

# Organisational Ethics Management to Combat Corruption in the South African Public Sector

**Shikha Vyas-Doorgapersad**,  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8146-344X>

PhD, Professor, School of Public Management, Governance and Public Policy, College of Business and Economics, University of Johannesburg, South Africa

**Corresponding author:** Shikha, Vyas-Doorgapersad, [svyas-doorgapersad@uj.ac.za](mailto:svyas-doorgapersad@uj.ac.za)

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**Abstract:** *The purpose of this study is to develop organisational ethics and encourage an ethical culture in the South African public sector. Systematization of the literary sources and approaches for solving the problem of corruption indicates the need to observe the principles of organizational ethics to provide and preserve the circumstances necessary to support the integrity of democratic institutions and processes. The relevance of this scientific problem decision is that this study intends to adhere to ethical principles stipulated in Section 195 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, stipulating that democratic principles shall guide South Africa's governmental administration. These goals may be achieved by implementing a strong organizational ethics management system. Investigation in the paper is conducted in the following logical sequence: an overview of corruption in the South African public sector is explored, followed by an explanation regarding the significance of organizational ethics management in reducing corruption. The methodological tools of the research methods include a desktop study of the existing literature and official legislation and regulatory documents required for the research. Organizational ethics management was theoretically and contextually analyzed utilizing qualitative research methodologies and trend analysis. The results show that although the South African government has implemented remedial procedures to address unethical behavior in the public sector, the study found that financial mismanagement and corruption continue to predominate investigations, commissions of inquiry, and the media. These occurrences also include non-compliance with laws and regulations. Furthermore, disciplinary procedures are implemented improperly, and supervision mechanisms are not properly used or enforced. Based on the research results, proposals for policy changes and a list of priority corrective measures specific to the South African situation are made. The provided practical recommendations to support an ethical environment in the South African public sector may be helpful for representatives of the public administration and other public institutions. Although the subject of corruption is not new, it still needs ongoing dialogue and participation between academics, legislators, and policymakers to come up with solutions tailored to each nation.*

**Keywords:** corruption, democratic principles, ethical culture, organisational ethics management, qualitative approach, South African public sector, theory of deontology.

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## Introduction

Corruption erodes respect for the law and deters honest people from entering the public service (Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2007: 285). Therefore, the South African government has implemented anti-corruption measures and strives to instill an ethical culture in the public sector agencies. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, adopted in 1996, reflects this. The Constitution's Chapter 10 outlines the fundamental ideas and principles that guide public administration and promote and guarantee moral conduct in all government agencies. The Constitution establishes the foundation for moral conduct (RSA, 1996). Section 195 (Subsection 1) states that democratic norms and principles shall guide public administration (RSA, 1996: 99). The Constitution (1996) emphasises that since services must be rendered objectively, fairly, equitably, and without prejudice, a high level of professional ethics must be promoted and upheld. Public administration must be held responsible, and fast, accessible, and accurate information should be provided to the public.

Because of this, the South African government has implemented efforts to lessen corruption and hopes to instill an ethical culture through disseminating timely, easily accessible, and accurate information. The aim is to ensure that the public administration of a nation adheres to the legal requirements of democratic principles. Professional ethics must be upheld for this to occur. Hence various legislative frameworks are established to combat corruption and regulate ethics in South Africa. Some of the significant ones include the Investigation of Serious Economic Offences Act No. 46 of 1995; the Executive Member's Ethics Act No. 82 of 1998; the Public Finance Management Act No.1 of 1999; the Protected Disclosures Act No. 26 of 2000; the Public Audit Act No. 25 of 2004; the Prevention and Combating of Corrupt Activities Act No. 12 of 2004 and the Public Administrative Management Act No.11 of 2014. Some of the relevant policy frameworks include the Code of Conduct for the Public Service 1997; the Public Service Anti-Corruption Strategy 2002; and the Public Sector Integrity Management Framework 2013.

