RESEARCH REPORT

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MEASURING ATTITUDES TO CORRUPTION

HEADLINE FINDINGS FROM THE SASAS 2023 MODULE AND EXPERT SURVEY 2023/24

HSRC Human Sciences Research Council | DCES Developmental, Capable & Ethical State

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Report prepared by
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Acknowledgements
Special thanks to Ruan Kitshoff and Rabea Kaas from the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH.

ISBN: 978-1-991248-15-2

Images: AdobeStock/iStock

Designed and typeset by COMPRESS.dsl | 800900_D | www.compressdsl.com

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Acronyms

GCB	Global Corruption Barometer
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit
HSRC	Human Sciences Research Council
MTSF	Medium-Term Strategic Framework
NACAC	National Anti-Corruption Advisory Council
NACS	National Anti-Corruption Strategy
REC	Research Ethics Committee (of the HSRC)
SALs	Small area layers
SASAS	South African Social Attitudes Survey
SOE	State-owned enterprise
SSU	Secondary sampling unit
VCS	Victims of Crime Survey
WVS	World Values Survey

Acknowledgements

The team would like to express their appreciation to the following people who contributed to the successful completion of this study.

- The Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH team (Transparency, Integrity and Accountability Programme) for their support, guidance, advice and input throughout the study.
- The 3 112 South African adults who participated in the representative survey and shared their attitudes and behavioural preferences.
- The 66 experts who contributed to the online survey, sacrificing their time to participate and share their opinions and views.
- The team responsible for managing the electronic data collection platform, most notably Mr Craig Schwabe, Mr Katiso Rachabane and Mr Bob Currin, as well as the Human Sciences Research Council's (HSRC) Dr Saahier Parker for programming and monitoring support for the expert survey.
- The HSRC project administrators who managed the contract and logistics, including Ms Koshen Govender, Ms Busisiwe Mamba and Ms Deshanie Reddy.
- The HSRC team for conceptualising the study and managing the project. These included Dr Steven Gordon, Adv. Gary Pienaar, Dr Benjamin Roberts, Dr Yul Derek Davids, Dr Ngqapheli Mchunu, Dr Jarè Struwig and Dr Shanaaz Dunn, with executive oversight provided by Prof. Narnia Bohler-Muller.

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Introduction

Corruption is a major problem in South Africa and the country has struggled to combat it. The rise and entrenchment of neo-patrimonialism and corruption in the public sector appears to be especially acute. There is growing evidence that corruption has worsened over the last 20 years (Afrobarometer, 2022; Corruption Watch, 2024; DPME, 2023, p.20; NPC, 2023, p.17). This change has had adverse political, social, economic and security-related repercussions for the nation's entire population. At this critical juncture, the South African government has adopted the National Anti-Corruption Strategy (NACS) 2020–2030 (The Presidency, 2020b). This strategy identifies the need for credible, evidence-informed approaches to reverse the destructive and debilitating effects of corruption. One of the main anti-corruption tactics prioritised by the NACS is a whole-of-society approach that incorporates changing social norms[1] and values in South Africa.

In most contexts, social norms and values play a pivotal role in driving human behaviour. Accordingly, participation in, or opposition to, corrupt behaviour can be influenced by these norms and values. Despite the challenge that corruption has come to represent in South Africa, there is a dearth of high-quality public opinion research on this important topic. As a result, not enough is currently known about social norms and values related to corruption in the country. There is a need to address this knowledge gap, promoting a discussion on the future of South African society and the post-apartheid constitutional order. The Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH commissioned the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) to provide credible evidence-based data that aims to help close this knowledge gap. The focus here is on social norms and values that underpin both corrupt practices and anti-corruption behaviour.

In accordance with the NACS, the research team conducted a nationally representative public opinion survey to assess existing social norms, values and behaviours on corruption in South Africa. This first survey round will serve as a baseline assessment, and subsequent survey rounds will be compared against the baseline. Social norm change will be assessed over time, identifying those subgroups that display the least and greatest levels of change. The overall aim of the study is to identify and track social values, norms and behaviours that encourage and discourage corruption. This research is intended to help support the National Anti-Corruption Advisory Council (NACAC) and the Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME) in their efforts to develop, assess and adapt strategies to combat and prevent corruption in accordance with the NACS. This work also contributes to the goals of the Medium-Term Strategic Framework (MTSF) 2020–2024 (The Presidency, 2020a), which emphasises the need to promote ethical governance.

Research methodology

Data from the 2023 round of the South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS) were used for this report. The nationally representative SASAS series has been conducted on an annual basis by the HSRC since 2003. This section presents information on the details of the survey, including questionnaire design and sampling framework. The first subsection explains the sample design of the survey, the second describes the data collection protocols, the third explains fieldwork preparation, and the fourth outlines the data capturing and weighting processes. To provide additional insight into our understanding of the public opinion data gathered for this study, a survey with relevant experts was fielded alongside SASAS 2023. The methodological design and sample of this supplementary survey is outlined in the final subsection.

The sample design

In accordance with the SASAS research infrastructure's standard approach, the survey was designed to yield a representative sample of 3 500 adults aged 16 years and older living in South Africa. The sample was spread across the country's nine provinces and was restricted to adults living in private residences. SASAS has three sampling stages. Small area layers (SALs) were the primary sampling units, and in the first stage 500 SALs were drawn. Estimates of the population numbers for various categories of the census variables were obtained per SAL. Data for this stage were drawn from the 2011 census and updated using mid-year population estimates. Three explicit stratification variables were used to draw the SALs: province, geographic type and majority population group. When drawing the sample, special institutions (such as hospitals, military camps, old age homes, schools and university hostels), recreational areas, industrial areas and vacant SALs were excluded.

Dwelling units (also known as visiting points) in each SAL were taken as the secondary sampling unit (SSU). A dwelling unit is defined as a 'separate (non-vacant) residential stand, address, structure, flat, homestead, etc.' In the second stage, seven SSUs were selected per SAL. SSUs were drawn with equal probability in each of the selected SALs. SSUs were selected using a random starting point and counting an even interval between households. The interval was calculated using the total number of households in the SAL. Finally, in the third sampling stage, a person was drawn with equal probability from all persons 16 years and older living at each selected visiting point (SSU). This person (i.e. the respondent) needed to be 16 years or older and have resided at the visiting point for at least 15 out of the past 30 days. The fieldwork period started in August and ended in October of 2023.

Data collection protocol

The HSRC subscribes to a strict internal Code of Ethics. The study design and research tools were submitted for approval by the HSRC's Research Ethics Committee (REC). Each interview conducted by the HSRC is fielded only if the REC has approved it. Before each interview was conducted, the following protocols were observed:

***Adult respondents and informed consent (older than 18 years)*:** All respondents aged 18 years and older were asked for informed consent. A digital consent form explained the purpose of the study, emphasised that participation was voluntary and explained the likely duration of the interview. The form made clear how confidentiality would be preserved, and offered an earnest appraisal of the risks/discomforts and benefits associated with participation in the study. Respondents were provided with details of the HSRC's toll-free ethics hotline and survey coordinator contacts.

***Minors and written informed consent (persons under the age of 18 years)*:** In instances where the selected research participant was a minor aged 16–17 years, the informed consent process adhered to the HSRC's guidelines on research with orphans and vulnerable children. A dual consent process was required, both from the minors and their parent/guardian.

***Ensuring confidentiality of information*:** All personal information on the respondent was removed when the data were captured and analysed. Codes to identify respondents were used instead. Personal information is stored electronically with password protection at the HSRC. The SASAS team is compliant with all relevant legislation that protects the data of respondents.

Fieldwork procedures and training

The following general protocol guidelines for data gathering were implemented:

- Fieldworkers and supervisors were required to notify the relevant local authorities that they would be working in the specific area. The purpose was twofold: (i) to increase safety protocols for fieldworkers; and (ii) to reassure respondents that the survey was certified. Official letters describing the project and its duration and relevant ethical issues were distributed to the authorities. This was done not only as a form of research and ethical protocol but also to ensure the safety of the fieldwork teams.
- Supervisors were advised to inform the *Inkosi* or *Induna* in a traditional authority area, while in urban formal or urban informal areas they had to report to the local police station. In some areas, the local councillor was also met and informed of the study prior to commencing fieldwork.
- When approaching a farm, fieldworkers were advised to enter with caution and that they should report to the local Agri South Africa (Agri SA) offices before doing so. Fieldwork supervisors were issued with specialised letters for farmers which contained information on the purpose of the study and contact details in case they received queries.
- Consent forms needed to be completed prior to initiating each interview. Informed consent was built into the online questionnaire on the hand-held devices, with respondents being asked to sign approval before proceeding with the interview. In instances where the respondent did not wish to sign, verbal consent was secured from the respondent.
- Fieldworkers were issued with name tags and letters of introduction to be used in the field. The introduction letter was translated from English into eight other official languages.
- Fieldworkers had to present their identity cards when introducing themselves.

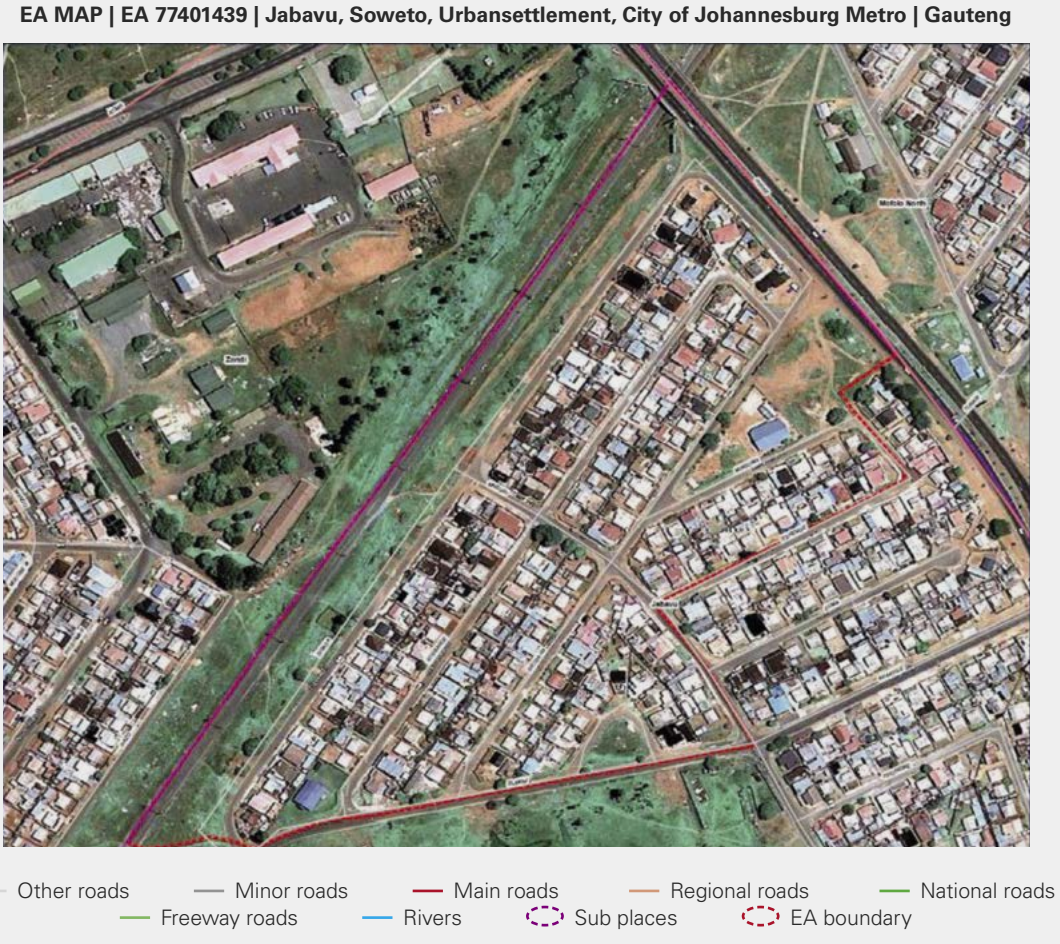
A network of locally based fieldwork supervisors in all parts of the country assisted in data collection. Competent fieldworkers with a thorough understanding of the local areas were employed as part of this project. Two-day training sessions were held in each of the provinces. The training session included lessons on selection and sampling of households, fieldwork operating procedures, research protocols and ethical considerations. The content of the questionnaires was dealt with in-depth in English and in translation, and the use of the forms on the tablets was a further area of focus. As far as possible, the

training was designed to be participatory, practical and interactive, and gave fieldworkers the opportunity to seek clarification. A training manual was also developed as part of the training toolkit. All relevant remarks and instructions discussed during the training session were included in the training manual.

Once the training sessions were completed, a navigational toolkit was provided to fieldwork teams. These toolkits were developed to assist the field teams in finding the selected SALs. The kits assisted the supervisors and fieldworkers to locate the exact SAL where the interviews were to take place. The navigational kits included:

- Route descriptions, to assist the teams to navigate their way into the selected areas.
- Maps that, using aerial photographs as a base, identified the exact geographic location of the area to be sampled.
- More detailed maps that identified the exact area, pinpointing street names and places of interest such as schools, clinics and hospitals. These maps also included latitude-longitude GPS coordinates indicating the centroid of the SAL. An example of a map is depicted in **Figure 1**.

Figure 1: An example of a small area layer map used to assist the fieldwork teams to navigate to the correct areas



HSRC researchers conducted random visits to selected areas and worked with the fieldworkers for a certain period to ensure that they adhered to ethical research practices and that they understood the intent of the questions in the questionnaire. HSRC researchers also ensured that the correct selection protocols were followed to identify SSUs and respondents in the household. The researchers also checked on the procedures followed in administering the research instrument. Field backchecks were also conducted in all nine provinces. Telephonic backchecks were done on at least 10% of the total sample.

Data capturing and weighting

In each SASAS round, an external service provider conducted data capturing. The final dataset was converted into Stata and SPSS and a data manager embarked on a data-cleaning exercise. Data were checked and edited for logical consistency, permitted ranges, reliability on derived variables and filter instructions. After data cleaning, the analytical team received the realisation rates of the survey. SASAS normally has a high interview realisation rate. SASAS 2023 was no different, with a realisation rate of 89% (or 3 112 out of 3 500) achieved in this round (**Table 1**). Our high realisation rate was partly achieved due to the fact that communities were well informed about the survey.

Table 1: Sample realisation for South African Social Attitudes Survey, 2023

Province	Number of SALs	Ideal sample (N)	Realised sample (N)	Realisation rate (%)
Western Cape	65	455	323	71
Eastern Cape	65	455	442	97
Northern Cape	37	259	219	85
Free State	38	266	244	92
KwaZulu-Natal	93	651	611	94
North West	37	259	212	82
Gauteng	83	581	538	93
Mpumalanga	38	266	256	96
Limpopo	44	308	267	87
Total	**500**	**3 500**	**3 112**	**89**

In order to ensure representativity of smaller groups (e.g. Northern Cape residents or Indian/Asian people), weights needed to be applied. The data were weighted to take account of the fact that not all units covered in the survey had the same probability of selection. The weighting reflected the relative selection probabilities of the individual at the three main stages of selection. The marginal totals for the benchmarking of variables were obtained from mid-year population estimates as published by Statistics South Africa. The final dataset (unweighted and weighted) characteristics are presented in **Table 2**, based on select key demographic variables.

