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When Services Come with a Price: Stakeholder Perspectives on Corruption and Public Service Delivery in Eswatini's Lubombo Region

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Abstract: Corruption quietly reshapes who gets served by the state and who is left waiting. Eswatini scored 30 out of 100 on the 2023 Corruption Perceptions Index, and Afrobarometer (2024) found that 87% of citizens believe corruption has risen while 83% rate government efforts against it as ineffective. Yet little empirical work shows how this plays out in specific regions and institutions. This qualitative case study asked how stakeholders in the Lubombo Region understand corruption in public institutions, how it affects the quality and accessibility of services, what limits employees in dealing with it, and what they think should be done. Twenty purposively selected participants (public employees, policymakers, civil society representatives and service users) took part in semi-structured interviews, and the transcripts were analysed thematically with NVivo. Participants described bribery, favouritism, misuse of public resources and procurement kickbacks, concentrated in procurement, police and justice services, and public employment. They linked these practices to low pay, bureaucratic delays and political influence, and described slower, poorer and less equal services, with poor households hit hardest. Employees stayed silent because they feared retaliation and distrusted reporting systems. Participants called for confidential reporting, whistle-blower protection, independent investigation, stronger audits and citizen oversight. The findings suggest that corruption in Lubombo is as much an equity problem as an administrative one.

Keywords: *Corruption; Service Delivery; Public Administration; Whistle-Blowing; Qualitative Research; Eswatini; Lubombo.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Governments exist, in large part, to deliver services: clinics that stock medicine, schools with desks and textbooks, clean water, a social grant that arrives on time. When corruption enters the picture, these basics become harder to secure. Public money is diverted, contracts go to the wrong suppliers, and the queue stops being fair. More than two-thirds of countries scored below 50 on the 2023 Corruption Perceptions Index (Transparency International, 2023), and the African Union (2018) has estimated that Africa loses about US$148 billion every year to corrupt practices. Those losses are not abstract. They are medicines not bought and roads not finished.

The burden does not fall evenly. People with money or connections can often find a way around a broken system, while those who depend entirely on public services cannot (Hope, 2019). This is why corruption is a concern for social work and social policy, and not only for auditors and lawyers.

Eswatini illustrates the problem well. The country scored 30 out of 100 on the 2023 Corruption Perceptions Index (Transparency International, 2023), and it has had an anti-corruption framework for years, including the Prevention of Corruption Act of 2006 and the Eswatini Anti-Corruption Commission. Even so, Afrobarometer (2024) reports that 87% of citizens believe corruption has increased and 83% consider the government's response ineffective. Laws on paper, it seems, are not the same as accountability in practice.

Most of what we know about corruption in Eswatini is national in scope. Far less is known about how it is experienced in a particular region, among the people who deliver and use services every day. The Lubombo Region is a useful place to ask. Many of its communities are rural and underserved, and residents rely heavily on public institutions for health care, education, water and sanitation, agricultural support and social protection. Where options are limited, the cost of a corrupt system is higher.

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This article reports a qualitative case study of corruption and service delivery in public institutions in the Lubombo Region. It addresses four questions:

- What are stakeholders' perceptions of corruption in public institutions?
- How does corruption influence the quality and accessibility of public services?
- What limitations do public institution employees face in managing corruption?
- What strategies do stakeholders suggest to reduce its impact on service delivery?

II. THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL GROUNDING

The study draws mainly on Institutional Theory. The core idea is that organisations and the people in them are shaped by formal rules, such as laws, policies and procedures, and by informal norms, such as workplace culture, habit and social expectation (North, 1990; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). When the formal rules are well enforced, they support accountability and transparency. When monitoring is weak or rules are unclear, they leave room for officials to bend the system for private gain (Scott, 2008). The theory also carries a hopeful corollary: if weak institutions create opportunity for corruption, strengthening them should reduce it.

This fits the Lubombo setting, where the formal machinery of anti-corruption exists but the informal practices around it, including relationships, hierarchy and political loyalty, may decide how it works. Other perspectives, such as principal-agent and public choice theories, also inform the wider literature, but Institutional Theory offered the best lens for asking why corruption persists despite the rules.