Additionally, several theoretical frameworks explain the value of ethics in preventing wrongdoing. The study utilizes the theory of deontology. Immanuel Kant's ethics are notable for the emphasis on duty, which is defined by right and wrong. Deontology is the name given to this type of ethics. The name derives from the Greek word *deon*, which means duty or obligation. According to deontologists, an act is morally correct if it is performed out of a sense of duty. Kant asserts that moral decisions are concerned with what we can control, namely our choices and intentional actions, rather than the consequences of our actions, which we cannot always control (Freeman & Werhane, 2008: 2, in Maile, 2022: 44). Even with these steps and a grasp of the theoretical framework, corruption in South Africa remains a problem that has to be addressed. In the past, corruption has become rife in the public sector. As a result, longitudinal data on corruption cannot be compiled. The current article concentrates on the corruption cases that were reported in 2020-2021 from a holistic perspective. Future research may consider ten-year cycles of longitudinal and comparative studies examining corruption in various public sector divisions.

**Overview of Corruption in the South African Public Sector.** The following types of corruption commonly witnessed in South Africa, as emphasised by the Corruption Watch (Business Tech, 2020: 1) are *maladministration* – the mismanagement and deliberate delaying and bundling up of legal and official government processes; *misappropriation of resources* – the theft, misuse, abuse and wasteful spending of state vehicles, equipment, time, and funds; and *procurement irregularities* – typically relating to the flouting of the awarding of tenders and related processes. The latest report released by the Corruption Watch (2020:2) recorded the following cases of corruption during 2020 that include compliance issues; procurement irregularities; soliciting of kickbacks; and fraudulent activities in various state institutions, agencies, and departments, as well as businesses.

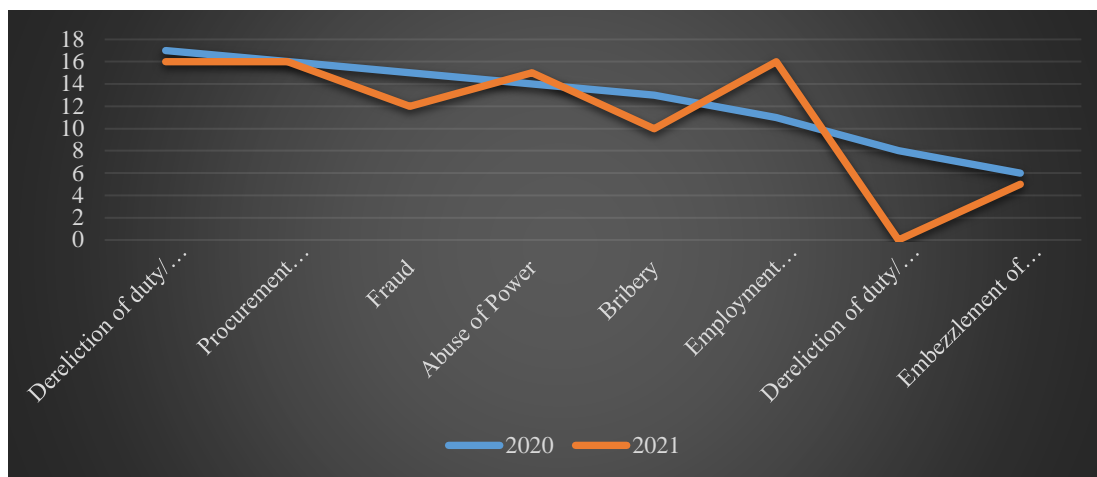
Due to the extent of corruption, South African ranks high in the corruption index. As highlighted by Business Tech (2022: 2), according to the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), which is a respected leading global indicator of public sector corruption, and scores and ranks 180 countries and territories across the globe, South Africa has a CPI of 44/100, which means that South Africa has high corruption within its public sector. The President of the Republic of South Africa (RSA), Honourable Matamela Cyril Ramaphosa (RSA, 2021: 7), shared his concerns related to the high level of corruption in the country and

stated that “corruption, wherever it occurs, represents a decline in our value system as a nation. If left unchecked, it poses a grave threat to our democratic values and our dream of being an ethical and developmental state”. In the context of the South African public sector, the common cases of misconduct witnessed include (Public Service Commission (PSC), 2017: 3): corruption, fraud, fruitless and wasteful expenditure, gross negligence, irregular expenditure, misappropriation and abuse, theft, and unauthorised expenditure. The opinions of the Public Service Commissioner Michael Selokane regarding corruption are recorded in the SA News (September 9, 2021), where he stressed that “South Africa continues to face the challenge of widespread corruption within its public service. Corruption scandals are precipitated by shady, widespread public sector patronage, crony capitalism, abuse of power and abuse of authority, corruption, and unprofessional behaviour in government”.

The Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) provided the 2020 report in which information was primarily researched on corruption worldwide during the global COVID-19 pandemic (CPI, 2020: 50). In 2020, COVID-19 presented health and economic crises and corruption crisis with countless lives lost due to the insidious effects of corruption undermining a fair and equitable global response to the pandemic (CPI, 2020: 50). Examples of corruption in the COVID-19 response included bribery for tests, treatment, and other health services-related incidences. The perpetrators of corruption in South Africa are brazen in their misuse of the emergency measures put in place to deal with COVID-19 (Corruption Watch, 2020: 1). In 2020, Corruption Watch recorded the highest number of police corruption reports in its history, receiving 442 whistle-blower reports. Of these whistle-blower reports, 10% are linked to the Covid-19 national lockdown and the state’s response to the pandemic (Corruption Watch, 2020:28). Some of the serious corruption in the health sector includes (Corruption Watch, 2020: 29), procurement corruption (21%), employment corruption (15%) and fraud (11%).

An anti-graft monitor said the coronavirus pandemic intensified corruption in South Africa in 2020, exposing many loopholes in the country's health sector on March 25. Corruption Watch said it had received 4,780 reports of graft in 2020, the second-highest tally since it was founded in 2012. Although the pandemic discouraged people from making in-person reports, an average of 11 cases were received daily online, the Johannesburg-based organisation said. Maladministration, procurement corruption, and fraud topped the list, with the ‘lucrative’ health sector hardest hit (Wiley Online Library, 2021: 1). In addition to these cases and types of corruption, there are cases whereby the leadership is also exposed due to the involvement on corrupt practices. It is authenticated in a report published by Magome in AP News (September 29, 2021). The news emphasized that the Special Investigating Unit's (SIU)’s long-awaited report, which President Cyril Ramaphosa issued, revealed misconduct by the former health minister Dr. Zweli Mkhize and others. According to the report (Magome, 2021), Mkhize meddled in the procurement procedure to grant a \$10 million COVID-19 communications contract to close friends. According to the allegation, the associates eventually paid payments for Mkhize and his family. Some money was used to upgrade one of Mkhize's residences and purchase a car for Mkhize's son. The contract to provide consulting services for the COVID-19 communications strategy of the national health department was given to Digital Vibes, a business related to Mkhize's former communications adviser and his former personal assistant.

The corruption emerged during covid-19 continued in 2021, whereby most of the alleged corruption cases in government departments reported on the National Anti-Corruption Hotline (NACH) between April and June 2021 were related to the South African Social Security Agency (SASSA)’s R350 social relief grant. During the first quarter, 337 cases of alleged corruption were reported on the NACH, of which 66% were referred to the SASSA for investigation because they pertained to social grant fraud (Bhengu, 2021: 2). Different types of misconduct were also reported in the 2021 Annual Report released by the Corruption Watch. The report highlights the statistics of misconduct as follows: maladministration (18%), procurement corruption (16%), abuse of authority (16%), fraud (14%), misappropriation of resources (12%), dereliction of duty (8%), bribery or extortion (8%) and employment corruption (8%) (Corruption Watch 2021: 31). Trend of corruption pattern recorded during 2020 and 2021 is stated in Graph 1.



**Graph 1. Trend of Corruption Pattern Recorded During 2020 and 2021**

Source: Author's compilation from Corruption Watch Documents-Annual Report, 2020:15 and Analysis of Corruption Trends (ACT), 2021:2.

