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Table of Contents

Chapter One – Understanding Corruption	2
Chapter Two – Why is Corruption an issue in South Africa and the Effects thereof.....	3
Chapter Three – Possible Effective Responses to Corruption in South Africa.....	6
Chapter Four – Effective University Responses to Corruption (UFS)	8
REFERENCE LIST.....	9

Taking Up Arms Against Corruption in South Africa

1. Understanding Corruption

(a) The meaning of corruption

Corruption is defined in numerous ways, and yet, none of these definitions take into account all the characteristics and aspects associated with it. One can casually describe corruption as the dishonest activities of those in positions of authority, such as government officials and business managers (Chen, 2021). It is widely believed that corruption is attributable to greed and selfishness. It is two-coined, consisting of the misuse one's privileges and the infringement of others' rights.

(b) Who is a corrupt individual?

Usually, when one hears the word 'corruption', the first thing that comes to mind is government officials, largely politicians. Perhaps this is because South Africa, has reported a bulk of corruption occurrences within its public sector. This reveals to us the sky-scraping level of susceptibility to corruption the public sector faces.

Although corruption is habitually committed by government officials, one should know and understand that it can be committed by any individual or organisation, whether linked to the cabinet or not, who is willing to undertake unlawful acts for personal gain. These individuals are routinely entrusted with certain positions of authority and are expected to act in the public's best interest.

(c) A few common forms of corruption

- **Bribery** – This refers to giving or accepting resources that have value, in order to influence the actions of official persons or any other persons in positions of authority. Bribery is seen as the most regular type of corruption in South Africa and can be used to avoid lawful punishments, influence the allocation of tenders, etc.
- **Embezzlement** – This refers to the abuse of privileged access to money or confidential information. Take for instance, organisations that have access to a customer's credit card information – financial institutions – may have employees that are willing to pilfer and use this information for personal gain.
- **Fraud** – This refers to one party deceiving another party for financial or personal gain. An example of fraud can be an educational institution that may increase its number of

students, by registering ghost students, with the hopes of being allocated a larger sum of funds from financial aid institutions.

- Nepotism – This form of corruption refers to the practise, by those in power, of favouring relatives and friends over other more deserving candidates by virtue of this connection alone. An example of this type of corruption is employing relatives or friends without considering others.

After a thorough understanding of corruption, one could conclude that corruption can take place anywhere and that anybody can be a corrupt individual including the least expected such as religious persons, medical doctors, teachers, or even the members of the wider society.

2. Why corruption is an issue in South Africa and possible effects thereof

Unfortunately, a large number of government officials are corrupt one way or another. These individuals, according to Corruption Watch, often have strong political connections that they use to lessen their punishments, which includes being transferred to a more comfortable prison, being granted early medical parole or they can also be pardoned by the president.

The political influence held by these people, needless to say, is one of the many hurdles faced by the South African anti-corruption law fraternity, anti-corruption agencies and members of the public who are fighting against corruption.

Generally, the reasons behind refraining from crime are either related to moral values or it is due to the fear of facing a lawful punishment, or both. Given the current level of political manipulation regarding retribution for corruption-related crimes, this could prove to be enough to convince the public that these corrupt individuals are somehow immune to the law. They eventually become role models because of the blatant manner in which crimes are committed, and penalties absconded. This leaves the perfect breeding ground for a culture of corruption to take root.

Possible effects

Although political graft may sometimes seem like a half-pint relative to the government's annual revenue; or corporate fraud when being compared to that particular corporation's income; or any other form of corruption in contrast to its finance source, one should know that corruption covers wider grounds of damage that include, but are not limited to:

(a) The country's economic loss and inefficiency

Unite 4 Mzansi has coined an amount of 1,5 trillion rands lost to corruption between the years 2014 and 2019 (Buthelezi, 2021), this represents a significant erosion of the country's Gross Domestic Product in just 5 years.

(b) Poverty and inequality

The government presented a Social Relief Distress grant as a result of job losses due to covid-19, and in less than two years after the grant was introduced, it was reported that more than 5800 government employees frequently received the grant, costing the country a whopping 5,8 million rands (Gerber, 2021). This example reveals to us that, as corrupt

individuals keep up with their illicit acts, less wealth will be available for redistribution to the more disadvantaged members of the population.

(c) Unemployment

Described as the largest corporate fraud in South Africa, Steinhoff continued to lay off some of its employees and disposed its assets, this was after forensic accountants at PWC investigated 200 billion rands wiped off from its shareholder equity in December 2017 (Independent Online 2019). It becomes clear that when a company loses its business once exposed for its corrupt dealings an onslaught of economic loss and job cuts are soon to follow.

