

# From Norms to Reality: Why Anti-corruption Protocols fail in Advancing African Regional Integration

Netty Magura

Pan African University, Institute of Governance Humanities and Social Science. (PAUGHSS) Yaoundé, Cameroon

**Abstract:** *Efforts to curb corruption in Africa have produced an impressive body of protocols, conventions, and institutional commitments at both continental and regional levels. From the African Union Convention on Preventing and Combating Corruption (AUCPCC) to regional protocols under SADC, ECOWAS, and the EAC, the continent has sought to embed governance reforms within its broader integration agenda. Yet corruption persists, undermining trade facilitation, distorting markets, and eroding trust in regional institutions. This article interrogates the paradox of norms without practice, examining why anti-corruption frameworks often fail to deliver tangible outcomes for African regional integration. Drawing on governance theory, political economy analysis, and case studies from Southern, West, and East Africa, the article argues that weak enforcement mechanisms, institutional deficits, elite capture, and sociocultural norms explain the implementation gap. It concludes that unless anti-corruption is repositioned as a central pillar of integration supported by enforceable sanctions, digital innovations, and multi-actor coalitions the, transformative potential of AfCFTA and Agenda 2063 will remain unrealized.*

## 1. Introduction

Regional integration has long been positioned as a strategic response to Africa's fragmented markets and developmental challenges. From the early aspirations of Pan-Africanism to the establishment of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), integration has been framed as a mechanism to expand trade, attract investment, and build collective resilience. Agenda 2063 identifies regionalism not only as an economic imperative but also as a platform for peace, political stability, and inclusive development. Despite these ambitions, intra-African trade remains modest roughly 15–17 percent of total exports compared to about 60 percent in Asia and 70 percent in the European Union (UNECA, 2021). Among the various factors depressing these figures, corruption remains one of the most persistent and insidious.

The continent is not short of anti-corruption norms. At the continental level, the AUCPCC (2003) sets binding commitments to criminalize corrupt practices, strengthen accountability, and promote cooperation among member states. Regionally, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Protocol Against Corruption (2001), the ECOWAS Protocol on the Fight Against Corruption (2001), and East African Community (EAC) initiatives reinforce these obligations. National governments have also established commissions, ombudsman offices, and specialized prosecutorial bodies. Yet corruption continues to permeate customs administrations, procurement processes, and border management. Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index repeatedly ranks most African countries below the global average, with bribery, rent-seeking, and elite capture undermining the very frameworks intended to prevent them.

This paradox abundant frameworks alongside persistent corruption raises a central research question: why do anti-corruption protocols fail to advance African regional integration? The question matters because corruption functions like a hidden tariff: it inflates costs, discourages small and medium-sized enterprises, and weakens investor confidence. It is also deeply political, eroding trust between citizens and the state and diminishing the legitimacy of regional institutions.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 situates the analysis within governance and integration theories. Section 3 provides an overview of the anti-corruption architecture from continental to national levels. Section 4 develops the concept of the protocol-to-practice gap and explains why frameworks fail. Section 5 presents case studies from SADC, ECOWAS, and the EAC. Section 6 analyses implications for trade and integration. Section 7 outlines reform pathways, and Section 8 concludes.

## 2. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Understanding why anti-corruption protocols fail requires grounding in theories of governance, corruption, and regional integration. These perspectives illuminate both the incentives that sustain corrupt practices and the institutional weaknesses that prevent frameworks from being effective.

Principal-Agent theory (Rose-Ackerman, 1999) locates corruption in the breakdown of monitoring and accountability: public officials (agents) exploit information asymmetries to pursue private gains at the expense of citizens (principals). In many African settings, weak oversight institutions and limited transparency magnify this problem, hence the emphasis in reform blueprints on

audits, codes of conduct, and disclosure regimes. Yet Principal-Agent assumptions often treat corruption as an aberration, overlooking contexts where it is systemic.

Collective Action theory (Persson, Rothstein, & Teorell, 2013) addresses that limitation by showing how, in environments where corruption is widely expected, individuals participate not from preference but because deviation appears futile. Where corrupt behaviour is the norm, enforcement must shift collective expectations, not merely punish individuals. Rent-Seeking theory (Krueger, 1974) adds a political economy layer: elites manipulate regulatory discretion and trade policies to extract rents, creating powerful constituencies against reform.