The conceptual framework treats corruption in public institutions as the independent variable and the quality and accessibility of services as the outcome. Two factors sit between them: stakeholders' perceptions of corruption, which shape trust and whether people use public services at all, and the institutional limitations employees face in detecting and addressing it. Strategies proposed by stakeholders are treated as the interventions that could weaken the link between corruption and poor service delivery.

III. METHODOLOGY

- *Design*

A qualitative case study design was used because the aim was to understand a contemporary problem in its real-life setting, from the viewpoints of people who live with it. The approach suits complex governance questions in which several actors and institutional factors interact.

- *Participants and Sampling*

Participants were selected purposively, meaning deliberately chosen for their knowledge of and experience with public service delivery (Patton, 2015). Not everyone has enough direct exposure to corruption in public institutions to speak about it with authority, so random selection would have served the question poorly. The final sample comprised 20 participants, with a 100% response rate. Table 1 Summarises their Characteristics.

Table 1 Characteristics of Participants (N = 20)

Characteristic	Distribution
Stakeholder category	Public institution employees 7 (35%); community members/service users 6 (30%); policymakers/government officials 4 (20%); civil society representatives 3 (15%)
Age	18-29: 4 (20%); 30-39: 8 (40%); 40-49: 5 (25%); 50+: 3 (15%)
Gender	Male 12 (60%); female 8 (40%)
Education	Primary 2 (10%); secondary 5 (25%); diploma 5 (25%); bachelor's 6 (30%); postgraduate 2 (10%)
Residence/work	Urban 14 (70%); rural 6 (30%)
Sector most often used or worked in	Health 5 (25%); social welfare 5 (25%); education 4 (20%); police/justice 3 (15%); local government 3 (15%)

For qualitative work, sample size is guided by saturation, the point at which new interviews stop producing new themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Marshall et al. (2013) note that saturation is commonly reached within 15 to 30 interviews, which places this sample within that range.

- *Data Collection*

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews using a single interview guide. The guide kept the conversations focused on the research questions while leaving room for participants to expand on their own experiences (Kvale, 2007). Interviews were audio-recorded with consent. Document review of publicly available policy frameworks, audit summaries and governance reports supplemented the interviews.

- *Analysis*

Transcripts were analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke (2006). Recordings were transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts were read repeatedly. Meaningful segments were then coded, codes were grouped into candidate themes, and the themes were reviewed, refined and named. NVivo supported the organisation, coding and retrieval of data. To strengthen credibility, the study triangulated across stakeholder groups and across interviews and documents, used a standardised interview guide, and kept an audit trail of analytic decisions.

- *Ethical Considerations*

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant review boards and national authorities before data collection.

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Participants gave informed consent, understood that participation was voluntary, and could withdraw at any time. Because corruption is a sensitive subject, identities and institutional affiliations were protected through pseudonyms and coded identifiers, and recordings, transcripts and notes were stored in password-protected files. Interviews focused on processes and systems rather than on accusations against named individuals.

IV. FINDINGS

Four themes were developed, matching the four research questions. Quotations are identified by participant number.

➢ *Perceptions of Corruption in Public Institutions*

- *Bribery and Favouritism*

Participants most often described corruption as money or personal connections used to jump the queue. One put it plainly:

> *"Corruption is quite common in some public institutions, especially when people want their applications, documents, or services to be processed quickly. Some individuals may offer money or favours to avoid delays." (Participant 3)*

✓ *Favouritism Worked in a Quieter Way*

People who knew an officer, or were related to one, were served first:

> *"Some people are given priority because they know an officer or have relatives working in the institution. Those without connections may wait longer, even when they applied first." (Participant 9)*

- *Not Uniform Across Institutions*

Participants were careful not to paint the whole public service with one brush. Several stressed that corruption varies by department and by officer:

> *"I think corruption happens, but it is not the same in every institution. It depends on the department and the officer a person interacts with." (Participant 7)*

✓ *It Was Seen as More Likely where Demand was Urgent and Discretion was High:*

> *"Corruption may be more likely in departments where people are desperate for urgent documents, jobs, licences, or other important services." (Participant 13)*

- *Misuse of Public Resources and Procurement*

Participants also described public funds, vehicles and equipment being used privately, and procurement that favoured connected suppliers through inflated prices, payment before tender award and poor-quality work.