Table 2: Sample characteristics (unweighted and weighted), 2023

	Unweighted		Weighted	
	N	%	N ('000)	%
South Africa	3 112	100	43 148	100
Gender				
Male	1 410	45	20 784	48
Female	1 701	55	22 363	52
Age group				
16–19 years	141	5	4 180	10
20–29 years	629	20	9 742	23
30–39 years	727	23	10 817	25
40–49 years	551	18	7 595	18
50–64 years	681	22	6 958	16
65+ years	383	12	3 855	9
Population group				
Black African	1 923	62	34 126	79
Coloured	558	18	3 897	9
Indian/Asian	329	11	1 256	3
White	293	9	3 869	9
Geographic type				
Metropolitan urban	1 223	39	18 778	44
Non-metropolitan urban	1 119	36	11 653	27
Rural	770	25	12 716	29
Province				
Western Cape	323	10	5 468	13
Northern Cape	442	14	4 367	10
Eastern Cape	219	7	918	2
Free State	244	8	2 061	5
KwaZulu-Natal	611	20	7 815	18
North West	212	7	2 967	7
Gauteng	538	17	12 338	29
Mpumalanga	256	8	3 357	8
Limpopo	267	9	3 858	9

Expert survey

To gauge expert perspectives and policy-relevant insights into the social values and norms that encourage and discourage corrupt behaviours in South Africa, an expert opinion survey was designed. The survey was devised as a complement to the national survey described in the previous subsections. The objective of this survey was to invite a range of experts to complete a questionnaire designed according to project objectives and key research questions. The selection of experts for inclusion in the study was purposive, with experts identified from a wide range of academic disciplines, professional institutions, civil society organisations as well as government departments and agencies. The questionnaire was administered via the SurveyMonkey platform, with a weblink emailed to individual experts. The expert survey was conducted over a period ranging between 18 December 2023 and 25 February 2024.

We designed an expert opinion survey to gauge expert perspectives and policy-relevant insights into the social values and norms that encourage and discourage corrupt behaviours in South Africa

A hundred and seventy experts were identified as part of the sample selection process. The individuals approached were all well-established and acknowledged experts in their fields. Most had previously published in accredited publications and engaged in public debates concerning related matters, and/or occupied senior positions in their organisations. Responses from 67 persons were received, with the remainder failing to respond or refusing to participate in the available period.

The team received responses from a wide range of different organisations, including universities, research institutes and non-governmental organisations. Survey participants identified themselves as experts in a range of different areas. Governance and public administration (70%) were the most common, followed by political science (40%), law (37%) and social policy (25%). Of those who participated, 61 fully completed the questionnaire while six were coded as partially completed.

Results

Drawing on the SASAS 2023 data, this report presents a headline breakdown of the results of the national survey as well as the online expert survey. In this section, the research team looks at social tolerance of corruption as well as the level of general exposure to corrupt practices. Lay attributions of responsibility are then considered, followed by perceptions of anti-corruption efforts, with a distinction between government efforts and those actions that can be taken by ordinary citizens. To provide a comparative perspective, data from other relevant surveys are (where possible) compared with our data. As this is a headline analysis of the data, it focuses *only* on providing a concise overview of the main findings from the SASAS module. This report does not make a wide-ranging assessment of subgroup variations or the interconnection between variables. This level of analysis will be provided in a later comprehensive report.

What kind of society do we have?

The vision of the NACS is a South Africa where most citizens uphold ethical values, including trust, honesty, probity and fairness.

The vision of the NACS is a South Africa where most citizens uphold ethical values, including trust, honesty, probity and fairness. As a foundation for cooperation, social integration and harmony, such prosocial values are at the centre of the whole-of-society approach envisioned by the NACS. The goal is to encourage ethical consciousness and principled conduct among the general public. Yet do we know what kind of social values and norms ordinary citizens in South Africa hold? Do these values and norms, for example, tend to be individualistic or collectivistic, distrusting or trusting? In an effort to better understand South African society, we look at these questions in this section. In particular, we are concerned with materialistic values and norms related to wealth and avarice. Given the ethical focus of the NACS, an understanding of such values was considered to be particularly important.

We begin this section by asking what the defining social values and norms that characterise South African society are, with insight gained from our expert survey data. As part of that survey, respondents were read a list of different social norms and then asked how prevalent they regarded them to be in the country. Most were divided on whether South African society was individualistic (a

place where people are viewed as 'good' if they are self-reliant and independent). A minority of the experts said that the country was individualistic to a great extent (14%) or to a considerable extent (10%). This finding does not, however, mean that our expert sample tended to characterise the country as collectivistic (a place where people are viewed as 'good' if they value the needs of the community over the needs of the self). Indeed, only a small minority told us that the country was collectivistic to a great extent (1%) or a considerable extent (10%). Our expert sample was quite pessimistic about the character of South African society. When asked what words or phrases could be used to describe the country today, few chose positive responses, such as 'compassionate' or 'altruistic'.

On the whole, the experts interviewed for this study were doubtful that South Africa could be designated as either an individualistic or a collectivistic society. However, this group was not divided on whether our society is materialistic (a place where people assign great importance to material wealth and possessions). About three-quarters of this group asserted that South African society was materialistic to either a great (35%) or considerable extent (35%). In other words, they felt that society tends to place a lot of personal value on material wealth, and also that the country is more materialistic today than it was in the past. When asked to select what words or phrases best describe South Africa 30 years ago, only 5% of experts chose the term 'materialistic'. Yet 43% of this group selected 'materialistic' when asked what words or phrases best describe the country today.

When asked to select what words or phrases best describe South Africa 30 years ago, only 5% of experts chose the term 'materialistic' – but 43% chose this word to describe the country today

What do the public opinion data tell us about the level of materialism within South African society? SASAS participants were requested to answer a set of questions designed to gauge the degree to which they personally held materialistic values. A set of questions[2] focusing on the degree of centrality of materialism to individual desires was used for this purpose. Respondents were read a set of five statements about material wealth and asked whether they agreed or disagreed with them. The results are displayed in **Table 3** and show that most people agreed that the accumulation of material possessions is admirable, and that wealth is very important to happiness. Consider, for example, that 58% of the general public said that they admired people who own expensive homes, cars and clothes. An even larger proportion (73%) stated that buying things gave them pleasure. The implication seems to be that material acquisition is a core aspect of the aspirations of a a clear majority of South Africans. These findings confirm those found by Roberts and colleagues (2022a) based on a fielding of the Material Values Scale (MVS) in the 2020 round of SASAS.

Table 3: Public agreement and disagreement with the five abridged Material Values Scale statements, 2023

	I admire people who own expensive homes, cars and clothes.	Buying things gives me a lot of pleasure.	I like a lot of luxury in my life.	I'd be happier if I could afford to buy more things.	It sometimes bothers me quite a bit that I can't afford to buy all the things I'd like.
Strongly agree	19	25	21	36	33
	(0.128)	(0.141)	(0.127)	(0.154)	(0.151)
Agree	39	48	41	48	45
	(0.157)	(0.159)	(0.161)	(0.158)	(0.159)
Neither agree nor disagree	16	14	17	9	12
	(0.107)	(0.097)	(0.109)	(0.086)	(0.091)
Disagree	20	10	16	5	8
	(0.125)	(0.084)	(0.104)	(0.060)	(0.080)
Strongly disagree	6	3	5	2	2
	(0.060)	(0.044)	(0.065)	(0.040)	(0.041)
(Do not know)	0	1	1	1	1
	(0.033)	(0.302)	(0.031)	(0.064)	(0.031)
Total agreement	**58**	**73**	**62**	**84**	**78**
Total disagreement	**26**	**13**	**21**	**7**	**10**

Note: Linearised standard errors in parenthesis.

Source: South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS), 2023

Given the importance attached to integrity in the NACS, it is worth asking how prevalent the social norm of trust is in South Africa. As part of the SASAS module, participants were asked if they thought that people could be trusted or whether you cannot be too careful when dealing with others. Only a minority (7%) of the general public stated that people can almost always be trusted, with 21% indicating that people can usually be trusted. A noteworthy share (43%) stated that you usually have to be careful of other people and a further 28% claimed that you almost always have to be careful. It would be informative at this stage to compare South Africa with other countries around the world on this matter of social trust. A recent report by Ipsos shows that social trust varies substantially between different countries (Boyon, 2022). Ipsos found that social trust in South Africa was significantly lower – about three times lower – than what was observed in China and India. On this measure, the nation was ranked alongside countries like Turkey, Malaysia and Brazil.

The data suggest that the social norms of trust and honesty are weak in South Africa. But what about fairness and altruism? SASAS respondents were asked whether they thought people tried to take advantage of others if they got the chance. A fifth said that people almost always behaved this way, while 36% said that people tried to take advantage of others most of the time. By contrast, a minority

(29%) thought that people were fair most of the time and 11% told us that people were fair almost all the time. In sum, it appears that a majority of adults in South Africa have a difficult time trusting others and tend to view other people as manipulative. This is not a once-off finding and has been common to SASAS and other survey examinations of social trust in the country over the past two decades. In sum, the general public was discovered to have a rather cynical view of human nature, viewing others as distrustful and disingenuous.

What is seen as good?

The NACS outlines public adherence to democratic constitutional values as the cornerstone of the strategy. Civic and democratic values and social norms, as outlined in the South African Constitution, are considered essential to the success of the strategy, which aims to create a zero-tolerance environment towards corruption. This corresponds with the aims of the MTSF 2020–2024 to promote ethical and accountable behaviour among all members of the public. Yet, what values and social norms do the general public see as important for good citizenship and good democracy? The previous section investigated views on certain prosocial values and norms. This section briefly looks at the perceived importance of different social norms around citizenship and democracy. Special consideration is given to how attitudes have changed over time, evaluating the period 2014 to 2023, based on results from identical questions in both the 2014 and 2023 SASAS rounds.[3]

To assess what social norms people thought would constitute good citizenship, respondents were first told: 'There are different opinions as to what it takes to be a good citizen.' Then fieldworkers read them a list of different actions and asked them to rate how important each was for being a good citizen. Interviewee responses were recorded on a 1–7 scale, with higher values representing a greater level of importance. These can be best understood as descriptive social norms of good citizenship. To assist the reader, each scale has been converted to a range of 0 to 100. The mean scores on each of these scales are presented in **Table 4** and show that certain norms (e.g. duty to obey the rule of law) were seen as more important than others. But we found a robust level of intercorrelation between the scales depicted in the table. Thus, if a person thought that one action was important for good citizenship, then they were more likely to think other actions were also important.

Table 4: Mean scores on perceived importance of different citizenship norm scales (0–100), 2014 and 2023

	SASAS 2014		SASAS 2023	
	Mean	Std Err	Mean	Std Err
Never to try to evade taxes	79	(0.779)	69	(1.068)
Always to obey laws and regulations	85	(0.618)	77	(0.872)
To keep watch on the actions of government	75	(0.730)	75	(0.997)
To help people who are worse off than yourself	77	(0.682)	76	(0.831)

Note: Linearised standard errors in parenthesis.

Source: South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS), 2014, 2023

An identical set of questions on citizenship norms were asked in SASAS 2014 and the evidence showed that for some norms (such as helping others) we did not observe a significant change over time. However, for other norms, we found that the average perceived importance had declined. For instance, the mean importance on the taxation compliance norm was 79 (SE=0.779) during SASAS 2014, ten index points above what was observed in SASAS 2023. Another significant change between the two periods was noted for duty to obey the law. Mean scores on this scale decreased from 85 (SE=0.618) in SASAS 2014 to 77 (SE= 0.872) in SASAS 2023 (**Table 4**). Although this change was not substantial, in the sense that large majority shares continue to regard them as salient, it is concerning that this type of social norm is declining in South Africa.

We now turn to what social norms were viewed as important within a democracy. Rather than explore obligations, as in **Table 4**, here the focus is on the *rights* that people have in a democracy. To evaluate the perceived importance of different democratic rights among the public, SASAS respondents were first told: 'There are different opinions about people's rights in a democracy.' Then a list of different democratic rights was read out to them by fieldworkers. These questions were designed to identify descriptive social norms associated with democracy. Following this, respondents were questioned on how important each right is for democracy, with answers recorded on a 1–7 scale. Higher values on this scale represent a greater level of importance. The scale was converted to a 0 to 100 score to make it easier for the reader to interpret. The mean scores on each of these scales are displayed in **Table 5** for both SASAS 2014 and SASAS 2023.

Table 5: Mean scores on perceived importance of different democratic rights (0–100), 2014 and 2023

	SASAS 2014		SASAS 2023	
	Mean	Std Err	Mean	Std Err
All citizens have an adequate standard of living	85	(0.670)	78	(0.858)
Government authorities respect and protect the rights of minorities	81	(0.709)	75	(0.782)
Opportunities to participate in public decision-making	81	(0.650)	76	(0.818)
Acts of civil disobedience against unpopular government actions	62	(0.852)	65	(1.084)

Note: Linearised standard errors in parenthesis.

Source: South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS), 2014, 2023

As can be observed from **Table 5**, it appears that the general public viewed certain rights as less important than others. Although support for the right to civil disobedience was slightly stronger in 2023 than in 2014, it was rated relatively poorly in both survey rounds. This finding corresponds with what was observed in **Table 4**, which showed that most people supported deference to the rule of law. Social welfare ('All citizens have an adequate standard of living') was seen as the most important democratic right in each survey round, although support for it has declined, as has support for two of the other three rights. There was some change in how people felt about the democratic right of all citizens to have an adequate standard of living between SASAS 2014 and SASAS 2023. We noted a decrease of seven points on this scale between the two periods. After statistical testing, we discovered a significant level of interdependence between the scales portrayed in **Table 5**. If a person thought that one democratic right was essential, then they were more likely to think other rights were also important.

The political mood

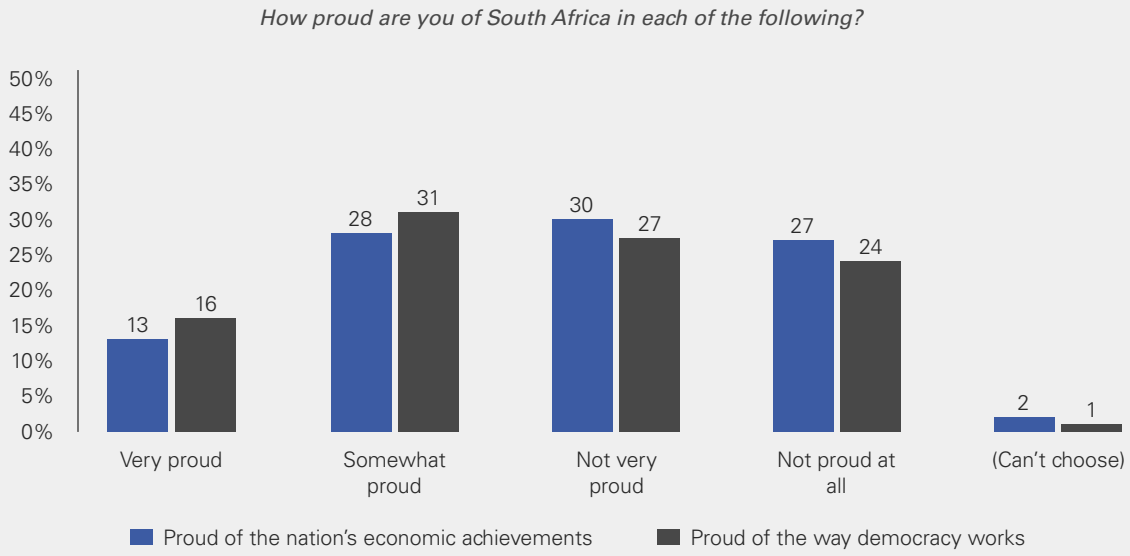
The NACS identifies the declining level of citizen confidence in the state as a problem. A lack of confidence in the public service is seen as particularly detrimental

The NACS is premised on the principle of good governance and that the state should be viewed as a protector and promoter of the rights of its citizens. The NACS identifies the declining level of citizen confidence in the state as a problem. A lack of confidence in the public service is seen as particularly detrimental. This problem is also recognised by the MTSF 2020–2024, which acknowledges that the public has low levels of confidence in the developmental state. Rebuilding public trust in government has been identified as a cornerstone of the NACS. Yet, what is the scale and nature of declining public confidence in South Africa's political institutions? This section provides a concise assessment of regime approval in the country, evaluating whether members of the adult public think the current system is working for them. It provides helpful insights into contemporary social values and norms around governance in the country. Given the centrality of public administration in the NACS, special attention is paid to attitudes towards the public service.