According to the Corruption Watch of 2020 and 2021, stylized data on the trend of corruption in South Africa reveals the following:

- Corrupt practices in 2020 were randomly distributed across different patterns in South Africa.
- In 2020, the incidence of dereliction of duty as a factor in corruption was glaringly obvious. It must have been a side effect of the COVID-19 lockdown, which prohibited employees from physically being present at work to perform job duties. Hospitalization of those who contracted the infection rendered some incapacitated, while forcing them to transfer their duties to other employees who weren't initially assigned to some tasks.
- However, employment corruption grew by 4% in 2021, maybe as a result of the COVID-19 lock down's associated unemployment. Demand for employment increased, and job searchers were increasingly frantic to find work and make money.

Maladministration and procurement corruption were discovered to be the most vulnerable channels for participating in corrupt activities. Hence strict rules must be implemented to stop it in South Africa. Perhaps this will deter corrupt activities if more public employees who commit errors in their work are exposed to harsh measures like incarceration. Additionally, Heywood explores in a newspaper Daily Maverick (September 21, 2021), highlighting that the head of the Special Investigation Unit (SIU), Advocate Andy Mothibi, presented an update to Parliament's Standing Committee on Public Accounts (SCOPA). The facts that Adv. Mothibi presented to Parliament (SIU, 2021) are presented hereunder (Heywood, 2021: 1):

- The total government expenditure on COVID-19 exceeded R138 billion between April 2020 and June 2021. Over 10% of this (R14.8 billion) is being investigated by the SIU.
- The Special Tribunal has already been referred to 24 cases worth a total of R1.39 billion for hearings to annul contracts and recover losses.
- A total of 4 302 contracts to 2 421 service providers have been or are still to be investigated.
- 408 of these shady contracts are with national government agencies and the remainder with provincial government agencies.
- The SIU has referred 214 cases to the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA) for criminal investigation.

According to Lynch (in Raga & Taylor, 2007: 4; Vyas-Doorgapersad & Ababio, 2010: 425; Thonzhe & Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2017: 143), the public sector, as is the case in individual behaviour, is constantly changing in reaction to new leadership, environmental influences, and socio-political development. Government and society cannot promote and enforce ethical behaviour solely through utilizing ethical codes of conduct or by promulgating a plethora of legislation. Social mindsets are often entangled in a micro-ethic paradigm. People tend to equate moral values and norms, which apply only to their relations and the structures within which they interact. South Africa needs an organisational culture that not only supports ethical behaviour, but also defines and underpins right and wrong conduct at an individual level as well as in the institutional sphere.

It can be inferred that the causes of corruption can be institutional (inadequate ethics-related processes, lack of monitoring and evaluation), political (lack of compliance with legal frameworks, misuse of power), economic (inadequate salary, inadequate financial resources to live a better life), social (need for higher status on the society, desire for luxury), and personal (individual greed). These elements necessitate more research into the root causes of corruption in the South African public sector, focusing on a few key government agencies for comparative analysis. According to the literature and document reviews used in this study, implementing organisational ethics management in the South African public sector may be the best course of action to lessen corruption and create an ethical culture, discussed in the next section.

**Role of Organisational Ethics Management to Combat Corruption.** The field of study known as ethics in organisation deals with issues such as right and wrong, moral obligation or unethical conduct, and good and bad. Hence following the opinions of Sarma (2020: 1), a collection of moral precepts may be used to define management ethics principles that direct a person's or a group's behavior. It is a behavior standard that controls the daily behaviors of managers and leaders in an organisation.

Organisational ethics is therefore concerned with the ethical behaviour of the whole organisation while carrying out its operations. Unethical practices create problems within the organisation. The life and growth of the organisation depend upon the ethics practiced by its management and employees (Satyendra, 2014: 2). Hence considering the opinions of Satyendra (2014), it is considered that when an organisation does business, it is acting morally and upholding moral principles. It is referred to as organisational ethics. It consists only of the organisation's application of ethics. It entails putting general ethical principles to use in organisational behavior. Ethical behavior enhances positive customer connections, increases revenue, boosts staff productivity, and facilitates and promotes social good. For different people, the idea of ethics in the workplace currently means different things, but typically, it refers to learning what is right or wrong in the job and acting accordingly. In the case of the public sector, it is anticipated that employees would act morally to promote an ethical workplace culture. According to Thonzhe and Vyas-Doorgapersad (2017: 146), organizational ethics include a defined ethics strategy, ethics training, and ethical organisational culture. Additionally, if moral standards are upheld and properly monitored, ethical behavior will follow, and an ethical character (will be) developed, all of which will support the development of a public administration that is driven by values.