(d) Human rights violations

(Section 29(1) of the constitution) provides that everyone has the right to a basic education, and in order to fully comply with basic education, one needs to take into account the resources and materials required to meet this right, such as qualified teachers, study material, school furniture, etc. This right to basic education is violated in cases where unqualified or underqualified teachers are employed at public schools (Savides, 2017), or when school funds, intended for school furniture and materials, are mismanaged or defrauded by school principals and administrators (Ramulifho, 2018).

In summation, corruption is, and it seems will always be a major issue in South Africa. And although it may be difficult to thoroughly define, we as responsible citizens must understand the full meaning of each form of corruption and be able to identify it at inception so that we can raise our voice against it and fight for justice.

3. Possible Effective Responses to Corruption in South Africa

Although South Africa has deployed multiple anti-corruption agencies, it is still not safe to say that the country's corruption is dwindling, but it is rather escalating in an exponential manner.

Ineffective actions taken against the increasing corruption will likely result to it becoming less concerning and may even begin to be tolerated (Tanzi, 1998: 7). If we use the analogy of the corona virus during its early days in South Africa circa March 2020, we see that people instantly went into survival mode as they resorted to panic buying in response to the national lockdown. However, with the passing of time, they started to doubt the lethality of the virus and disobeyed covid-19 regulations. With numerous conspiracy theories running amok, they began to tolerate the pandemic and resumed with their daily routines, despite the increasing number of deaths.

The point of the analogy is that, even though people began to tolerate the virus, it was still as deadly as it was in the beginning, and mostly affected the ones with weak immune systems. The same may apply with corruption, the lack of effective responses and its frequency will result to its acceptance and will pose a threat to the poor, and eventually the non-poor.

The necessity of South Africa going to survival mode against corruption leads naturally to the question of how. How can we effectively respond to corruption?

Firstly, we need to eliminate public ignorance. Several arguments have been advanced suggesting that corrupt acts be exposed, but to what extent are these corrupt actions and individuals exposed? Are the negative effects of these acts, in a comprehensible manner, made available to the members of the public? The use of adequate methods to expose corruption can help create a pathway that gives the public relevant information to participate in combating against and not protecting the corrupt individuals through riots and plundering.

Secondly, using the power of technology. Effectively responding to corruption does not necessarily mean having to wait for it to occur and then acting against it but being able to prevent the corruption in the first place also constitutes as an effective response. Technology can be used to randomly allocate tenders from a list of several qualified individuals and/or companies, this helps prevent bribery attempts and nepotism, resulting in fair and equal treatment of deserving applicants.

Thirdly, ensuring transparency. One of the key factors enabling corruption is the fact that individuals believe that they can camouflage their illicit arrangements. These illegal transactions can significantly decrease with the constant monitoring of individuals or companies. In cases where corruption does occur, it would be a much simpler task to isolate the responsibility, and thus preventing them from denying any corruption allegations.

Finally, establishing an anti-corruption agency immune to political interference. Carrim argues whether the disbanding of the Scorpions was a result of political interference or not, and although it may not be clear to us whether it was in fact because of political interference, individuals or groups that are suspected of being corrupt should never be allowed to interfere in any manner with the dealings of anti-corruption agencies so as to ensure genuine investigations.

4. Effective university responses to corruption

Universities, with their capacity to develop future skilled experts, can contribute positively to the plight of corruption. When applying the biblical principle of teaching a child what is right and what is wrong so that when they grow up, they are likely to do right (Prov. 22:6), it is then only just that universities should introduce learning programs which teach students the ways of recognizing and resisting corruption.

This can be done by:

- (a) Introducing an ethics module which is mandatory for all registered students

This module will provide a good foundation of ethical decision making in the world of work. Ethics can also be made obligatory for undergraduate students as a unit within the University of the Free State's UFSS1504 compulsory module which would make it supplementary to the already existing framework.

- (b) Hosting ethics tests and exams for all programs

Universities should also introduce entrance tests that help decipher which students, by the university's standards, are moral and thus require less intervention. Alternatively, the institution can add corruption-based questions in tests and exams in a way that blends with their degree programs.

- (c) Awareness campaigns

Raising awareness will further educate students and raise the visibility on the issue of corruption.

Ethics in education is critical for all university students as this will better shape their self-discipline and preserve their integrity. This will not only set a good foundation in the students' ethics and cause a reduction of selfish tendencies in the workplace but will also help potential entrepreneurs prevent corruption in their future businesses.

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