- *Police and Justice Services, and Public Employment*

Participants reported payments to avoid charges, to speed up cases or to influence investigations. In recruitment and promotion, jobs and contracts were said to follow personal or political ties rather than merit.

- *Perceived Drivers*

Low salaries and financial pressure were seen as making bribery more tempting, though participants did not treat hardship as an excuse. Long delays, complicated procedures and repeated visits created openings for unofficial payments, and political influence was seen as distorting recruitment, procurement and discipline.

➢ *Effects on the Quality and Accessibility of Services*

The central finding here is that corruption sorts people. Those who can pay or who have connections get faster, better service; those who cannot are delayed, ignored or excluded.

> *"In some cases, a person may be asked to give money before a document is signed or a service is provided. This makes public services unfair for people who cannot afford to pay." (Participant 15)*

- *Three Strands Stood Out*

✓ *Quality and Efficiency*

Participants linked corruption to poorer treatment, delays and, through procurement, to substandard goods and unfinished projects.

✓ *Health, Education and Welfare*

Informal payments for treatment, medicines or quicker attention were described as barriers for poor patients, some of whom delay care or leave without treatment. School places, bursaries and welfare support were said to be allocated through money or connections rather than need.

✓ *Resource Diversion*

Participants connected diversion of public resources to shortages of medicines, equipment, textbooks and desks, and to reduced social assistance.

Across these accounts, access through connections emerged as a cross-cutting mechanism. Connected citizens bypassed procedures for licences, permits, jobs and welfare, while ordinary citizens made repeated visits and waited.

➢ *Limitations Faced by Employees in Managing Corruption*

- *Fear of Retaliation*

This was the strongest barrier. Employees believed that reporting could bring punitive transfers, blocked promotion, poor performance reviews, harassment or non-renewal of contracts.

> *"Junior officers and contract workers may keep quiet because they fear losing their jobs, receiving poor performance assessments, or having their contracts not renewed after reporting corruption." (Participant 8)*

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The risk was greatest for junior and contract staff, whose livelihoods depend on the very people they might report.

- *Confidentiality and Trust in Reporting*

Participants doubted that complaints would stay confidential and worried they might reach the supervisors or colleagues involved. Many also described slow investigations, little feedback, and a belief that cases involving senior or politically connected officials were delayed or quietly dropped.

- *Independence and Oversight*

Investigation units sitting inside the institution being investigated were seen as compromised, since investigators' own promotions and job security depend on senior managers. Weak monitoring, limited audits and thin internal controls meant problems went undetected.

- *Training and Guidance*

General induction was seen as inadequate. Junior officers, who deal with the public most, were often left out of specialised training, and written codes of conduct offered little help when an employee faced a real request for an unofficial payment.

➢ *Strategies Suggested by Stakeholders*

Participants' proposals tracked the barriers closely.

- *Confidential Reporting Channels*

Anonymous hotlines, online platforms and sealed complaint boxes, handled by authorised independent officers. As Participant 14 put it, institutions should provide "secure reporting options" so that people can report "without revealing their identity."

- *Whistle-Blower Protection*

Safeguards against dismissal, transfer, harassment and blocked promotion, plus legal advice and counselling.

- *Internal Controls and Audits*

Regular independent audits, separation of duties, clear approval procedures and timely action on findings.

- *Prevention Systems*

Regular ethics training, conflict-of-interest declarations, corruption-risk assessments and continuous monitoring.

- *Awareness and Media*

Community radio, campaigns, social media and investigative journalism to inform people of their rights, official fees and reporting routes.

- *Citizen Participation*

Involvement in public meetings, budget discussions and development committees, including women, young people and persons with disabilities.