Integration theories also matter. Neofunctionalism (Haas, 1958) highlights ‘spillover effects’ whereby cooperation in one domain generates momentum in others; corruption disrupts this dynamic by blunting the efficiency gains from customs harmonisation or trade-corridor reforms. Institutionalism (North, 1990) stresses that durable integration requires credible rules and enforcement precisely what many African Regional Economic Communities (RECs) lack. Pan-Africanism provides an ideological foundation for unity, but governance deficits erode the trust and solidarity required to realise it.

The protocol-to-practice gap captures the tension between normative commitments and implementation. Andrews (2013) calls this ‘isomorphic mimicry’: governments adopt international norms to signal compliance yet resist enforcement where it threatens domestic political interests. In Africa, ratification often reflects donor expectations or peer pressure, while weak enforcement, selective prosecution, and normalised informal practices sustain the gap.

### 3. Africa’s Anti-Corruption Architecture: An Overview

Africa’s anti-corruption architecture spans continental, regional, and national levels. On paper, this reflects a significant normative commitment. Yet the gap between design and delivery has been persistent. At the continental level, the African Union Convention on Preventing and Combating Corruption (AUCPCC), adopted in 2003, has been ratified by most AU member states. However, the absence of robust compliance monitoring mechanisms and weak supranational enforcement have limited its effectiveness.

The African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), also launched in 2003, was designed to foster peer accountability and governance reform. Although innovative, the APRM is voluntary and its recommendations are not binding. Many states have participated only minimally, reducing the mechanism to a symbolic exercise rather than a driver of reform. This reflects a wider challenge in Africa’s anti-corruption efforts: frameworks exist, but the absence of sanctions means implementation often stalls.

AfCFTA, while primarily an economic agreement, indirectly embeds anti-corruption dimensions through its commitments on transparency, trade facilitation, and customs simplification. By reducing discretionary powers at borders, AfCFTA could in principle diminish opportunities for rent-seeking. However, governance-related provisions have been slow to materialise in practice, leaving corruption as a persistent barrier to intra-African trade.

Regionally, the SADC Protocol Against Corruption (2001) and the ECOWAS Protocol on the Fight Against Corruption (2001) require harmonisation of laws and cooperation in prosecutions. Yet enforcement varies: Botswana is frequently cited as a positive example, while Zimbabwe and the Democratic Republic of Congo remain mired in systemic corruption. The East African Community (EAC) has taken more pragmatic steps, such as establishing one-stop border posts (OSBPs) and rolling out electronic cargo tracking systems. While these have reduced clearance times, informal practices persist, particularly at weighbridges and roadside checks.

At the national level, commissions such as Nigeria’s EFCC, Zimbabwe’s ZACC, and Kenya’s EACC were created to meet regional and continental obligations. However, these bodies are often constrained by political interference, chronic underfunding, and lack of prosecutorial independence. While high-profile arrests occasionally occur, convictions are rare, particularly for politically connected individuals. As a result, these institutions often serve as tools of political theatre rather than substantive mechanisms of accountability.

Nationally, many states have established anti-corruption commissions—Nigeria’s EFCC, Zimbabwe’s ZACC, Kenya’s EACC—alongside specialised courts and ombudsman offices. However, political interference, resource constraints, and selective prosecution limit effectiveness (Doig, 2012; Hope, 2017). Institutions often serve as signals of compliance rather than engines of accountability.

#### 4. Why Frameworks Fail in Practice

Despite the apparent strength of Africa's normative frameworks, corruption remains entrenched because enforcement is weak, institutions lack capacity, political economy dynamics sustain patronage, frameworks are fragmented, and social norms normalise corrupt practices.

At the most basic level, enforcement mechanisms are inadequate. Neither the AU nor the RECs have supranational sanctioning powers. This means that states face no real consequences for ignoring their commitments. As a result, governments may ratify protocols for legitimacy without implementing them—a phenomenon that Andrews (2013) terms 'isomorphic mimicry.'

Institutional limitations deepen the problem. Many anti-corruption commissions lack financial autonomy, specialised staff, and investigative tools. Leadership appointments often depend on executive discretion, leaving these bodies vulnerable to political capture. Even where agencies initiate investigations, weak prosecutorial capacity and slow judicial processes undermine deterrence.

Fragmentation is another challenge. States are bound by multiple conventions—continental, regional, and bilateral—that overlap in scope but differ in definitions and obligations. This duplication overwhelms limited institutions, creates compliance fatigue, and weakens accountability. Governments exploit these overlaps to evade scrutiny, citing partial compliance in one forum to mask failures in another.

The persistence of corruption despite robust frameworks reflects a convergence of weak enforcement, institutional deficits, political economy constraints, fragmentation, and sociocultural norms.