To evaluate how the general public viewed the status quo, respondents in SASAS 2023 were asked how proud they were of: (i) South Africa's economic achievements; and (ii) the way democracy works. Public responses to these items are portrayed in **Figure 2**, and show polarisation in opinion. Many people were not proud of economic and political developments in the country. Nearly three-fifths (57%) said that they were not very or not at all proud of the country's economic achievements, while 51% told us that they had limited or no pride in how democracy was functioning. Despite this

criticism, many people still felt a strong sense of loyalty and pride when asked about South Africa. Around two-fifths (41%) were very or somewhat proud of economic achievements, and 47% were proud of democratic performance in the country. Furthermore, a clear majority (77%) of adults agreed that they would rather be a citizen of South Africa than of any other country in the world.

Figure 2: Public level of pride in South African economic and democratic functioning, 2023

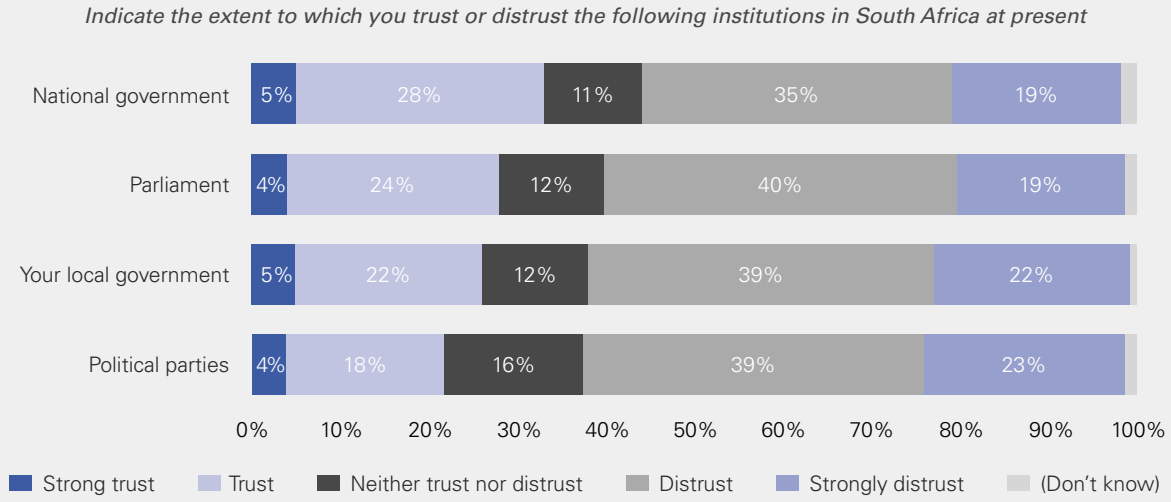


Source: South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS), 2023

Given the findings outlined in **Figure 2**, it is unsurprising that many people in South Africa feel alienated from contemporary politics. Survey respondents in the SASAS 2004 and SASAS 2023 rounds were asked if they agreed or disagreed with the following statements: (i) 'People like me don't have any say about what the government does'; and (ii) 'I don't think the government cares much what people like me think'. In 2004, 54% of the adult population agreed with the first statement, and an even smaller share (47%) agreed with the second. It appears that political alienation grew substantially between 2004 and 2023. In the 2023 survey round, 66% of the general public agreed with the first statement and 72% agreed with the second.

It is apparent from the data presented above that the general public are, on the whole, quite discontented with how politics works in South Africa. To provide further insight into public perceptions of state performance, survey respondents were asked to indicate whether they trusted or distrusted four key political institutions in South Africa. We find that most citizens do not have confidence in these institutions (**Figure 3**). For instance, the proportion who distrusted the national government was 54% in SASAS 2023. This high level of distrust was, however, lower than that observed for parliament (59%), local government (61%) and political parties (62%). In contrast to the widespread distrust of these political institutions, people were more divided on the role of the media in politics. Approximately half (49%) of the general public agreed that media coverage about politics in South Africa was biased, while 19% disagreed. The remainder were either neutral in their response (28%) or did not know how to answer (4%).

Figure 3: Public trust and distrust in four political institutions, 2023

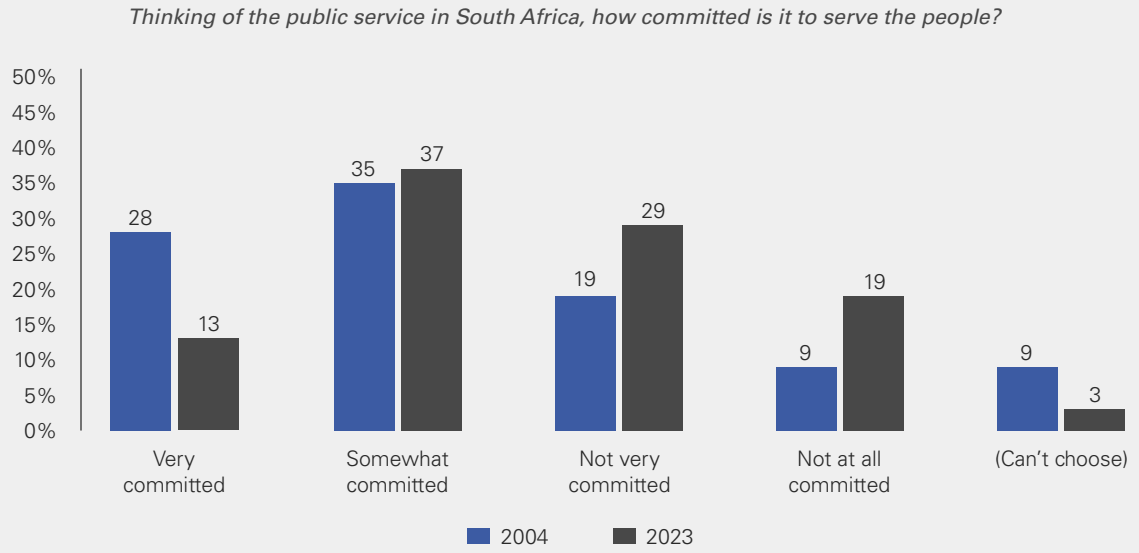


Source: South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS), 2023

In view of the high level of political distrust observed, it is worth narrowing our focus and looking at attitudes towards the public service. Participants in both the 2004 and 2023 SASAS rounds were asked: 'Thinking of the public service in South Africa, how committed is it to serve the people?' Public responses to the question are presented in **Figure 4** and show a significant change over time. More than a quarter of the general public in SASAS 2004 described the public service as either not very committed (19%) or not at all committed to the people (9%) – a combined total of 28%. By comparison, 29% in SASAS 2023 said that the public service was not very committed to serving the people, while a further 19% maintained that it was not at all committed – adding up to 48%, an increase of 20 percentage points. It would therefore appear that the South African public has become far more negative about the public service over time.

Our data show that a noteworthy share of the general public was dissatisfied with the direction in which the country was heading and felt that they could not trust their political institutions. These findings are consistent with prior public opinion research conducted by the HSRC, which found that popular anger against the status quo has grown over the last few years (Roberts et al., 2022b). A significant segment of the adult population is losing confidence in the ability of the current system to deliver for them (see also Struwig et al., 2016). The dire political mood identified among the public so far in this section was also evident in the expert survey data. When asked to list the words or phrases that describe South Africa today, our experts tended to give quite negative responses. The most popular choices included 'divided' (78%), 'angry' (67%) and 'pessimistic' (63%), with only a minority opting for positive responses such as 'optimistic' (15%).

Figure 4: Public evaluation of the commitment of the public service to the people of South Africa, 2004 and 2023



Source: South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS), 2004, 2023

Perceived level of corruption

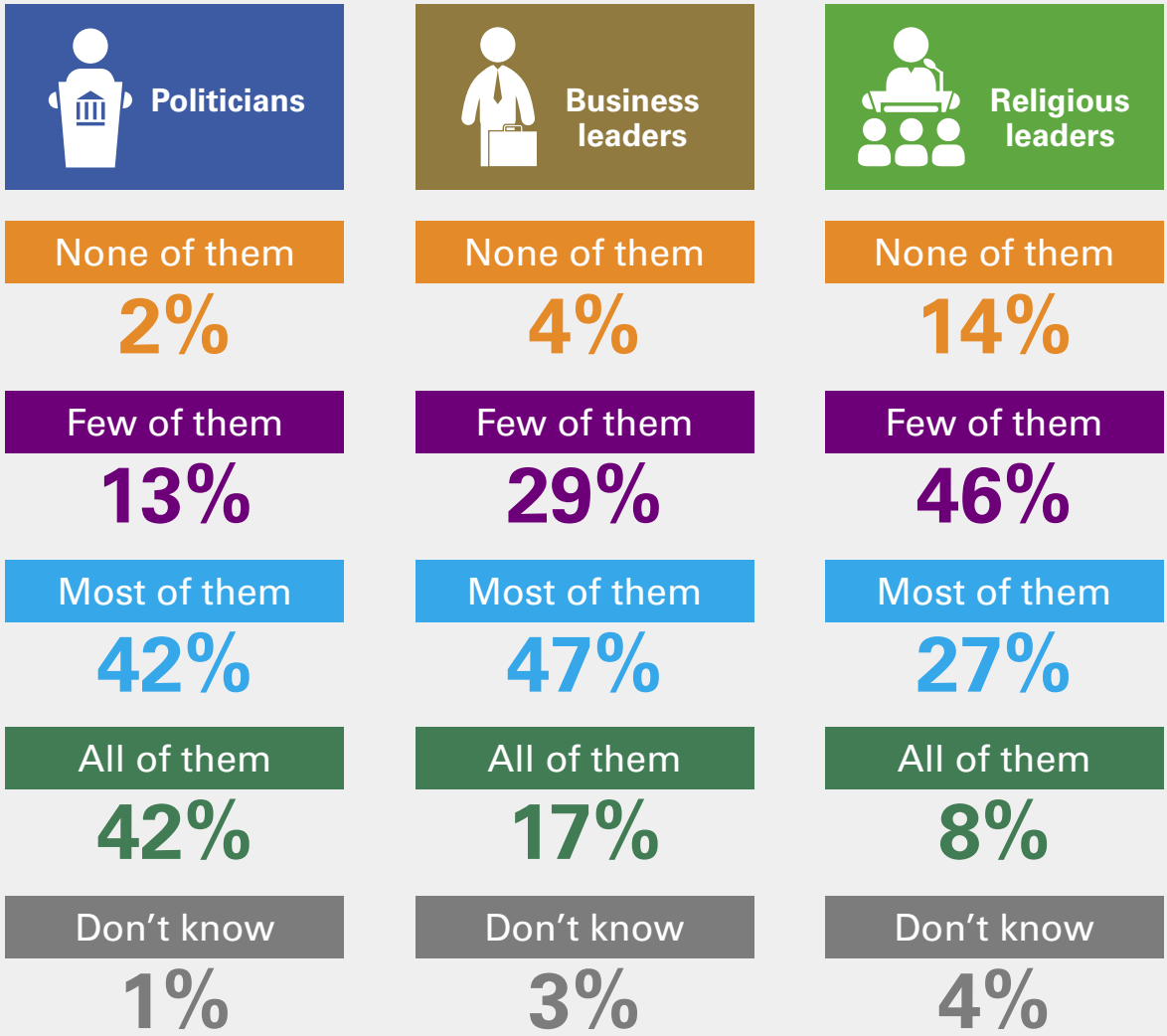
The NACS describes corruption as endemic in South Africa, a problem that has manifested itself in all spheres of society. One of the key goals of the strategy is to raise awareness about the negative impacts of corruption on our society. The NACS envisages that this will help create societal values and norms aligned with transparency, accountability and active citizenship. Greater awareness will also help support champions of anti-corruption activities by making people more cognisant of the need for action. This section briefly examines public awareness through the lens of the perceived level of corruption in the country, with an emphasis on corruption at elite levels. It also looks at perceptions of the impact of corruption on the economy and on the nation's state-owned enterprises (SOEs).

There is growing concern among policymakers that corruption has become more pervasive in South Africa. The 2016 NACS Diagnostic Report identified evidence of the escalating level of corruption in various government departments, as well as local government and the public service (The Presidency, 2016). Although the authors acknowledged the lack of data available, the report also recognised significant concerns about corruption in the private sector. These findings from the Diagnostic Report were acknowledged in the NACS, which expressed grave concern about the scale of corruption in South African society.

Similarly, many experts interviewed for this study were concerned that the problem of corruption had worsened in recent years. John Clarke, whistleblower activist and anti-corruption campaigner, believes that corruption has increased a lot since 2015, a view shared by 43% of his fellow experts. A quarter thought that corruption had increased a little, while only a small minority (3%) believed that corruption had decreased since 2015.

Which types of leaders in South Africa are considered most likely to engage in corruption? As part of our expert survey, respondents were read a list of different types of leaders and asked: 'How many [of the following] do you believe are involved in corruption?' Politicians were ranked as the most corrupt. Nearly nine-tenths of this group said that either almost all politicians were corrupt (35%) or that quite a lot were (52%). Many experts also regarded business leaders as corrupt. About half of those interviewed thought that either quite a lot of business leaders were corrupt (49%) or almost all were (6%). Our expert data can be judged against results from equivalent questions included in the general public opinion survey. As part of SASAS 2023, respondents were read a list of three different types of leaders and asked how many of each group were involved in corruption.[4] The results are presented in **Figure 5**.