Therefore, according to organizational ethics management, organisations must regulate and direct ethics in a work environment. Establishing ethical and educational codes and decision-making techniques is a requirement of these programs. Employees must be aware of these criteria, and those who execute ethical management must be meticulous in tracking and assessing staff morale. Creating a set of necessary principles that define the ethical charter of the organisation is the first stage in the ethics management process (Hamid & Nezhad, 2014: 9956). Following the implementation of the Integrated Management Framework (IMF) in South Africa, particular organisations and people were given the duty of controlling ethics (The Ethics Institute, 2016). The IMF mandated that departments establish ethics committees, ethical champions (or exco-level owners of the ethics program), and ethics officers to achieve widespread compliance (The Ethics Institute, 2016). Dobie (2016) notes that the Ethics Institute worked with the Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA) to make sure that the Ethics Officer Certification Programme (EOCP) was in line with what ethics officers needed to know for them to comprehend the value of ethics in the public sector holistically.

This article, which adopts the views of Vyas-Doorgapersad and Shava (2021: 45), given the present administrative issues facing the South African government, makes a case for a more morally upright and responsive public sector that upholds the ideal of good governance. Such a Public Administration must be motivated to improve public institutions by avoiding corruption, which weakens moral values, and by putting new public management (NPM) concepts like accountability and openness into practice. Vyas-Doorgapersad and Simmonds (2011: 70, in Thonzhe & Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2017: 146) suggest that when viewed in conjunction with values and morals, such principles serve as the cornerstone of accountable and responsible conduct at all levels of governance. Using philosophical tools (taking a normative approach) helps public administrators to think rationally and be committed, ethical policymakers.

## Methodology

What is the general state of corruption in the South African public sector, for example, is one research question that the study seeks to answer by gathering data. The study makes use of a qualitative desktop

study to collect information. According to Grbich (2013: 197), the study used the qualitative research technique, enabling the researcher to give the reader an in-depth data collection. Experimental and descriptive research designs are taken into consideration. Based on the views of Manerikar and Manerikar (2014: 1) and Bangani (2019: 11), experimental research frequently results in a better understanding of a concept or crystallization of an issue. Exploratory research is a preliminary analysis to characterize and clarify a problem's nature. The goal of descriptive research, as considered by Cant et al. (2003, quoted in Greling 2014: 30) and adapted by Nhlapo (2020: 30-31), is to present an accurate image of some characteristics of the unique environment so that precise forecasts and unambiguous specifications may be made. By providing answers to the who, what, why, when, where, and how questions, descriptive research might, for instance, provide information on more specific elements.

Literature and document reviews were used to gather the data. A literature review examines books, academic papers, and any other materials pertinent to a particular subject, field of research, or theory, as guided by Labaree (2009: 1) and Ncamphalala (2019: 16-17) to describe, summarize, and critically evaluate these works about the research topic. A document review, according to Mogalakwe (2006 in Nyikadzino, 2020: 33; Makhubu, 2021: 10-11), refers to the analysis of documents that contain information about the phenomenon one wishes to study. Data were analyzed using conceptual and document analysis. The practice of analyzing concepts that are significant and pertinent to a study topic and how these concepts relate to other concepts is known as conceptual analysis, as suggested by Jackson (2013: 3053). A documentary analysis/study is a systematic method that aims to gain a comprehensive evaluation of carefully chosen material with the objective of detecting patterns, themes, or biases that may exist within a particular research topic, according to Leedy and Ormrod (2001: 155).