Political economy dynamics sustain corruption. Patronage networks depend on rents generated through discretionary control of trade and procurement (Chabal & Daloz, 1999; Meagher, 2003). Reforms that threaten these rents face resistance or are selectively enforced. Fragmentation across continental, regional, and national instruments produces overlapping mandates, duplication, and diluted accountability (Hope, 2017).

#### 5. Case Studies

The weaknesses of Africa's anti-corruption frameworks become clearer when examined through regional case studies. In the SADC region, the Protocol Against Corruption (2001) has had little impact on entrenched practices. Along the North–South Corridor, customs delays are routinely resolved through informal payments. While automation through ASYCUDA and the creation of OSBPs has improved efficiency, corruption often shifts to new points of discretion, such as post-clearance audits. In Zimbabwe, the Zimbabwe Anti-Corruption Commission (ZACC) has been accused of selectively prosecuting political opponents while shielding ruling elites.

In South Africa, the State Capture Inquiry revealed how corruption extended beyond petty bribes into large-scale manipulation of procurement processes. These scandals highlight how corruption undermines both domestic institutions and regional credibility. Even in states with relatively stronger institutions, the persistence of elite capture illustrates the limits of legal frameworks without political will.

In ECOWAS, the Abidjan–Lagos corridor exemplifies how pervasive checkpoint corruption undermines trade facilitation. Truck drivers report dozens of stops along relatively short distances, with informal payments demanded at each. Although Ghana's introduction of a single window customs system has reduced opportunities for bribery, entrenched networks continue to resist reforms. Nigeria's ports, meanwhile, remain plagued by systemic corruption, deterring investment and raising costs for traders.

The EAC presents a more complex picture. OSBPs at major crossings like Busia and Malaba have reduced clearance times and improved predictability. However, corruption persists at weighbridges and roadside checkpoints, where truck drivers continue to pay 'express fees.' Procurement scandals in Kenya and Tanzania further illustrate that corruption is not confined to borders but pervades national governance systems as well.

Across these case studies, a pattern emerges: reforms reduce transaction costs but fail to change incentive structures. Where political will exists, such as in Rwanda, reforms succeed; where elites benefit from rents, as in Nigeria or Zimbabwe, frameworks collapse. The decisive factor is therefore less the existence of frameworks and more the political conditions under which they operate.

##### 5.1 SADC: Protocols, Corridors, and the Politics of Enforcement

The SADC Protocol Against Corruption (2001) is comprehensive on paper, yet enforcement is uneven. Along the North–South Corridor—linking the DRC, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Botswana, and South Africa—customs procedures, discretionary valuation, and documentary 'queries' create opportunities for rent extraction that act as hidden tariffs (De Wulf & Sokol, 2005; World Bank, 2020).

Automation (e.g., ASYCUDA) and OSBPs have reduced some delays, but corruption often shifts to risk profiling and post-clearance audits. Selective enforcement and limited prosecutorial independence further erode credibility.

### **5.2 ECOWAS: Checkpoints, Informal Payments, and Corridor Governance**

Despite the ECOWAS Protocol on the Fight Against Corruption (2001), the Abidjan–Lagos corridor remains characterised by frequent checkpoints and informal payments that inflate logistics costs and cause delays. Road governance reports document persistent extortion, while reforms such as single windows have progressed unevenly due to vested interests (West Africa Trade Hub, 2019; OECD, 2019).

### **5.3 EAC: One-Stop Border Posts and Their Limits**

The EAC's OSBPs and electronic cargo tracking have reduced clearance times and improved predictability (World Bank, 2016). Yet bribery persists at weighbridges and police checkpoints, where discretion remains highest. Firms often prefer predictable 'express fees' over uncertain delays (Sequeira & Djankov, 2014), revealing how efficiency reforms leave underlying incentives intact.

### **5.4 Synthesis of Case Evidence**

Across regions, reforms reduce some transaction costs but rarely alter core incentives. Where enforcement capacity is weak, automation relocates corruption; where elites rely on rents, reforms stall or are selectively applied. These dynamics confirm a persistent protocol-to-practice gap.

## **6. Implications for Regional Trade and Integration**

Persistent corruption has far-reaching implications for Africa's integration agenda. First, corruption functions as a non-tariff barrier, undermining tariff liberalisation under AfCFTA. Bribes and informal fees inflate logistics costs and erode competitiveness, effectively cancelling the benefits of tariff reductions.