Figure 5: Assessment of the involvement of types of leaders in corruption, 2023



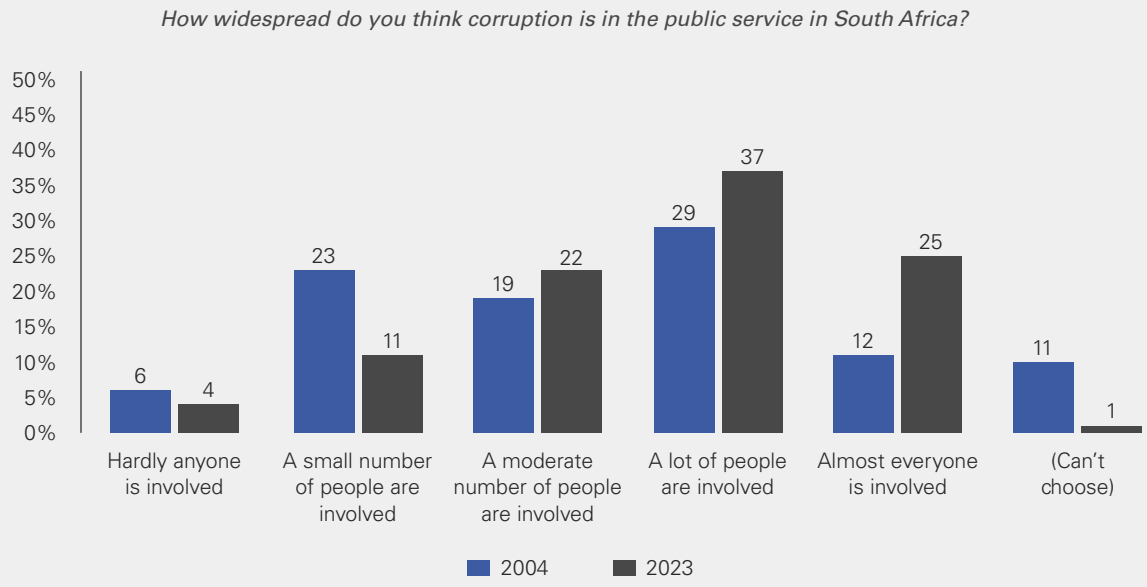
Note: Respondents were asked: '[A]mong the following groups of people, how many do you believe are involved in corruption?'

Source: South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS), 2023

Consistent with what we saw from the expert survey data, the general public tended to perceive politicians as the most corrupt kind of leaders in South Africa. Approximately two-fifths (42%) of the populace believed that all politicians were involved in corrupt behaviour. Other public opinion research also tends to produce comparable results. The data presented in **Figure 5**, for example, are comparable to data from the 2019/2021 wave of Afrobarometer (Afrobarometer Project, 2022). The Afrobarometer data make a distinction between different types of politicians (parliamentarians, local government councillors and the president). According to that data, South Africans, on average, viewed these different types as all quite corrupt and did not really view one type as significantly less corrupt than others. In our survey, non-political leaders were seen as far less corrupt than their political counterparts: only 17% of adults thought that all business leaders were corrupt and 8% believed the same about all religious leaders. The public were slightly more negative than the experts we surveyed about the scale of corruption among political leaders, but the reverse was true of business leaders.

It is apparent from **Figure 5** that the general population was quite concerned about corruption among politicians. We now narrow our focus and concentrate on the public sector. The following question was put to survey participants in both SASAS 2004 and SASAS 2023: 'How widespread do you think corruption is in the public service in South Africa?' Public responses from both survey rounds are displayed in **Figure 6**. On the whole, it is evident that the public was quite worried about corruption among public sector officials. When asked about the issue in SASAS 2023, a quarter of adults (25%) said that almost all public officials participated in corrupt behaviour. A notable proportion (37%) of the public felt that quite a lot of them were implicated, while 22% thought that only a moderate number were involved. These results can be juxtaposed against what we found in the expert survey. Jay Kruuse, Director of the Public Service Accountability Monitor, believed that quite a lot of public service employees in South Africa participated in corruption. His position was supported by more than two-thirds (69%) of surveyed experts, who said that many civil servants were involved.

Figure 6: Evaluations of the involvement of public service in corruption, 2004 and 2023

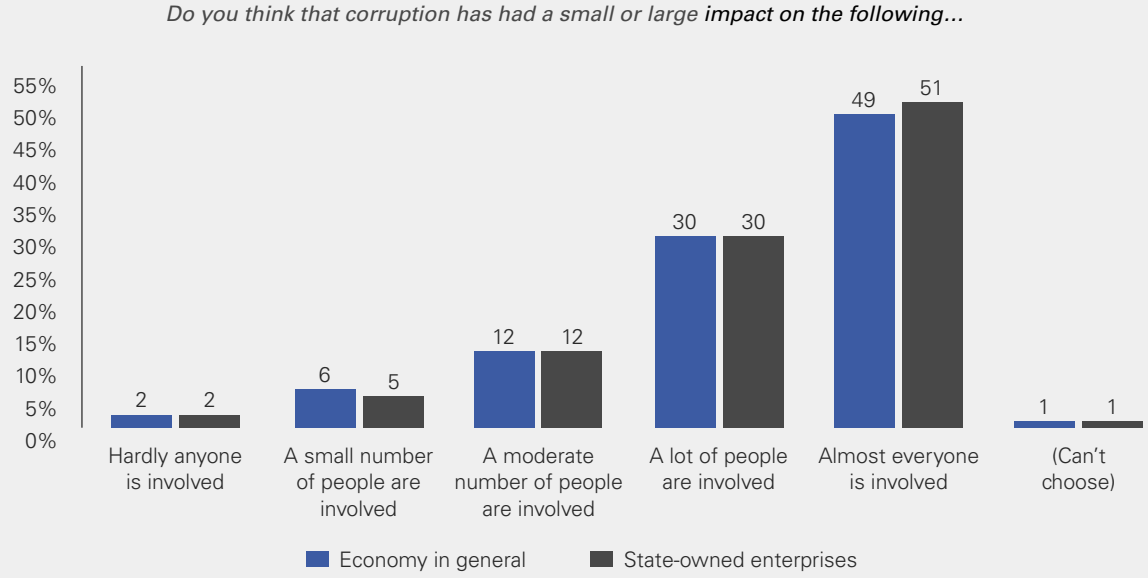


Source: South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS), 2004 , 2023

Comparing the SASAS 2023 data on perceived public service corruption to what we observed in SASAS 2004, it is evident that the public has grown more disapproving of the conduct of officials over time. The growth of perceived corruption within the public service is even more pronounced if SASAS 2023 data are compared to similar public opinion data from the 1990s. If we consider data from the World Values Survey (WVS), we can see how attitudes on this subject have changed over a longer time period (Inglehart et al., 2022). The following question was asked of South Africans during the 1994/1998 wave of the WVS: 'How many public officials in South Africa are involved in corruption?' At the time, 15% of the adult public said that almost all public officials were involved in corruption and 30% stated that most were involved. When comparing the WVS results to the SASAS 2004 and 2023 data, it is evident that the perceived pervasiveness of public sector corruption remained relatively stable between the 1994/1998 WVS wave and the SASAS 2004 round, but has increased appreciably since 2004.

We conclude this section by looking at mass evaluations of the impact that corruption has had. Survey participants in SASAS 2023 were asked to evaluate the perceived scale of impact that corruption has had on the South African economy in general. More than three-quarters (79%) of the adult population believed that the economic impact of corruption had been large (**Figure 7**). This high figure can be compared to data from the 2006 Global Corruption Barometer (GCB),[5] which showed that slightly more than half (56%) of the general public in 2006 felt that corruption had influenced the business environment to a large extent. It could be argued that growing concern among the public about corruption in SOEs is part of the reason for rising public apprehension about the economic impact of corruption observed here. As a follow-up to the question about the impact of corruption on the general economy, SASAS 2023 respondents were asked to state the degree to which they thought corruption had impacted SOEs in the country. Four-fifths (81%) of all adult South Africans said that the impact was large. Less than a tenth (7%) thought the impact was small, and 12% responded that the impact was neither small nor large.

Figure 7: Appraisals of how much corruption has impacted on the economic situation, 2023



Source: South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS), 2023

Exposure to corruption

The NACS identifies respect for the rule of law as essential for its anti-corruption approach. It envisages a country whose citizens are not exposed to corrupt practices. The strategy places a significant emphasis on preventing the extortion of bribes (in whatever form) by public officials in exchange for entitled services or special treatment. Yet, what level of exposure has the general public had to corrupt practices, including bribery? In this section we investigate corruption experiences among the general public, with an emphasis on the public sector. Although experience is crucial for our study purposes here, we should recognise that response bias[6] may be a problem. Survey participants may be reserved about reporting their experiences of corruption to fieldworkers and may underreport the level of corruption that they encounter.

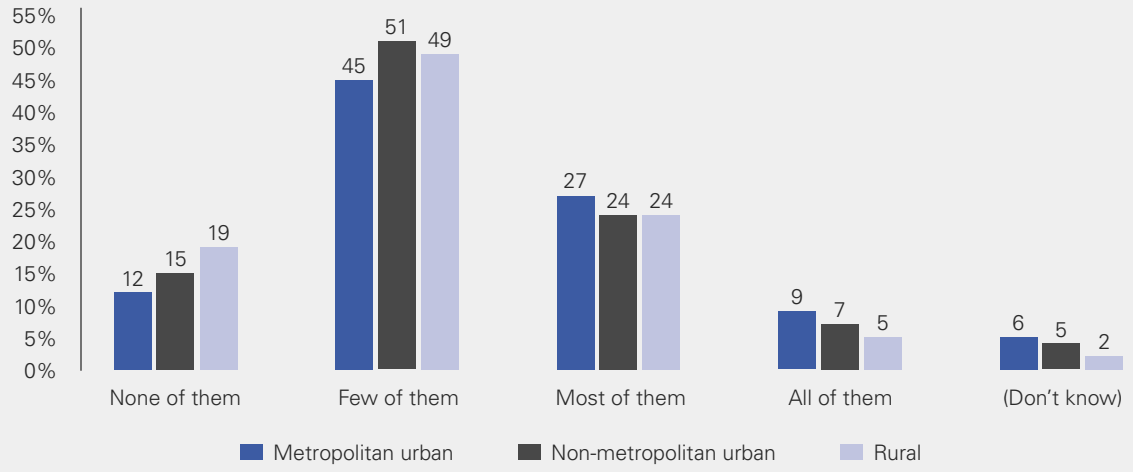
With respect to the perceived level of corruption within the South African population, more than half (56%) of experts interviewed believed that a lot of people were involved in corruption, and 8% thought that almost everyone was. Our expert sample tended to think that people living in urban areas engage in corrupt behaviour more often than those in rural areas. About two-thirds of this group thought that urban dwellers engaged in corruption either quite often (41%) or very often (21%). This can be compared to about a quarter of experts who believed that rural dwellers participated in corrupt behaviour quite often (21%) or very often (5%). These expert findings can be contrasted with SASAS data on whether an individual has been exposed to corruption in their community. SASAS 2023 respondents were asked to estimate the level of corruption in their neighbourhood. It is clear from the responses that many people thought that they were surrounded by corrupt neighbours.

Compared to those living in rural or non-metropolitan urban areas, adults living in large cities tend to feel that their neighbourhoods are more corrupt

As part of the SASAS 2023 module, the following question was put to participants: 'Among people in your neighbourhood, how many do you believe are involved in corruption?' This is a good proxy for injunctive social norms about corruption at the neighbourhood level. Most of the adult population across all different types of geographic areas (geotypes) said that at least some of their neighbours were involved in corrupt behaviour, while only a small percentage (15%) said that no one in their neighbourhood was involved. Close to half (48%) of the general public, across all geotypes, believed that a few of their neighbours were involved, and 25% stated that most of them were. Remarkably, we found that 7% of adults claimed that all of their neighbours were involved in corruption. Compared to those living in rural or non-metropolitan urban areas, adults living in large cities tended to feel that their neighbourhoods were more corrupt. However, this differential was not especially strong, as can be observed from the pattern of results presented in **Figure 8**. This finding can be juxtaposed against the expert survey data, which suggested a much wider disparity between urban and rural dwellers.

Figure 8: Perceived level of neighbourhood corruption across types of geographic area, 2023

Among people in your neighbourhood, how many do you believe are involved in corruption?

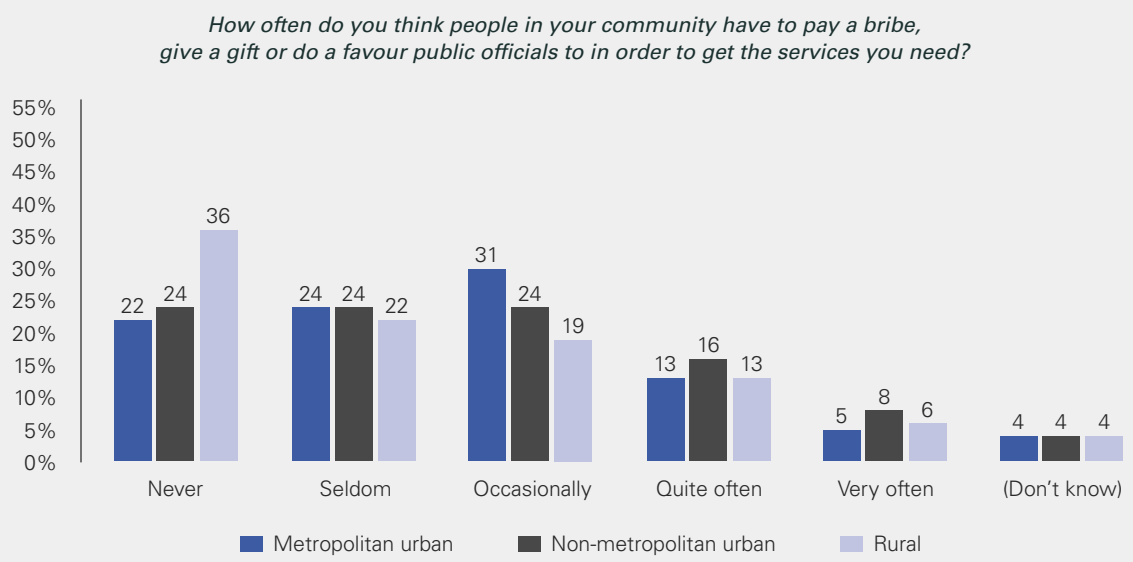


Source: South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS), 2023

There is anecdotal evidence that public officials sometimes refuse services to South African residents unless they pay a bribe of some kind. The SASAS 2023 questionnaire included a question exploring the frequency of exposure to this type of public sector corruption. Data results show that, on average, only a small proportion (27%) of all adults believed that they lived in communities that were free of public sector extortion. Nearly half (48%) of the public thought that it occurred infrequently in their community, with 23% stating that it happened seldom, and 25% claiming that it took place occasionally. A fifth (20%) believed that corruption in their community was fairly common, with 14% answering 'quite often' and 6% 'very often' in response to this question. As can be seen from **Figure 9**, there was a significant difference in perceived levels of public sector corruption by geotype group. Residents of rural areas believed that their communities were less corrupt than those in urban areas. Residents of non-metropolitan urban areas thought that corruption was somewhat more frequent in their communities than their metropolitan counterparts.

In order to understand how exposed the general public is to corruption, respondents in both the SASAS 2006 and 2023 rounds were asked the following question: 'In the last five years, how often have you or a member of your immediate family come across a public official who hinted they wanted, or asked for, a bribe or favour in return for a service?' During the 2006 round, 63% of the adult population told fieldworkers that this had not happened to them during the specified timeframe. Levels of exposure were 18 percentage points higher in SASAS 2023, a significant increase over the time period (**Figure 10**). The 1998 Victims of Crime Survey (VCS) also included a similar question on whether a public official had asked for a bribe in the five years prior to the survey.[7] The vast majority (96%) of the adult public reported that this had not occurred in the five years before the VCS interview. Although the response options provided to VCS respondents were not analogous with those of SASAS, the difference between the two time periods is striking.