V. DISCUSSIONS

➢ *Three Points Stand Out*

First, corruption in Lubombo looks less like a uniform blanket and more like a set of pressure points. Participants located it in transactions where demand is urgent and officials hold discretion: documents, licences, jobs, contracts, case handling. That pattern echoes studies from Colombia and Ecuador that tie corruption to administrative delay, informal payments and weak responsiveness (Friedemann-Sánchez & Grieve, 2017; Sabina & Pérez Figueroa, 2019). The practical implication is to focus reform on high-risk service points, through simplified procedures, published service standards and digital applications and payments, instead of spreading effort thinly.

Second, the effects are about fairness as much as efficiency. Participants described a two-speed system in which money and connections buy access. This agrees with evidence that informal payments and favouritism undermine access to health, education and social protection (Chingumbe, 2018; Morse et al., 2025; UNICEF, 2022) and with work on Eswatini linking bribery and deliberate delay to unequal access (Bratton, 2019). Seen this way, corruption is an equity issue that falls hardest on poor and vulnerable households, which is a central concern for social work practice and policy.

Third, the limits on employees reveal something Institutional Theory predicts: rules alone do not change behaviour. Reporting duties and codes of conduct exist, yet employees stay silent because retaliation is a rational fear, confidentiality is doubtful and investigators are not independent. For junior and contract staff, silence is less a moral failure than a sensible response to unequal power. This agrees with Eswatini research on fear of victimisation and weak whistle-blower protection (Afrobarometer, 2023; Kingdom of Eswatini, 2021) and with the broader argument that reforms stall when they stop at policy adoption without building institutional capacity and leadership accountability (Roland et al., 2024; González, 2025).

The study's contribution is context-specific. Existing literature describes similar patterns nationally and regionally; this study shows how they are experienced by people who deliver and use services in the Lubombo Region.

VI. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Corruption in public institutions in the Lubombo Region was perceived to operate through bribery, favouritism, personal connections, resource misuse and procurement kickbacks, concentrated in procurement, police and justice services, and public employment. It was linked to financial pressure, bureaucratic delay and political influence, and it was seen to lower the quality, speed and fairness of services, with the heaviest costs falling on poor households. Employees' ability to respond was blunted by fear of retaliation, weak confidentiality, slow and non-independent investigations, and limited training.

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➢ *Several Recommendations Follow from the Findings*

- Establish secure, anonymous reporting channels, with access to complainants' identities restricted to independent officers.
- Enforce whistle-blower protection against dismissal, punitive transfer, harassment and blocked promotion, with legal and counselling support.
- Ensure investigations are independent and timely, with clear deadlines and regular feedback to complainants.
- Strengthen audits, internal controls and procurement oversight, including separation of duties and asset registers.
- Make recruitment, promotion, tendering, bursaries and welfare selection transparent, merit- or need-based and open to appeal.
- Simplify procedures, publish official fees and processing times, and expand digital applications and payments.
- Provide regular, practical ethics training for all staff, including junior and frontline officers.
- Hold leaders accountable, with discipline applied regardless of rank or political connection.
- Support citizen, civil-society and media oversight, including awareness of rights and fees.
- Include women, young people and persons with disabilities in community participation structures.

Sustainable improvement will depend on the whole set working together: protected reporting, independent oversight, ethical leadership and engaged citizens. Laws alone, as the Eswatini experience suggests, are not enough.

➢ *Limitations*

This was a qualitative study, so its findings describe participants' perceptions and experiences and are not statistically generalisable to all public institutions in Eswatini. The sample was weighted towards urban participants (70%) and men (60%), so rural and women's experiences may be under-represented. Because corruption is sensitive, some participants may have held back or given socially acceptable answers, which the study tried to limit through confidentiality, anonymity and neutral questioning. Access to internal audit records and case files was restricted, so documentary evidence relied on public sources. Systematic coding, an audit trail, triangulation and peer review of emerging themes were used to limit researcher bias. Future studies could add a quantitative component, include more rural voices and compare regions.

➢ *Declarations*

- *Ethics Approval:*
  Obtained from the relevant institutional review boards and national authorities in the Kingdom of Eswatini.

- *Consent:*
  All participants gave informed consent.

- *Competing Interests:*
  None declared.

- *Funding:*
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  [add].

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