Second, corruption operates as a hidden tariff that disproportionately harms small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Larger firms can absorb or even strategically exploit informal payments, but SMEs lack the resources to do so. As a result, corruption entrenches inequality and undermines AfCFTA's promise of inclusive growth.

Third, corruption distorts competition. Firms willing to engage in bribery gain advantages, while honest businesses are penalised. This erodes the foundations of merit-based competition and discourages long-term investment. Mauro's (1995) seminal study demonstrated that corruption is negatively associated with investment and growth, a finding that continues to resonate across African economies.

Finally, corruption undermines continental aspirations such as Agenda 2063 and flagship projects like the Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa (PIDA). By inflating project costs, diverting funds, and reducing efficiency, corruption compromises the delivery of critical infrastructure and value-chain integration. Unless corruption is addressed as a central obstacle, the ambitious objectives of Africa's regional projects will remain aspirational rather than realised.

Corruption operates as an invisible non-tariff barrier. As formal tariffs fall under AfCFTA, hidden costs reappear through bribes and extortion, cancelling liberalisation gains. Because these costs are arbitrary and unpredictable, they discourage smaller firms and reduce overall competitiveness (Sequeira & Djankov, 2014).

The distributional effects are stark. Large, well-connected firms internalise corruption as a cost of business, while SMEs—AfCFTA's intended beneficiaries—are crowded out. For landlocked countries, layered rent extraction across transit states compounds the burden.

Corruption distorts competition and undermines investor confidence, weakening prospects for regional value chains (AfDB, 2021). If corruption persists, AfCFTA's projected trade gains (UNECA, 2021) will remain largely theoretical.

## **7. Towards Bridging the Protocol-to-Practice Gap**

First, enforcement and compliance mechanisms must acquire teeth. Link peer review to material incentives (access to regional funds, trade facilitation support) and credible sanctions for non-compliance, drawing lessons from EU conditionality while tailoring design to African political realities (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005).

Second, digitalisation should reduce discretion through single windows, electronic cargo tracking, and open-data customs dashboards. Because corruption can migrate to new choke points, technology must be coupled with independent oversight, public transparency, and robust whistleblower protections (Sequeira & Djankov, 2014; Tapscott & Tapscott, 2018).

Third, empower regional courts and parliaments to scrutinise compliance and adjudicate cross-border corruption disputes, insulating processes from partisan interference. Fourth, mobilise civil society, the private sector, and citizens—through access-to-information regimes and safe reporting channels—to sustain pressure for accountability (Gyimah-Boadi, 2017).

Finally, learn from reform leaders. Rwanda's digital service delivery, Botswana's institutional independence, and Mauritius's cooperative frameworks illustrate that when political will aligns with institutional design, corruption can be constrained (Gateri, 2017; Sebudubudu, 2014). The challenge is scaling these lessons regionally.

## 8. Conclusion

Africa's anti-corruption architecture is rich in norms but weak in practice. Enforcement gaps, institutional fragility, elite patronage, fragmented frameworks, and normalised bribery combine to blunt effectiveness. The case studies show that reforms often shift, rather than eliminate, corruption—confirming a persistent protocol-to-practice gap.

The implications for integration are profound: corruption acts as a hidden tariff, distorts competition, and erodes public trust. Bridging the gap will require enforceable sanctions, digital transparency, empowered oversight bodies, and active participation by civil society and the private sector. By treating anti-corruption as a foundational pillar of integration, Africa can move from declaratory norms to transformative practice.