Figure 9: Perceived community level of public sector corruption across type of geographic area, 2023



Source: South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS), 2023

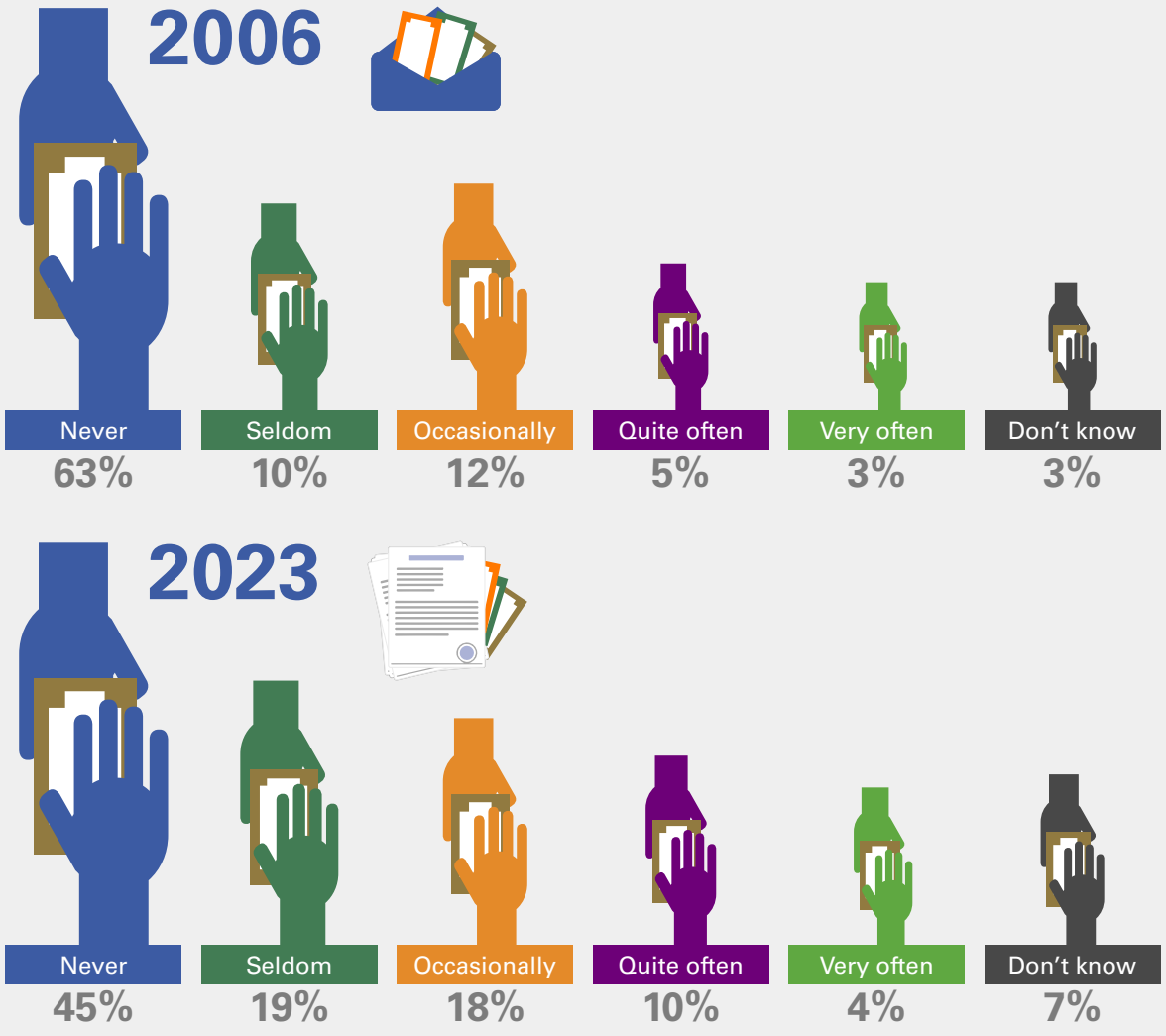
Reviewing the data provided in **Figure 10**, it is evident that there was a significant increase in the frequency of self-reported petty public corruption experience in the country between 2006 and 2023. Assessing how people answered the exposure question in SASAS 2023, we can see that a significant segment of the general public experienced corruption on a regular basis during the 2018–2023 reference period. A substantial minority of the adult population reported that they have been recently solicited for a bribe by a public official either quite often (10%) or very often (4%). Nearly a fifth (18%) said that it had happened occasionally and 19% told fieldworkers that this had taken place only seldom. In sum, and looking at different data sources, South Africans were, on aggregate, *far less* likely to report recent exposure to public sector corruption in the mid-2000s (or late 1990s) than they were in 2023.

It could be argued that the level of self-reported corruption experience presented in this section is lower than what we may have expected. Indeed, a considerable proportion of the experts interviewed thought that most people in the country were involved in corruption. We could be observing underreporting in SASAS due to social desirability response bias in the national dataset. Although we should not discount the possibility of response bias, it is important to consider that corruption experience is also informed by barriers to participation. Many poor and economically inactive South Africans simply do not have the financial resources to frequently participate in corrupt practices. In addition, many people (especially those in rural areas) have limited interactions with government officials of any kind. This would reduce their exposure to corruption in the public sector.

As part of SASAS 2023, participants were invited to rate how corruption was affecting their personal and family life. Only about a fifth (18%) of the general public said that corruption had a small impact on them and their family. A clear majority (64%) of the public told us that corruption had a large effect on them and their family. The remainder told fieldworkers that it had neither a small nor a large

impact (17%) or that they were uncertain of how to respond (1%). For a comparative perspective, according to data on the same issue from the 2006 round of the GCB survey, around half the population claimed that corruption had little effect on their personal and family life. Only a small share (32%) indicated that it had a large effect on their private life. Even considering the fact the GCB 2006 and SASAS 2023 do not use equivalent phrasing, the disparity between the two is remarkable. Adults in South Africa were, on the whole, *far more* likely to view corruption as having a sizeable effect on their lives in 2023 than in 2006.

Figure 10: Self-reported exposure to petty public corruption, 2006 and 2023



Note: Respondents were asked how often they or an immediate family member had encountered a public official in the last five years who wanted a bribe or favour in return for a service.

Source: South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS), 2006, 2023

Perceived level of sextortion

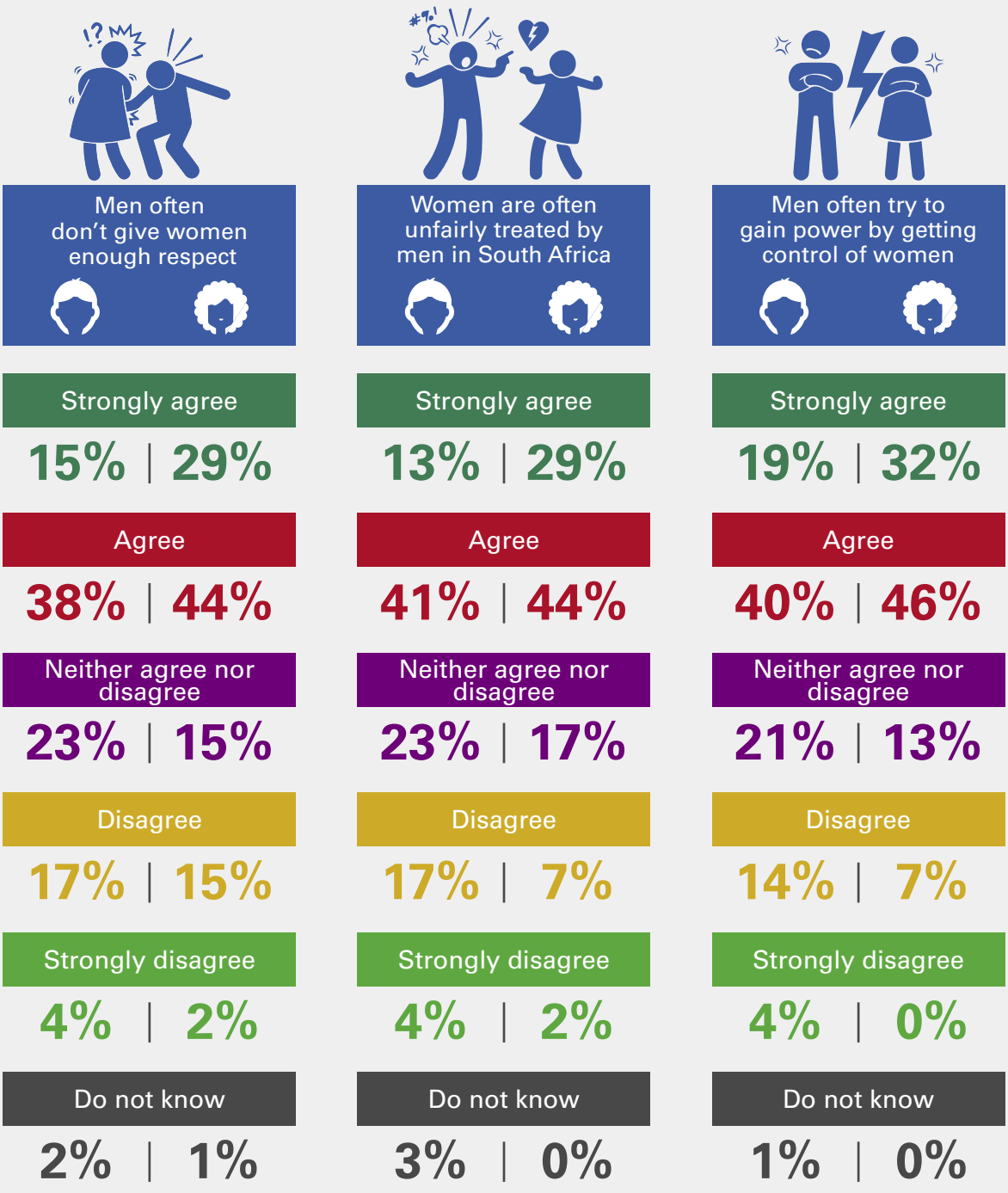
At the international level, sextortion is increasingly attracting considerable attention. Transparency International defines sextortion (also known as sexual corruption) as occurring when those 'entrusted with power use it to sexually exploit those dependent on that power' (Feigenblatt, 2020, p.2). While women are typically targeted, all gender groups are affected by sextortion. There is growing concern about sextortion in South African society, particularly that perpetrated by public sector officials (Gary, 2023). Among policymakers, however, the issue of sextortion has often received far less attention than other kinds of corrupt behaviour. For example, the NACS does not apply a gendered lens in its analysis of the corruption problem. This section explores the issue of sextortion in South Africa, with a specific interest in cases of sextortion in the public sector.

Before looking at sextortion, this section examines values and social norms related to sexual chauvinism. It is hypothesised that these may be related to the perceived prevalence of sextortion within South African society. To gain insight into the level of patriarchy within our society, we first turn to our expert survey data. A large share of the experts interviewed for this study viewed South Africa as exhibiting a patriarchal culture (one where male dominance and the control of women are viewed as 'good'). Vanja Karth, Director of the Democratic Governance and Rights Unit (DGRU) at the University of Cape Town (UCT), thought that South African society was very patriarchal. A sizeable proportion of surveyed experts agreed with her and described the country as a patriarchal society to a great (29%) or a considerable (42%) extent. Given this result, it is not surprising that most of this group also thought that many South Africans hold attitudes that are sexist or misogynist. Nearly two-fifths (37%) thought a majority held such attitudes and 49% said that a moderate proportion did. The full report will identify whether or not there was general agreement or substantial variation in views based on the gender of the experts.

> There is growing concern about sextortion in South African society, particularly that perpetrated by public sector officials

The expert data can be contrasted with the perceived level of patriarchy in society reported by the general public. SASAS respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with three different statements about male chauvinism in South Africa. The responses are displayed in **Figure 11** and show that most people agreed that sexism is a common problem in the country. Approximately two-thirds (63%) of the adult public agreed that South African men often do not give women enough respect. A similar proportion (64%) believed that men often treat women unfairly, while 69% thought that men often try to gain power by controlling women. There was a distinct gender differential in how these questions were answered. Male adults were found to be significantly less likely to agree with the statements about patriarchy than female adults. However, it is important to acknowledge that the dominant male response is still one that acknowledges patriarchy/sexism in the country. In closing, both our expert survey and the general public recognised the prevalence of sexist social norms and values in South Africa.

Figure 11: Public agreement and disagreement with three statements about sexual chauvinism, 2023



Note: Respondents were asked if they agreed or disagreed with three statements about men and women in South Africa.

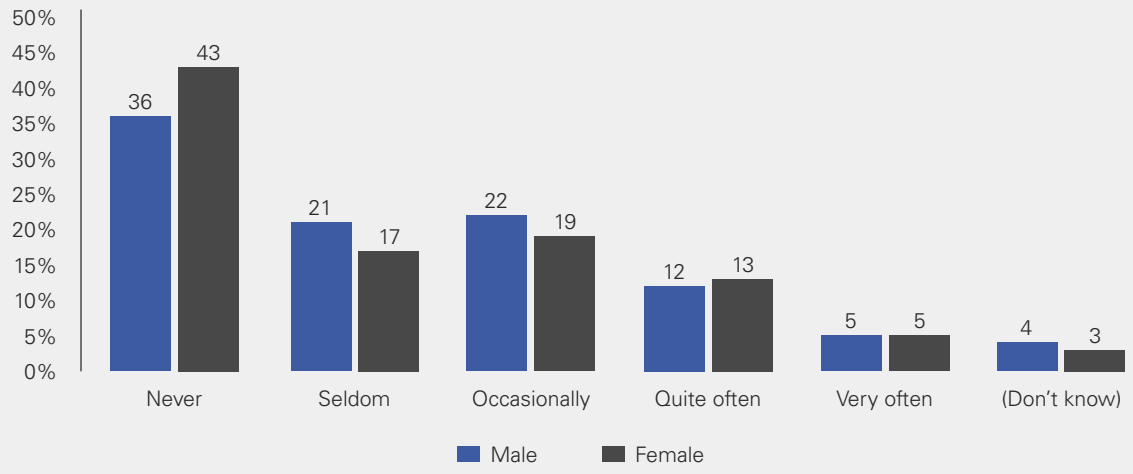
Source: South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS), 2023

Before participants in SASAS were asked about sextortion, they were read this statement: 'Sometimes public officials will ask for sexual favours in exchange for a government service, a job, or to avoid a fine. This could include sexual intercourse, inappropriate touching, or posing for sexual photos.' As part of SASAS 2023, respondents were requested to indicate whether they had 'heard about an official making requests of a sexual nature from someone you know in exchange for a government service or benefit in the last five years?'[8] Responses to this question can be used as (an imprecise) proxy for exposure to sextortion. Given societal taboos against discussing sexual behaviour, respondents may have been restrained when talking about this topic to a fieldworker whom they do not know.

