Policy Note: Pathways from Corruption to Destabilisation. Evidence and Methods
Panel at Stockholm Forum on Peace and Development, 13 May 2025

Corruption poses a serious threat to international peace and security because it protracts armed conflict, fuels violence, undermines military preparedness, and erodes public trust.

The workshop organised by Transparency International Defence and Security (TI-DS) and the Centre for Sustainable Peace and Democratic Development (SeeD) explored different tools and methodologies that can inform programming, policy, and practice by:

- identifying and using **perceptions of corruption** as an **early warning sign of fragility**, and
- assessing the **resilience of national defence institutions** to **corruption risks**.

We showed how corruption in defence and security has significant destabilising effects on communities and societies because protection and security provision are at the core of state responsibility and the basis of a fair and sustainable social contract. We then explored creative and integrated approaches to address corruption in a high insecurity context, learning from experiences of the UN Office of the Resident Coordinator in Nigeria.

Our key findings in a nutshell?

➢ **When security actors are seen as corrupt or abusive, public trust in the state erodes and the citizens' sense of physical insecurity deepens**. Evidence from TI-DS shows that in contexts where official forces fail to provide reliable protection, communities may seek safety elsewhere, including from non-state armed groups. These groups exploit the vacuum left by the state to position themselves as legitimate security providers, further weakening state authority and entrenching parallel systems of power and control. Over time, this dynamic not only undermines the state's monopoly on force but also fuels cycles of insecurity, fragmentation, and contested governance.

➢ **Perceptions of corruption fuel intergroup tensions and weaken social cohesion**. When people lose confidence in state's ability to deliver security impartially, communities are left to resolve grievances on their own and lose trust in public institutions. Evidence from SeeD's Social Cohesion and Reconciliation (SCORE) index—across five contexts in Sub-Saharan Africa and Eastern Europe—shows that high levels of corruption, real or perceived, consistently undermines trust in the state, rise perceptions of physical insecurity, and lower satisfaction with service provision.

➢ **Corruption is not a victimless crime**. Lack of access to basic public services is not simply a matter of bureaucratic inefficiency. It signals deeper problems of exclusion, mismanagement, and weak accountability. When essential services fail to reach communities, frustrations rise and also suspicions that public funds are being misused or captured by elites. The daily experience of neglect reinforces perceptions of injustice and corruption, especially in contexts marked by fragility and deep disparities. As a result, inefficiency becomes politicised—seen not as a technical shortcoming but as evidence of deliberate exclusion—and over time, they erode public trust, delegitimises state institutions, and undermine the social contract that holds communities together.

➢ **Improvements to anti-corruption agencies and reporting mechanisms fosters public trust only if backed by concrete action**. In many contexts, poor coordination, limited resources, and failures to prosecute corruption cases undermine both the effectiveness and the credibility of oversight bodies, further eroding trust in public institutions and the state.

➢ **Corruption threatens development by constraining economic growth and deterring investment**. It creates uncertainty, distorts markets, and weakens the rule of law, all of which have a chilling effect on both public and private investment. National and international companies are less likely to invest in environments marked by political instability, weak institutions, and insecure operating conditions. In these fragile settings, private military and security companies are increasingly relied upon to protect high-value assets, particularly in natural resource sectors. This trend underscores the need for integrated, whole-of-society approaches that combine anti-corruption, regulatory oversight, and inclusive governance to ensure that security provision does not further entrench impunity or exacerbate local grievances.

➢ **Larger-scale systemic or structural corruption fuels and normalises petty corruption**. Corruption by high-level politicians or officials can incentivise at lower levels at the public sector and institutionalise a culture of corruption. For example, late salary payments to lower-level officials due to mismanagement at higher levels can create conditions where officials resort to extortion and solicit bribes from local communities during routine policing or when delivering public services.

➢ **The defence sector is particularly vulnerable to corruption** due to high-value contracts, exceptional secrecy, limited access to information, close industry-government ties, high technical complexity, and exemptions from public transparency and accountability standards. As the [Governance Defence Integrity Index (GDI)](#) shows 62% of countries assessed face high to critical levels of corruption risk across their national defence sectors. As security and law enforcement functions are increasingly taken over by defence forces in many contexts, communities are affected more immediately by corruption in the sector.

What to do about it?

⇨ **Recognise corruption as an early warning sign for conflict and violence and integrate it into early warning systems**. Tools and methodologies that examine levels of corruption perceptions alongside other conflict drivers, such as [SCORE](#) and [GDI](#), can support more accurate assessments of the impact of corruption on conflict dynamics in specific countries and regions.

⇨ **Prioritise intersectional approaches to peacebuilding and stabilisation**, by investing in initiatives that build trust and social cohesion, such as improving complaint mechanisms in law enforcement, helping victims of corruption access justice, and strengthening security sector reform (SSR) and disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programmes.

⇨ **Emphasise whole-of-society approaches** to peacebuilding to engage civil society more comprehensively and consistently, including the private sector, and recognise the key role that both play in building and sustaining peace, development, and security.

⇨ **Examine the underlying conditions and institutional incentives enabling petty corruption**, as these often signal deeper, systemic forms of abuse. Petty corruption can serve as an entry point for understanding broader governance failures and identifying where anti-corruption efforts are most likely to gain traction. A nuanced analysis of these dynamics can help tailor programming and strategically position interventions for greater impact.

In summary:

The workshop was a powerful reminder: corruption is not abstract. It directly undermines access to basic services, human security, and social cohesion.

If we want peace to last and development to take root, we must address corruption systematically, through reforms that strengthen transparency, accountability, and institutional resilience. Institutions that are vulnerable to abuse or widely perceived as corrupt are a signal of deeper fractures: an early warning sign of rising tensions and long-term instability.

In fragile contexts, corruption is not just a side issue. It is a direct driver of conflict. That is why evidence-based tools are essential for practitioners and policymakers to assess corruption risks and design targeted responses.

Integrity must be at the heart of any credible strategy for peace, stability, and sustainable development.