## References

- Agbiboa, D. E. (2015). Between corruption and development: The political economy of state robbery in Nigeria. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 131(2), 447–467.
- Blundo, G., & de Sardan, J. P. O. (2006). *Everyday corruption and the state: Citizens and public officials in Africa*. Zed Books.
- De Wulf, L., & Sokol, J. B. (2005). *Customs modernization handbook*. World Bank.
- Gateri, C. W. (2017). Rwanda's approach to anti-corruption: Successes and challenges. *African Journal of Public Affairs*, 9(5), 147–165.
- Haas, E. B. (1958). *The uniting of Europe: Political, social, and economic forces, 1950–1957*. Stanford University Press.
- Hope, K. R. (2017). *Corruption and governance in Africa: Critical essays*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Meagher, K. (2003). A back door to globalization? Structural adjustment, globalization and transborder trade in West Africa. *Review of African Political Economy*, 30(95), 57–75.
- OECD. (2019). *Integrity for good governance in Africa*. OECD Publishing.
- Rose-Ackerman, S. (1999). *Corruption and government: Causes, consequences, and reform*. Cambridge University Press.
- Sebudubudu, D. (2014). The impact of good governance on development and poverty in Africa: Botswana—A relatively successful African initiative. *African Journal of Public Affairs*, 7(4), 35–47.
- Tapscott, D., & Tapscott, A. (2018). *Blockchain revolution: How the technology behind bitcoin is changing money, business, and the world*. Penguin.
- UNECA. (2021). *Economic report on Africa 2021: Addressing climate change in Africa*. Addis Ababa: United Nations Economic Commission for Africa.
- West Africa Trade Hub. (2019). *Road governance report: Abidjan–Lagos corridor*. USAID.
- World Bank. (2020). *Trading for development in the age of global value chains*. World Development Report 2020. World Bank.
- African Development Bank. (2021). *African economic outlook 2021: From debt resolution to growth—The road ahead for Africa*. Abidjan: AfDB.
- Agbiboa, D. E. (2015). Between corruption and development: The political economy of state robbery in Nigeria. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 131(2), 447–467.
- Andrews, M. (2013). *The limits of institutional reform in development: Changing rules for realistic solutions*. Cambridge University Press.
- Bayart, J. F., Ellis, S., & Hibou, B. (1999). *The criminalization of the state in Africa*. Indiana University Press.
- Blundo, G., & de Sardan, J. P. O. (2006). *Everyday corruption and the state: Citizens and public officials in Africa*. Zed Books.
- Chabal, P., & Daloz, J. P. (1999). *Africa works: Disorder as political instrument*. James Currey.
- De Wulf, L., & Sokol, J. B. (2005). *Customs modernization handbook*. World Bank.
- Doig, A. (2012). Anti-corruption agencies: Reflections on international standards and experiences. *Public Administration and Development*, 32(1), 1–10.
-

- Gateri, C. W. (2017). Rwanda's approach to anti-corruption: Successes and challenges. *African Journal of Public Affairs*, 9(5), 147–165.
- Gyimah-Boadi, E. (2017). Political corruption in Africa: Lessons from Ghana. *Daedalus*, 146(3), 55–68.
- Haas, E. B. (1958). *The uniting of Europe: Political, social, and economic forces, 1950–1957*. Stanford University Press.
- Hope, K. R. (2013). *The African Peer Review Mechanism: Critical perspectives*. Routledge.
- Hope, K. R. (2017). *Corruption and governance in Africa: Critical essays*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Krueger, A. O. (1974). The political economy of the rent-seeking society. *American Economic Review*, 64(3), 291–303.
- Mauro, P. (1995). Corruption and growth. *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 110(3), 681–712.
- Meagher, K. (2003). A back door to globalization? Structural adjustment, globalization and transborder trade in West Africa. *Review of African Political Economy*, 30(95), 57–75.
- North, D. C. (1990). *Institutions, institutional change and economic performance*. Cambridge University Press.
- OECD. (2019). *Integrity for good governance in Africa*. OECD Publishing.
- Persson, A., Rothstein, B., & Teorell, J. (2013). Why anticorruption reforms fail—Systemic corruption as a collective action problem. *Governance*, 26(3), 449–471.
- Rose-Ackerman, S. (1999). *Corruption and government: Causes, consequences, and reform*. Cambridge University Press.
- Schimmelfennig, F., & Sedelmeier, U. (2005). *The Europeanization of Central and Eastern Europe*. Cornell University Press.
- Sebudubudu, D. (2014). The impact of good governance on development and poverty in Africa: Botswana—A relatively successful African initiative. *African Journal of Public Affairs*, 7(4), 35–47.
- Sequeira, S., & Djankov, S. (2014). Corruption and firm behavior: Evidence from African ports. *Journal of International Economics*, 94(2), 277–294.
- Tapscott, D., & Tapscott, A. (2018). *Blockchain revolution: How the technology behind bitcoin is changing money, business, and the world*. Penguin.
- Transparency International. (2023). *Corruption perceptions index 2022*. Transparency International Secretariat.
- UNECA. (2021). *Economic report on Africa 2021: Addressing climate change in Africa*. Addis Ababa: United Nations Economic Commission for Africa.
- Viljoen, F. (2012). *International human rights law in Africa (2nd ed.)*. Oxford University Press.
- West Africa Trade Hub. (2019). *Road governance report: Abidjan–Lagos corridor*. USAID.
- World Bank. (2016). *Doing business in East African Community 2016: Measuring regulatory quality and efficiency*. World Bank Group.
- World Bank. (2020). *Trading for development in the age of global value chains. WorldDevelopment Report 2020*. World Bank.