Nevertheless, SASAS 2023 data show that most of the adult public in South Africa had heard about people in their social network being victims of public sector sextortion during the last five years. A large percentage had heard about such incidents recently happening to people they know quite often (13%) or very often (5%). The remainder claimed that they had seldom (19%) or occasionally (20%) heard about this happening recently to people they know. Two-fifths (40%) of the adult population claimed not to have heard about such a crime happening to someone they know in the five years prior to the interview. The data presented in **Figure 12** show that men were somewhat more likely than women to report having heard that someone they know was a victim of sextortion.

Figure 12: Self-reported exposure to stories about sextortion in the public sector, by gender, 2023

How often have you heard about an official making requests of a sexual nature from someone you know in exchange for a government service or benefit in the last five years?



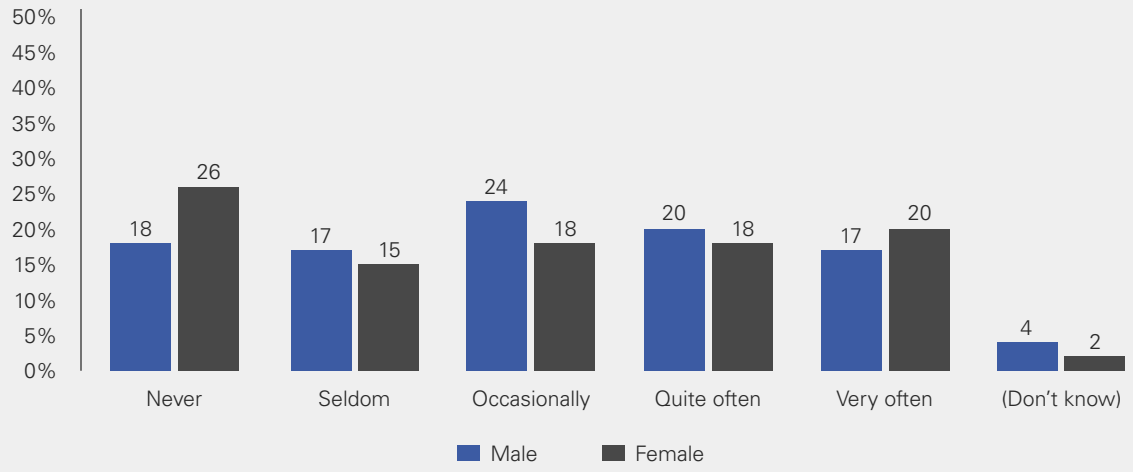
Note: The share of the public self-identifying as non-binary is too small to report their pattern of responses to the question.

Source: South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS), 2023

Turning to the perceived level of public sector sextortion in South African society, SASAS respondents were asked to indicate how often they think sextortion in the public sector occurs in South Africa. Three-quarters (75%) of all adults reported that this crime did occur, with only 22% claiming that it never took place, and 3% stating that they did not know how to respond (**Figure 13**). Around two-fifths (38%) thought it occurred either quite often or very often. The rest of the general public asserted that it

happened less frequently, with 16% responding with 'seldom' and 21% 'occasionally' when answering this question. The outcomes portrayed here can be compared against the results from our expert survey. Feminist and activist Sharon Ekambaram thought that sextortion occurred very often, a view shared by 16% of our expert sample. About a third (37%) of experts thought it happened quite often and 29% said it took place occasionally. Only a small minority said that this kind of crime occurred rarely (2%) or seldom (5%).

Figure 13: Appraisals of how often public sector sextortion occurs in, by gender, 2023



Note: The share of the public self-identifying as non-binary is too small to report their pattern of responses to the question.

Source: South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS), 2023

We found that men were more likely than women to claim that the crime of sextortion was commonplace. This gender differential is apparent from the pattern of results presented in **Figure 13**, and may be explained by what we observe in **Figure 12**. In other words, if a person had heard about their friends and family being victims of public sector sextortion, then they were more likely to think that this crime was quite common in South Africa. In sum, we find that sextortion is perceived as quite a major problem in South Africa. This important finding builds on small-scale preliminary research by Gary (2023) and Merkle (2023), which identified sextortion as a significant issue in the country.

Attribution and responsibility

When individuals seek to solve a problem, they first ask themselves *what* is causing the problem. The solutions that they pursue are often informed by the answer to this question. Social psychologists term this process 'lay attribution', defining attributions as the causal explanations used by ordinary people (or non-experts) to explain a phenomenon. In this section, we look at the main causal attributions for what is causing corruption. Since not all types of corruption are the same, a distinction is made between corruption among ordinary people and corruption at the elite level. This provides unique insight into how citizens understand different types of corrupt conduct in South Africa.

The SASAS 2023 questionnaire contained this question about the reasons that ordinary people might participate in corrupt practices: 'In your opinion, what are the main reasons why ordinary people in South Africa might engage in corruption?' Respondents were then read a list of options and requested to select all that applied. Responses are depicted in **Table 6**, which shows that most people were able to answer the question. Only a small share was unable to provide a response, with 3% (SE=0.006) saying they were unsure and 1% (SE=0.002) remarking that there was no corruption in South Africa. Many members of the general public provided multiple responses, with only a third providing a single response when asked to answer this question. When delineating lay attributions, special consideration was given to distinguishing internal from external factors.[9]

Table 6: Main attributions identified for why there is corruption among ordinary people (multiple response), 2023

	%		[95% Conf. Interval]	
Psychological factors				
People are greedy and want to get rich quick	50	(1.586)	46	53
People want better treatment	35	(1.508)	32	38
People are by nature dishonest	29	(1.422)	27	32
People think corruption is normal	26	(1.373)	24	29
System justification				
It is the only way to get access to essential services	23	(1.275)	20	25
People want to avoid government harassment	12	(1.081)	10	14
Other responses				
The courts and police do not punish people for corruption	27	(1.241)	24	29
Poor socio-economic conditions lead to corruption	27	(1.324)	24	29
Other reason	1	(0.330)	1	2
Non-response				
There is no corruption among ordinary people	1	(0.245)	0	1
Do not know	3	(0.558)	2	5

Note: Linearised standard errors in parenthesis.

Source: South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS), 2023

The most common lay attributions offered in **Table 6** involved psychological (internal) factors, with 82% of public opinion identifying at least one of these factors as among the main reasons for corruption. Of the four different internal factors listed, greed and the pursuit of quick wealth (50%; SE=1.586) was the most popular response, followed by a desire for better treatment (35%; SE=1.508). Given that an earlier section ('What kind of society do we have?') showed that most of the general public holds a materialistic view of success, this finding seems unsurprising. Although the least popular internal attribution concerned the belief that corruption is normal, 26% (SE=1.373) of all adults selected this option. Although external (environmental) factors were less common, many people still mentioned them. The most common were the lack of political will to fight corruption (27%; SE=1.241)

and poor socio-economic conditions (27%; SE=1.324). The least common external factors concerned system justification, which defends the decision to engage in corrupt behaviour based on the need to access essential services and avoid harassment from the state.

Participants in the expert survey were also asked about the primary drivers of corruption in South Africa. The data received showed that a range of factors are at play, including: (i) greed and materialism; (ii) low levels of personal morality and responsibility; (iii) the state bureaucracy being so inefficient or corrupt that participating in corruption is the only way to access basic services; (iv) a lack of opportunities in the legitimate economy; and (v) the absence of consequences for corrupt activities due to an inefficient and ineffective criminal justice system.

A number of experts favoured system justification responses. Ralph Mathekga, Senior Expert at Geopolitical Intelligence Services, echoed the sentiments of many when he pointed to 'a lack of connectedness with others and [a] sense of being overwhelmed by the system…[so that] one has to pay [a] bribe or else be inconvenienced a great deal'. Collette Schulz-Herzenberg, Professor at Stellenbosch University, expressed related sentiments: 'A breakdown in trust in democratic institutions, coupled with high levels of poverty and unemployment, motivate people to pay bribes for services.' A respondent who preferred anonymity also indicated that a combination of factors encourage or enable corruption in urban settings: 'They need to access services and can get away with bribing officials without being caught. It is not wrong if everyone is doing it, is the thinking.'

As noted earlier, the general public is quite concerned about corruption among their leaders in South Africa. It appears that many believe that corruption is prevalent among the country's rich and powerful. SASAS included the following attribution question to try to understand how the general public saw corruption among the elite: 'In your opinion, what are the main reasons why the rich and powerful people in South Africa might engage in corruption?' Survey participants were then read a list of options and asked to select the most appropriate. The results, presented in **Table 7**, show that most people provided multiple responses to this question. The average number of responses was two, and only a nominal share of all adults did not provide an answer. A small proportion (3%; SE=0.0558) responded 'do not know' and 2% (SE=0.245) gave an answer that was not on the list provided to respondents.

A varied assortment of different lay attributions for elite corruption were selected by the general public. The most common responses concerned internal (psychological) factors, with three-quarters of the public selecting such a factor (**Table 7**). The most popular factor here was greed (48%; SE=1.582), followed by the normalisation of corruption (33%; SE=1.456) and inherent dishonesty (28%; SE=1.334). Another rationale for elite corruption was the lack of political–legal constraints, with three-fifths of all adults selecting enforcement factors. Nearly two-fifths (38%; SE=1.488) of the adult population attributed it to a lack of political will, and 32% (SE=1.530) blamed the inaction of the courts and the police. A significant minority, perhaps surprisingly, justified elite corruption within the confines of the current system. A quarter of the public said that this form of corruption was the only way to get things done in the country.

Table 7: Main attributions identified for why there is corruption among powerful elites (multiple response), 2023

	%		[95% Conf. Interval]	
Psychological factors				
Elites are greedy and want to get rich quick	48	(1.582)	45	51
Elites think corruption is normal	33	(1.456)	30	35
Elites are by nature dishonest	28	(1.334)	26	31
Enforcement factors				
Politicians do not do enough to fight corruption	38	(1.488)	35	40
The courts and police do not punish people for corruption	32	(1.530)	29	35
Anti-corruption policies are not enforced	19	(1.134)	16	21
System justification				
It is the only way to get things done in this country	25	(1.410)	22	28
Elites want to avoid government harassment	9	(0.894)	7	10
Other responses				
Other reason	1	(0.580)	0	2
There is no elite corruption	0	(0.151)	0	1
Do not know	4	(0.608)	3	5

Note: Linearised standard errors in parenthesis.

Source: South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS), 2023

Lawbreaking norms and values

One of the strategic objectives outlined in the NACS is that citizens should be empowered with knowledge about what constitutes corruption and about the negative effects of corruption on the state and society. Education is therefore considered essential for changing social values and social norms towards corruption. It is hoped that education will strengthen ethical consciousness, integrity and principled conduct. The concern of the NACS is that if a community does not view a particular act as unlawful and unjustified, then the moral cost of any community member engaging in such an act is reduced. For this reason, understanding the social tolerance for certain behaviours is considered vital. This section briefly looks at the perceived justifiability of unlawful acts, with an emphasis on corrupt behaviours such as nepotism, bribery and sexual exploitation.

Experts tend to think that the South African public do not adhere to social norms of law and order. Respondents interviewed for our expert survey were divided about whether people in the country value the rule of law. Paul Holden, Director of Investigations at Shadow World Investigations, thought that a majority did show respect for the law. Only a small segment (24%) of experts agreed with him on this issue. Gareth Newham, Head of Justice and Violence Prevention at the Institute for Security Studies, stated that only a minority of the public respected and valued the law. More than a quarter (28%) of experts surveyed supported his position, and 3% said that almost no one respected the law. Indeed, when asked what words

or phrases best describe South Africa in the present, 57% of experts said that the country was lawless, and 62% opted for violent. In sum, our expert survey data suggest that the South African public generally do not respect the rule of law. But what does the public opinion data from SASAS tell us?

To assess societal norms against participating in unlawful behaviours, we turn to our public opinion data. As part of the SASAS 2023 survey, respondents were presented with the following statement: 'Please tell me for each of the following actions whether you think it can always be justified, never be justified, or something in between.' Survey participants were then read a list of eight different types of unlawful behaviour, ranging from petty types of crime (e.g. avoiding paying for public transport) to extreme types (e.g. violence against other people). Responses were captured on a 0–10 scale, with 0 representing 'never justifiable' and 10 representing 'always justifiable'. These questions were designed to measure descriptive social norms around criminal behaviour. For ease of interpretation, each scale was converted to a 0 to 100 range. Mean scores on these scales are presented in **Table 8**, with the results showing that mean justifiability scores ranged between 26 and 33 out of 100 for the eight unlawful activities.

Table 8: Perceived justification scales (0–100) of different lawbreaking activities, 2023

	Mean justifiability score (0=never justifiable; 100=always justifiable)		[95% Conf. Interval]	
Defrauding the state				
Avoid paying for public transport	33	(0.962)	31	35
Improper claiming of social grants	30	(0.933)	28	32
Cheating on your taxes	29	(0.914)	27	31
Corrupt behaviour				
Having sex with someone to get a job	26	(0.923)	24	28
Accepting bribes	27	(0.882)	26	29
Nepotism in the public sector	27	(0.912)	25	29
Contact crime				
Stealing goods from a shop	27	(0.831)	25	28
Violence against other people	27	(0.872)	25	29

Note: Linearised standard errors in parenthesis.

Source: South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS), 2023

It is apparent from the data presented in **Table 8** that a noteworthy minority share of the public viewed both major and minor acts of lawbreaking as acceptable. It is worth noting that we need to be cognisant of the possibility of response bias here. Given that respondents may feel reticent about admitting that they find certain types of unlawful behaviour acceptable, the high scores evident on certain measures are astonishing. The unlawful behaviour that was seen as most acceptable was avoiding paying for public transport (M=33; SE=0.962) and unlawful social grant claims (M=30; SE=0.933). The least justified behaviour concerned sexual favours for employment (M=26; SE=0.923).[10] It was surprising to note that a sizeable number of people viewed contact crime as justifiable. The observed mean justifiability score for stealing from a shop (M=27; SE=0.831) was not too different from the justifiability scores for less serious crimes (such as not paying for public transport).

The bribery question portrayed in **Table 8** has been included in each WVS round conducted since the 1990s. If we examine data on the perceived justifiability of bribery from these rounds, we find a significant increase in the societal acceptability of this kind of corruption over time.[11] WVS data show that bribery was viewed as far less acceptable in South Africa in the 1990s than it was in SASAS 2023. When the question was included in the 1994/1998 WVS round, the mean score on this variable was 10 out of 100 (SE=0.372). The mean score on the scale increased to 17 (SE=0.525) in the 1999/2004 round, remained in a similar range at 15 (SE=0.459) in the 2005/2009 round, and rose more substantially to 34 (SE=0.563) in the 2010/2014 round. Looking at this change from another perspective, 85% of the general public scored below 30 on the scale in the 1994/1998 WVS round. When the question was fielded in SASAS 2023, slightly over half (56%) of the adult population scored below 30 on the scale. The mean justifiability of bribe taking in South Africa is now much higher than in most other countries in the WVS.[12]

The perceived acceptability of one kind of unlawful act was found to be correlated with the acceptability of others. In other words, if a person thought that one unlawful act (e.g. avoiding paying for public transport) was acceptable, then they were more likely to think that others (e.g. accepting bribes or nepotism) were similarly acceptable. Statistical testing showed that the contact crime items represented in **Table 8** were very strongly interrelated with the corrupt behaviour items. Of all the items in the table, the one that was most strongly associated with the corruption items was the acceptability of stealing. In short, this analysis suggests that the perceived acceptability of corrupt behaviour evident in this section is part of a general se t of social norms that disrespect the rule of law.