## Results

The following components, such as ethical organisational culture, ethics training, and ethics strategy, may be used as guidance based on the knowledge of the OEM to reduce corruption in the South African public sector. When members of an organisation share a common set of presumptions, values, and beliefs, an organisational culture is established, as believed by Trevino (1986: 611). It is further believed that role-players are urged to accept accountability for their actions, work out disagreements, and consider various viewpoints and interests in this setting. This kind of culture promotes a person's moral and intellectual growth (Trevino, 1986: 611). The service delivery culture among public employees and good ethical ideals frequently collides within South Africa's public administration. Most of the research on the issue affirms that governments' failure to uphold ethical norms may be to blame for the public administration's inability to develop a strong organisational culture, as stressed by Kuye (Sebola 2014: 302). South Africa's various cultures and beliefs reflect its deeply ingrained ethnocentric customs. Sebola (2014: 303) advises that the idea of local culture, as well as a change approach, should be integrated into the work ethos of the public administration to remain relevant to its clients and workers.

Employees participating in ethics training are aware of all the rules, procedures, and moral standards that apply to that organisation. Employees' incentive for learning and conformity to professional, ethical behavior may be boosted by evaluating and classifying their ethical performance, as emphasized by Hamid and Nezhad (2014: 9959). According to Sayeed (2016: 48), individuals are properly competent but not trained in public administration in the South African setting. As a result, training programs must be put in place. Mantzaris and Pillay reaffirm these recommendations (2014 in Sayeed, 2016: 48) and emphasize that public sector personnel should have access to education and training programs that focus on codes of conduct to strengthen the ethical standards specified in South Africa's legislative requirements. As a result, to increase their integrity and accountability, leadership is required to prepare for and execute codes of conduct.

It is essential to adhere to a solid ethics strategy to promote an ethical organisation. It could be challenging since the management of ethics is not prioritized in many companies (Schoeman, 2012: 1). Schoeman (2012: 1) suggests implementing an ethics strategy with six focus areas: laying down the ethical standards; setting up an ethics committee; building ethical awareness; measuring and monitoring ethical status; taking action to improve ethical behaviour; and maintaining an ethical culture. A code of conduct or code of ethics created by the PSC, which declared that the code's goal is to encourage outstanding behaviour, serves as a representation of the ethics approach in the South African setting, as suggested by Gildenhuis (2004: 125). A code of ethics enables the organisation to specify its stance about being an ethical organisation. All workers and stakeholders may clearly understand the organisation's values. Additionally, a code of ethics offers standards and recommendations for acceptable employee conduct, making it a crucial tool for

institutionalizing ethics in a company, as confirmed by Lloyd and Mey (2010: 222). The PSC has created a document describing the code of behavior for public service personnel. It offers comprehensive advice on working in the public sector and covers more particular topics, including acting in the interests of the public, upholding the highest standards of professionalism and honesty, and handling conflicts of interest. The South African Parliament has also created a Joint Committee on Ethics and Members' Interests to promote political officeholders' morals and values. It is an advising and consultative body for all political office holders and the public. The committee's duties include establishing norms of ethical conduct, enacting a code of conduct for members, and routinely evaluating the code of conduct. In the upcoming years, the effects of these actions will be evaluated, and potential future studies may include them.

## Conclusions

The conclusions reached from the study conducted, and the official records show that the South African government has taken remedial action to deal with unethical behaviour in the public sector. In the upcoming years, the effects of these activities will only become more apparent. Public employees must participate in training highlighting the negative impact of unethical behaviour. Corruption must also be tracked and evaluated to bridge the policy and implementation gaps and create an ethical and normative public service.

The article concludes that there are still a lot of instances of financial mismanagement and corruption. Lack of compliance and enforcement, improper use of oversight systems, and improperly implemented disciplinary procedures contribute to this situation. The goal of this article is to raise the bar for research in this important area. Future research on efforts that support moral behavior and impose penalties for transgression is particularly interesting. In terms of theoretical framework, it follows that in a South Africa that is evolving, public officials are expected to adopt deontological principles and show sensitivity to results in transforming the public sector and in the provision of services. It calls for a blend of insight, integrity, and originality.

Thus, public officials must employ deontological concepts to revolutionize the public sector and enhance the efficient and cost-effective delivery of services in South Africa. Notably, a grassroots commitment to moral behavior and good public governance is equally important at the local level as it is at the national level. To prevent ethics-related norms and legislation from being misused for political ends, further research needs to be done on how to provide enough support and resources for activities linked to ethics for good local governance.

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