Reporting corruption

The NACS aims to promote an active citizenry that is empowered to hold leaders and organisations accountable. The strategy acknowledges that public vigilance, exercised through tireless monitoring, will be the key to success. Indeed, the first of the six strategic pillars of the NACS calls for all members of the public to take personal responsibility in preventing and addressing corruption. This pillar identifies reporting corruption as one of the best methods to forge an ethical and accountable political system, economy and society. Reporting will help create the social values and social norms of transparency and accountability that are needed to achieve a society free of corruption. This section examines public attitudes towards reporting corruption, exploring the values and social norms that inform this behaviour. A particular emphasis is placed on *why* many people do not report corruption to the authorities.

SASAS respondents were informed that they would be questioned about what they would do if they experienced or witnessed corrupt behaviour. To assist them to answer the question, two examples of corrupt behaviour were included: 'the misuse of funds' and 'requests for bribes'. Survey participants were then asked: 'If you experienced or witnessed corrupt behaviour, how likely is it that you would report it?' Respondents were divided about how they would act if faced with such a scenario. Roughly half thought it was likely they would report it, with 21% stating that it was very likely and 31% that it was likely. A similar proportion considered it unlikely that they would report corrupt behaviour: 30% believed that it was not very likely while 15% said that it was not at all likely.

Survey participants were requested to provide a rationale for why many people in South Africa do not report corruption. The question was: 'Some people say that many incidents of corruption are never reported. Based on your experience, what do you think is the main reason why many people do not report corruption when it occurs?' A wide variety of different options were read out and multiple options could be selected. Responses are shown in **Table 9**; only a small percentage of the public were unable to provide an answer. Indeed, about two-thirds of the population provided multiple responses when queried about the main reasons for not reporting corruption, with two-fifths providing more than two responses.

As indicated in **Table 9**, the most commonly selected responses involved environmental (external) factors. Nearly nine-tenths (86%; SE=0.010) of the general public identified factors related to the law enforcement system as one of the main reasons for a lack of corruption reporting. Of the four different external factors listed, lack of punishment for the guilty scored highest (51%; SE=1.584), and this was followed closely by a lack of protection for those reporting corruption (49%; SE=1.578). Unfortunately, we found that 30% (SE=1.415) of the public stated that the reporting structures themselves were corrupt. Slightly more than half (55%) of the population listed psychological (internal) factors as drivers of non-reporting. The most common internal factor selected was the normalisation of corruption, with 27% (SE=1.376) stating that no one bothers because corruption is normal and everyone does it. Similar proportions of the public also selected a lack of knowledge (23%; SE=1.251) and concerns about ingroup loyalty (21%; SE=1.296).

Table 9: Main attributions identified for why many people do not report corruption (multiple response), 2023

	%		[95% Conf. Interval]	
Psychological factors				
Corruption is normalised	27	(1.376)	25	30
People don't know where to report it	23	(1.251)	21	26
No one wants to betray anyone	21	(1.296)	19	24
Environmental factors				
Those responsible will not be punished	51	(1.584)	48	54
There is no protection for those who report corruption	49	(1.578)	46	52
The officials where they would report to are also corrupt	30	(1.438)	27	33
It is not worth the effort of reporting it	28	(1.415)	25	30
Other responses				
Other reason	2	(0.476)	1	3
Refused	3	(0.586)	2	4

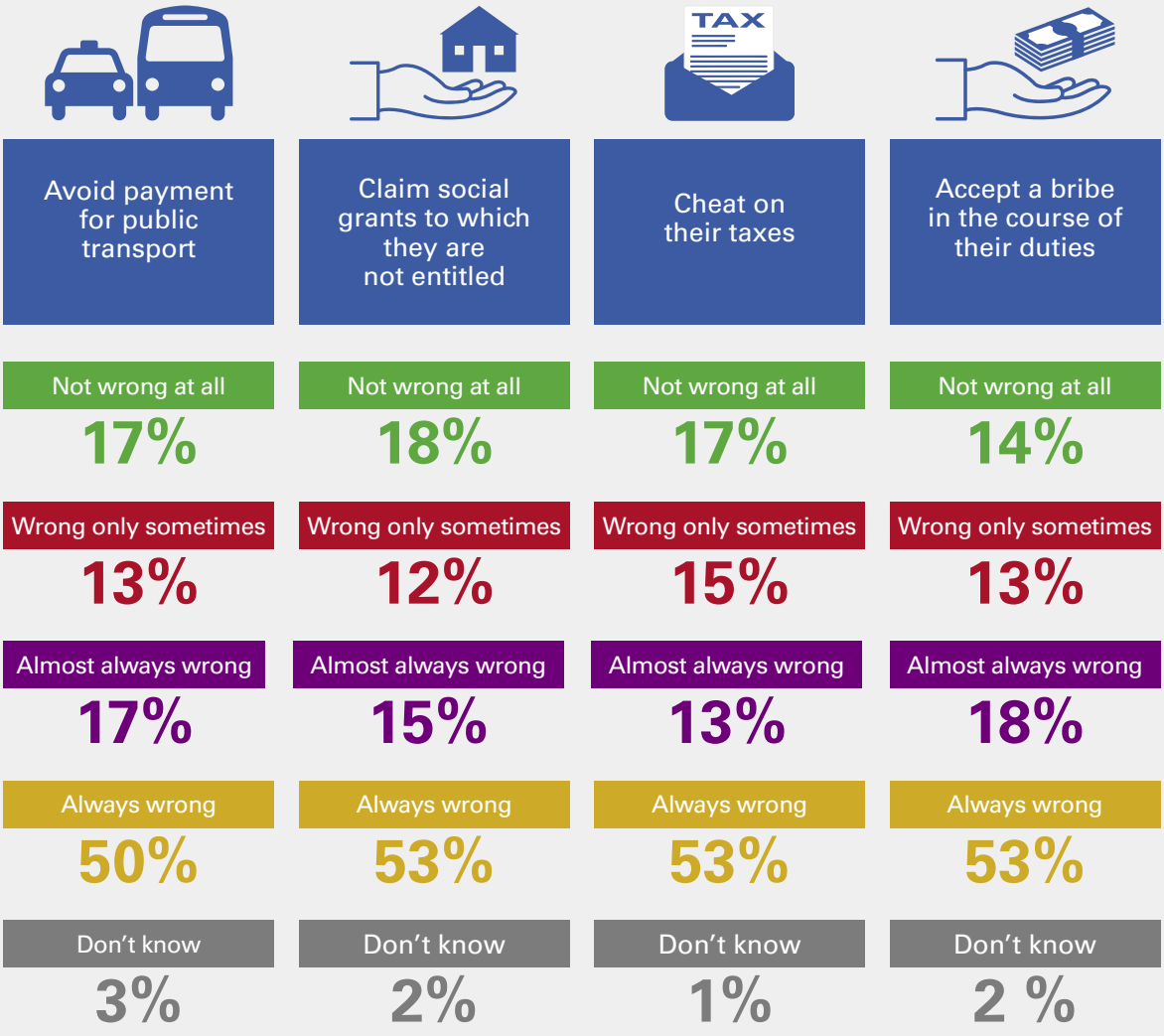
Note: Linearised standard errors in parenthesis.

Source: South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS), 2023

Whistleblowers play a crucial role in promoting transparency, accountability and integrity in South Africa. It is important to encourage whistleblowers and celebrate their brave decision to report corruption. However, our expert sample was divided on whether the general public in South Africa had a positive or negative view of whistleblowers. Professor Natasja Holtzhausen at the University of Pretoria thought that people had a negative view of whistleblowers on the whole, and 30% of the experts agreed with her. Kavisha Pillay, NACAC councillor, disagreed and said that people had a positive view, and 42% of the expert sample supported this position. Our findings here can be contrasted with recent public opinion research on the Zondo Commission. This work found that most (82%) of the general public had heard the term 'whistleblowers' (Roberts & Mchunu, 2023). The research also found some popular support for whistleblower protection, with a clear majority favouring policy interventions that would help those reporting corruption.

People may feel uncomfortable reporting the corrupt behaviour of a member of their ingroup, whether it be defined in terms of family, friendship, workplace or locality. Indeed, ingroup loyalty was cited as a reason that people did not report corruption, as shown in **Table 9**. To look more closely at ingroup loyalty, SASAS respondents were asked about the morality of reporting ingroup members for committing different types of unlawful behaviour. This was included to provide insight into descriptive social norms around reporting behaviour. Responses are shown in **Figure 14**, and we can see that reporting on ingroup members was generally seen as morally wrong. Popular opinion did not seem to make much distinction between the different kinds of unlawful behaviour. Even when asked about quite serious crimes, most people said it was wrong to report on others. Consider, for example, that 53% of adults thought that reporting someone for accepting bribes was always wrong and 18% believed that it was almost always wrong. Only a small proportion of the public claimed that this behaviour was wrong only sometimes (13%) or not at all (14%).

Figure 14: Perceived morality of reporting the unlawful behaviour of ingroup members, 2023



Note: Respondents were asked: 'To what extent do you think it is wrong or not wrong for someone to report someone you know personally (like a friend, co-worker or neighbour) to the authorities if they did the following behaviours?'

Source: South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS), 2023

One of the main reasons given for why people do not report corruption is fear of retaliation (see **Table 9**). Indeed, informal codes of silence are often enforced through fear. Consequently, it is prudent to consider how risky people think it is to report corruption. As part of SASAS 2023, respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: 'In this community, people risk revenge if they speak out against corruption.' How people answered this question helps us understand injunctive social norms against reporting corruption in South African communities. Almost two-thirds (63%) of the adult population agreed with the statement while only 14% disagreed. The remainder either gave a neutral answer (21%) or were uncertain of how to answer the question (3%). This finding is comparable with data from Afrobarometer 2019/2021. As part of that survey round, participants were invited to indicate whether ordinary people like themselves could safely report corruption or whether they would risk retaliation (Afrobarometer Project, 2022). A clear majority (76%) thought that reporting corruption would result in retaliation, and only a minority (21%) stated that people could report without fear.

This section has covered public attitudes towards reporting corruption but has not asked the question: '*Who* should people be reporting *to*?' As part of our expert survey, respondents were asked to imagine that a person has become aware of a particular instance of corruption and wants justice. Then they were requested to indicate which institutions or agency this person should approach to help them get justice. The most popular choices were non-governmental organisations dealing with corruption issues, as well as the media. Some of the least popular responses included political representatives, trade unions and religious organisations. Most of those interviewed for the expert survey were quite critical of the country's system of law and order. Only about half (52%) of the experts responded that people should report corruption to judicial agencies (i.e. law enforcement or investigative agencies),[13] such as the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA) and the Special Investigating Unit (SIU). A smaller percentage (38%) said that people should report the alleged corruption to the police. This may be due to the fact that many experts interviewed for this study thought that police officers in the country were corrupt.[14]

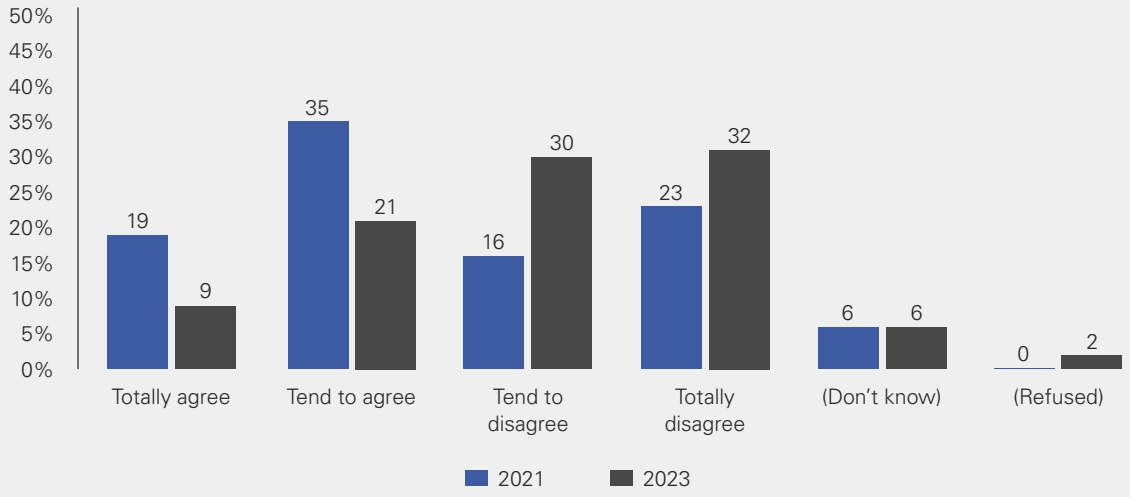
Government efforts to fight corruption

Accountability is key for the success of the NACS and is repeatedly emphasised in the strategy document. It is believed that citizens will regularly engage in corruption reporting only if they feel that their reports will lead to action. The goal of the NACS is to create or encourage values and social norms in South Africa that stress full accountability for those involved. It aims to promote an active citizenry that is empowered to hold leaders and organisations accountable. This section takes a more in-depth look at public attitudes towards the government's fight against corruption. The emphasis is on accountability and whether the general public thinks that those who commit corrupt acts will be punished. The section examines, in particular, the perceived ability of citizens to get the authorities to act on reports of corrupt behaviour.

The following question was included in the 2011, 2021 and 2023 rounds of SASAS to investigate public evaluations of the efficiency of existing government efforts to address corruption: 'How much do you agree or disagree that South African government efforts to combat corruption are effective?' Reviewing the results presented in **Figure 15**, it appears that the public has become more negative about the ability of the state to successfully fight corruption. Close to a third (30%) of the general public agreed in the 2023 round that the government's anti-corruption efforts are effective. This represents a significant decline relative to the share agreeing with the statement in both 2011 (54%) and 2021 (43%), signifying a 24 percentage point decline between 2011 and 2023. The results depicted in **Figure 15** can be contrasted with the findings of our expert survey. Almost all (91%) of the experts interviewed for this study thought that state efforts to combat corruption were ineffective. Only a small percentage of this group (7%) asserted that current efforts were effective, while 4% were uncertain of how to respond.

Figure 15: General evaluations of government efforts to combat corruption, 2021 and 2023

How much do you agree or disagree that South African government efforts to combat corruption are effective?



Source: South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS), 2021, 2023

Many experts interviewed for this study expressed scepticism about the willingness of the authorities to act when corruption was reported. For example, Sadia Khan at Accountability Lab South Africa thought that it was unlikely that action would be taken if a whistleblower came forward and reported corrupt behaviour (like the misuse of funds or requests for bribes) to the relevant authorities. A clear majority (76%) of the experts surveyed agreed with her. As regards combating sextortion in the country (discussed in the section 'Perceived level of sextortion'), our expert participants were also quite negative about the willingness of the authorities to act. Respondents were told to imagine a person who was a victim of sextortion and wanted justice. They were then asked the following question: 'Do you think they would generally receive equal and effective access to justice?' A large majority of this group of experts either said probably not (62%) or definitely not (19%), while only a small minority responded either yes (16%) or that they were uncertain (4%).

The section 'Exposure to corruption' showed that most of the adult public reported being exposed to public sector corruption. We now examine whether the public thought that people like themselves would get into trouble for engaging in this kind of corruption. During the SASAS 2023 round, respondents were asked to answer the following question: 'How likely is it that an ordinary person in South Africa will be punished by the authorities for giving or receiving a bribe, gift or favour in return for public service?' The public was divided about whether ordinary people would be punished if they engaged in public sector corruption. Half of all adults thought that the chances of punishment were unlikely, with 15% stating it was not at all likely and 35% that it was not very likely. A smaller proportion considered it likely that regular people would be punished, with 18% saying that punishment was very likely and 28% that it was somewhat likely.

A substantial share of the adult population feels that the authorities will not, or cannot, punish ordinary people for engaging in corrupt behaviour

These data show that a substantial share of the adult population felt that the authorities would not, or could not, punish ordinary people for engaging in corrupt behaviour. Building on this finding, the following question was put to survey participants to explore public evaluations of interventions that target elite corruption in society: 'How likely is it that the rich and powerful in South Africa will be punished for engaging in corruption?' Most people claimed that the elite were safe from punishment. Close to two-thirds of the general public said that punishment was either not at all likely (29%) or not very likely (34%). A minority considered it likely that a member of the elite would be punished for corrupt behaviour. Around a third (34%) of the public thought that the chances of punishment were likely, with 13% stating it was very likely and 21% that it was

somewhat likely. We observed a moderate (and positive) relationship between perceptions of anti-corruption efforts directed against the elite and those directed against ordinary people. In other words, if you thought it likely that an ordinary person would be punished, then you were more likely to believe that a member of the elite would also be held accountable.

This section has discussed the perceived effectiveness of macro-level anti-corruption efforts. We now consider the perceived effectiveness of reporting corruption. SASAS 2023 participants were asked to indicate how likely it is that they could get someone to act if they went to the authorities to report corrupt behaviour. Approximately a third of the adult public thought it was either very likely (13%) or somewhat likely (23%) that they would be able to get someone to act. More than three-fifths stated that it was either not very likely (41%) or not at all likely (20%). The remainder (3%) did not know how to answer the question.

Looking at the perceived effectiveness of anti-corruption actions from another perspective, data from the 2016/2018 Afrobarometer round allow us to examine the perceived efficacy of reporting corruption to local government (Afrobarometer Project, 2019).[15] About half (54%) of adults in South Africa in that survey round thought their reports of corruption to local authorities would probably *not* be successful. The figure was lower than that recorded in Namibia (74%) and Nigeria (68%), but higher than what was observed in Botswana (32%) and Tanzania (17%).

Respondents in the expert survey thought structural change to the existing system would be the most effective action to help combat corruption

As part of the expert survey, respondents were asked what they thought the most effective action was that ordinary people in South Africa could take to help combat corruption. Reviewing the answers given by this group, it is apparent that most favoured structural change to the existing system. This finding is consistent with the generally negative evaluations of existing anti-corruption efforts expressed by the experts. The most frequent response was to support legal reform for greater transparency (especially proactive disclosure of public procurement information): 85% of experts selected this option. Other common responses included 'vote for a political party that demonstrates a commitment to fight corruption' (68%) and 'report corrupt behaviour to the appropriate authorities' (65%). The options that were the least popular included contacting a politician or civil servant. This finding is unsurprising given the negativity our experts expressed towards politicians and public sector employees, as noted earlier. Yet it could also reflect an understanding that politicians and civil servants are not the appropriate recipients of anti-corruption reports.

Conclusions

This headline report has outlined a series of significant findings from both our baseline national survey as well as the online expert survey. We have revealed crucial insights about South Africa, pointing to important social norms and values that characterise society. However, it is our findings on corruption that are the most relevant for the NACAC and the current efforts of the state to successfully implement the NACS. In this section, the main findings of the report are summarised. A clear majority of the experts interviewed believed that corruption in the country was widespread. Politicians, in particular, were seen as corrupt. This finding is consistent with the SASAS 2023 data and corresponds with the elevated levels of political distrust that we observed. It appears that most adults in South Africa are worried about the impact of corruption on the country. This corresponds with recent HSRC public opinion research on 'state capture' for the Zondo Commission (Roberts & Mchunu, 2023).

Most adults in South Africa are worried about the impact of corruption on the country

It is evident from the data that a majority of the experts interviewed for this study felt that most of the South African population had been exposed to corruption. This finding corresponds with the results of the public opinion data. SASAS results showed that 69% of the public reported living in communities where people pay bribes to get services they need. An even larger share (80%) of the public reported that at least a few of their neighbours were involved in corruption. In addition, a majority of the general public admitted to being solicited for bribes by public officials in the last five years. The high level of exposure to corruption reported here may help explain the pattern of results observed in the section 'Perceived level of corruption', which showed that many thought that there was a lot of corruption in the public sector. The data available suggest that exposure to corrupt behaviour has increased over time, significantly so from what was observed in the mid-2000s.

A noteworthy share of the experts interviewed thought that South Africa is characterised by sexist and chauvinistic social values and norms. This sentiment is shared by a plurality of the general public. The lion's share of our expert sample also alleged that sextortion occurs frequently in South Africa. This corresponds to what we see in our national survey data. A majority of the public knew someone who had been a victim of sextortion by public officials and believed that

this crime occurred regularly. Although we did find approximate gender parity in the reporting of sextortion, the data tend to suggest that women are slightly less likely to report knowing of such crime than men. It is difficult to determine whether this is due to a greater tendency among women to underreport instances of sextortion relative to men or, alternatively, if this could reflect the possibility that men in South Africa are more likely than women to have a friend or kinsperson who has been a victim of sextortion. Overall, our findings suggest that sextortion is a major problem in the South African public sector.

When we examined how ordinary people understood the drivers of corruption, we found that the general population offered several different ideas. However, the most popular reason provided concerned internal psychological factors (e.g. greed and dishonesty). A distinction was made between corruption among two groups – ordinary people and elites. This distinction brings new insight, helping us understand how the general public viewed different forms of corruption. Internal factors were the most common attribution selected by the general public for both ordinary people and elites. Yet certain internal factors (e.g. greed) were more commonly used to explain corruption among ordinary people than among elites. System justification attributions were somewhat less popular when the question concerned elites than when it concerned ordinary people. The general public was more likely to blame law and order failures for elite corruption.

The survey also provided evidence to show that a sizeable segment of the general public viewed corrupt behaviours (e.g. accepting bribes or nepotism in the public sector) as justifiable and permissible. Unexpectedly, petty crime and violent crime were evaluated as more or less similarly justifiable. Furthermore, statistical testing revealed that perceiving these corrupt behaviours as justifiable was strongly associated with perceiving other unlawful behaviours as permissible. In other words, if a person viewed defrauding the state or contact crime as justifiable, they were more likely to think that corrupt behaviour was acceptable. This finding corresponds with what we observed regarding public concerns about the normalisation of corruption in the country. In addition, there is evidence that the share who felt that accepting bribes was acceptable has also grown during the period for which we have data.

We provided a brief outline of what the general public thinks about the reporting of corruption. Values and social norms related to transparency and integrity on this issue are much weaker than we would have assumed. It appears that only 45% of the adult public said that they would report corrupt behaviour if they witnessed or experienced it. Moreover, most would consider it morally wrong to report the corrupt behaviour of someone they knew personally. When asked why people would not report corruption, external factors related to the integrity or efficacy of the justice system emerged as the most salient. This corresponds with the finding that many people thought that inadequate law enforcement was driving corrupt behaviour. A similar pessimism was expressed by our expert sample: most of this group did not think that the authorities would act when corruption was reported. Another factor was fear: a clear majority of the population felt that reporting corruption could bring retaliation from the community in which they lived.

Most of the experts interviewed were discontent with government's anti-corruption efforts. The general public shared this sentiment and viewed accountability for corrupt behaviour as weak. This finding corresponds with the view, held by a significant proportion of the public, that law enforcement failures are one of the main reasons for corruption. This pessimism could be due to the lack of high-profile prosecutions for those accused of serious corruption in recent years. Yet, we also found that half of the public thought that anti-corruption efforts were similarly ineffective when targeted at *ordinary* people. Indeed, 61% of the adult public thought that the act of anti-corruption reporting itself was ineffective. These findings are consistent with the perceived failure of state authorities to act on reports of corrupt behaviour as a reason for non-reporting. It would seem, in sum, that most South Africans think that there is limited accountability for those who commit acts of corruption.

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Glossary of statistical terms

Confidence intervals Ranges of values that are calculated from sample data and used to estimate the range within which a population parameter is likely to lie. They provide a measure of uncertainty around a point estimate by specifying a range of values within which the true population parameter is expected to fall with a certain level of confidence, typically expressed as a percentage (e.g. 95% confidence interval). As an example: 50% of the public believe that corruption among ordinary people is attributable to them being greedy and wanting to get rich quickly, with a 95% confidence interval of 46–53%. This means that, based on the survey sample, we can be 95% confident that the share of adults that holds this viewpoint falls between 46% and 53%.

Mean A measure of central tendency that represents the sum of all values in a dataset divided by the total number of values. Sometimes referred to as an average, it provides a single numerical value that describes the typical value or centre of data.

Percentage A measure that expresses a proportion (or part of a whole) as a fraction of 100.

Standard errors Frequently abbreviated to SE, standard errors represent the measure of variability (or uncertainty) associated with a statistic. They quantify the extent to which the sample statistic may differ from the true population parameter in repeated sampling. When data are weighted, standard errors are linearised to estimate the variability associated with the dataset's parameters. As an example, 69% believed it is important to never try to evade taxes, with a linearised standard error of 1.07. This means that while the national average is 69%, the true percentage is probably between 68% and 70%, considering the standard error.

Glossary of other terms

Descriptive social norm	A type of societal expectation that reflects what is commonly observed or practised by a person. It identifies behaviours based on perceptions of what a person would typically do in similar situations, influencing individual actions to conform to the observed norms.
General public	The broad and diverse population within a society who are not part of any specific group or organisation. In this report, the term refers to adults living in South Africa.
Injunctive social norm	Actions or behaviours deemed acceptable or unacceptable by others, often enforced through explicit rules or cultural expectations. It establishes standards of conduct based on perceived moral or ethical principles by the community, guiding individuals' actions to adhere to societal norms and values.
Institutional trust	The confidence individuals have in the credibility, effectiveness and integrity of an organisation (such as government bodies, corporations and educational institutions). It plays a crucial role in fostering organisational legitimacy and influences people's willingness to cooperate with organisations.
Patriarchy	A system of authority in which men hold the power and women are largely excluded from it.
Public opinion	The collective attitudes, beliefs and sentiments held by the general population on various issues or topics.
Sexism	Prejudice, stereotyping or discrimination, typically against women, on the basis of sex. Sometimes this term is framed as 'sexual chauvinism'.
Social norm	Shared understandings of appropriate behaviour, formed through mutual expectations derived from beliefs about anticipated outcomes or preferred conduct. These beliefs, often implicit, evolve from observations of others' actions and perceptions of anticipated societal standards and interpersonal obligations.
Social trust	The confidence and belief individuals have in others. It forms the foundation of cooperative interactions, fostering cohesion and stability within communities.
Social value	A collective belief or principle held by a society, shaping attitudes, behaviours and priorities. These values often serve as guiding principles in decision-making processes, influencing individual and group actions within the community.

Endnotes

1 For a more comprehensive discussion of social norms as a concept, see Scharbatke-Church and Chigas (2019).
2 These questions were adapted from the Material Values Scale (MVS) developed by Richins (2004).
3 These measures form part of an international module on citizenship and identity that was developed by the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP), and this thematic focus is fielded once every decade. 2014 and 2023 are the most recent occasions when this module was fielded through SASAS as the South African ISSP representative.
4 When this question was asked, no definition of corruption was provided to survey participants. This was done so as not to bias the responses of the participants.
5 The Global Corruption Barometer is a public opinion survey conducted by Transparency International, which also produces the Corruption Perceptions Index based on experts' opinions. (Transparency International, 2007).
6 Social desirability/acceptability response bias will be discussed in more detail in the main report.
7 The exact wording of the 1998 VCS question was: 'Over the past five years, has any government official, for instance a customs official, police officer or inspector asked you or wanted you to pay a bribe for his/her service?' (Statistics South Africa, 1999).
8 There was debate within the research team about asking people to report having been a victim of sextortion, as there was concern that such a direct and personal question would be unduly affected by social desirability response bias. The possibility of this form of bias remains a concern given the coercive and sexual nature of the behaviour under discussion.
9 In attribution theory, internal and external factors refer to perceived causes of an individual's behaviour or the outcomes they experience. Internal factors are those that are seen as originating from within the individual, such as their personality, abilities or effort. In other words, in the context of attribution theory research, an internal factor typically involves examining how individuals attribute the causes of events or behaviours to characteristics or traits inherent to the person in question. On the other hand, external factors are attributed to outside influences, such as luck, the actions of others or situational factors. For a further discussion of this theory, see Hewstone (1989).
10 Female adults were more inclined to view this behaviour as unjustifiable than their male counterparts. But the gender difference here was more marginal than may have been expected.
11 The reader should be aware that there was a moderate difference in how the response scales for the WVS and SASAS were designed. The scales were adjusted to render them comparable.
12 Utilising the 2017/2022 WVS dataset, we compared other countries, ranging from Argentina to Malaysia, with South Africa. Most people around the world tended to display an aversion to bribery. However, justifiability of bribery was lowest in countries like Egypt (M=2; SE=0.213) and Germany (M=4; SE=0.263). South Africa reported relatively high levels of bribery tolerance, and only a few other countries, such as Malaysia (M=23; SE=0.788) and the Philippines (M=34; SE=0.952), had similar scores.
13 A broad collective noun of 'the judicial system' was used.
14 Sean Tait, Director at the African Policing Civilian Oversight Forum (APCOF), felt that quite a lot of police officers participated in corruption. A majority (63%) of experts interviewed agreed, and 17% alleged that almost all officers participated in corruption. Expert respondents were more positive about the judiciary. Only a minority believed that quite a lot (6%) of judges, magistrates or prosecutors were involved in corruption or almost all were (2%).
15 The question used to measure the perceived effectiveness of anti-corruption reporting was a little different from that used in SASAS 2023. The exact wording was: 'How likely is it that you could get someone to take action if you went to your local government office to report corrupt behaviour like misuse of funds or requests for bribes by government officers, police, or school or clinic staff?'

Corruption is a major problem in South Africa and the country has struggled to combat it. The rise and entrenchment of neo-patrimonialism and corruption in the public sector appears to be especially acute. There is growing evidence that corruption has worsened over the last 20 years. This change has had adverse political, social, economic and security-related repercussions for the nation's entire population.

At this critical juncture, the South African government has adopted the National Anti-Corruption Strategy (NACS) 2020–2030. This strategy identifies the need for credible, evidence-informed approaches to reverse the destructive and debilitating effects of corruption.

One of the main anti-corruption tactics prioritised by the NACS is a whole-of-society approach that incorporates changing social norms and values in South Africa. In most contexts, social norms and values play a pivotal role in driving human behaviour. Accordingly, participation in, or opposition to, corrupt behaviour can be influenced by these norms and values.

The overall aim of the study is to identify and track social values, norms and behaviours that encourage and discourage corruption. This research is intended to help support the National Anti-Corruption Advisory Council (NACAC) in their efforts to develop, assess and adapt strategies to combat and prevent corruption in accordance with the NACS.

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