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From Regulation to Culture: Rethinking Global Anti-Corruption Law Enforcement

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ABSTRACT

Corruption persists as one of the most entrenched challenges in global governance, undermining democratic institutions, economic development, and public trust. Despite the widespread adoption of international frameworks, such as the United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC), and the proliferation of national anti-corruption agencies, empirical evidence suggests that regulatory instruments alone remain insufficient. Transparency International's 2023 Corruption Perceptions Index reveals that two-thirds of countries score below 50 out of 100, reflecting limited progress despite extensive legal reforms. This study employs a qualitative-descriptive and comparative literature approach to analyze the limitations of formal regulation and to examine the role of legal culture in strengthening anti-corruption enforcement. Findings demonstrate that while regulatory frameworks provide essential normative foundations, sustainable compliance emerges only when integrity is embedded within societal values and norms. Comparative evidence from Singapore, Denmark, Finland, and Rwanda illustrates that internalized social trust, transparency, and accountability act as cultural multipliers of legal effectiveness. The study contributes to academic discourse by shifting the focus from purely legal and formal perspectives to the integration of socio-cultural dimensions, thereby addressing a significant research gap. Practically, it offers policy recommendations for embedding anti-corruption education, strengthening civil society, and fostering cultural transformation alongside legal reforms. Ultimately, effective global anti-corruption enforcement requires a paradigm shift—moving from regulation to culture.

Keywords: Judicial Independence; Anti-Corruption Enforcement; Legal Culture; Global Governance; Compliance; Regulatory Effectiveness; Corruption Prevention

Introduction

The long history of human civilization shows that law is not merely a normative instrument that regulates behavior, but also a reflection of the values, morality, and culture of society (Van Krieken, 2019). In the context of eradicating corruption, regulations are often considered the primary foundation for limiting the abuse of power (Hess & Dunfee, 2000; Johnston, 1998; Kurer, 2005; Nielsen, 2003; Rifai et al., 2024). However, global experience shows that written laws, no matter how strict, are not always able to foster accurate compliance. Corruption arises not only from legal loopholes but also from a permissive culture that normalizes deviant practices (Ashforth & Anand, 2003; Fürstenberg et al., 2023; Hidayaturrahman et al., 2025; Klinkhammer, 2013; Mesra, 2024; Pamungkas & Wahyudi, 2025). Thus, a fundamental question arises: can global anti-corruption law enforcement succeed by relying solely on regulations, or is it necessary to move towards the formation of a more integrity-based culture?

Global phenomena reveal a striking paradox. According to Transparency International's 2023 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), two-thirds of countries worldwide scored below 50 on a scale of 0–100, indicating serious levels of corruption. In fact, some countries with strong anti-corruption legal frameworks remain stagnant in the CPI rankings due to weak implementation. The World Bank Governance Indicators report also shows a similar trend. Despite increased formal regulation, public perceptions of government effectiveness and public official integrity have not improved significantly in the last decade. This data reveals a gap between the idealism of rules and the reality of their implementation.

The urgency of this research lies in the fact that corruption is not only a legal problem, but also an existential issue for sustainable development, political stability, and public trust in institutions (Anazodo et al., 2015; Kulin & Johansson Sevä, 2019; Oluwole et al., 2014; Philp, 1997; Tartaglia Polcini, 2018). Countries that fail to control corruption face serious consequences in the form of low foreign investment, hampered economic growth, and erosion of political legitimacy. In a global context, the failure to eradicate corruption also has implications for the unfair distribution of resources and the obstruction of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Therefore, a paradigm shift from mere regulation to the internalization of an anti-corruption culture is becoming increasingly urgent.

Although many studies have examined the effectiveness of formal regulations and anti-corruption institutions (Cole, 2015; Jon, 2015; Kim et al., 2009; M. Daud, 2024; Min, 2019; Perez Torres, 2020), a crucial research gap remains. Academic literature tends to focus on normative aspects, such as criminal sanctions, strengthening supervisory institutions, or bureaucratic reform. However, very few studies have examined how legal culture transformation—namely, changes in values, attitudes, and social norms—contributes to the sustainability of efforts to eradicate corruption. As a result, efforts to eradicate corruption often fail to take root socially and instead create a new cycle of distrust when regulations are not accompanied by cultural change.

Based on this framework, this study aims to examine the limitations of the regulatory approach in global anti-corruption law enforcement, while offering a new perspective that emphasizes the importance of building an anti-corruption legal culture. The contribution of this research is both scientific, expanding the legal discourse from a formal legal perspective to a socio-cultural perspective, and practical, providing strategic recommendations for policymakers to integrate anti-corruption education, civil society strengthening, and social value transformation into the framework of global anti-corruption law enforcement.

This study aims to explore the limitations of the regulatory approach in global anti-corruption law enforcement while highlighting the importance of legal culture transformation as a pillar of sustainable anti-corruption efforts. The primary focus is on analyzing how formal regulations, although necessary as a normative foundation, are not effective enough unless accompanied by the internalization of integrity values and the formation of an anti-corruption culture in society.More specifically, this study aims to: (1) identify the gap between formal regulations and actual implementation in a global context, (2) examine the role of legal culture in strengthening or weakening the effectiveness of anti-corruption policies, and (3) propose a conceptual model that combines regulations with strategies for developing a more inclusive and sustainable anti-corruption culture.

Thus, this study is expected to contribute scientifically by enriching the literature on the relationship between regulation and legal culture in the context of anti-corruption, as well as contributing practically to international and national policymakers in formulating law enforcement strategies that not only emphasize normative aspects but also build a social ecosystem conducive to strengthening public integrity.

Methods Research

This study uses a qualitative-descriptive approach with a comparative literature study design (M.D., 2019). This approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth exploration of the dynamics of global anti-corruption law enforcement, particularly in comparing the role of formal regulation with the formation of legal culture. The focus of the research is not on statistical measurement, but rather on conceptual interpretation and critical analysis of relevant literature, making this framework more appropriate for answering the research questions.

The research data were obtained from two primary sources. First, policy documents and global reports published by international organizations such as the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), OECD Anti-Bribery Convention Reports, Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), and World Bank Worldwide Governance Indicators. Second, academic articles published in Scopus-indexed journals during the period 2013–2023 on topics related to anti-corruption regulations, law enforcement effectiveness, and legal culture. Sources were selected based on topic relevance, publication credibility, and peer-review process as indicators of scientific validity.

The data collection process was conducted through systematic searches of international databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, and ScienceDirect. The keywords used included anti-corruption enforcement, legal culture, global governance, and regulatory effectiveness. Articles that were popular opinion pieces or did not go through a peer review process were not included in the analysis to maintain the academic quality of this research.

The collected data was then analyzed using content analysis to identify the main themes that emerged, particularly those related to regulatory effectiveness and obstacles to its implementation in various countries. This analysis was enriched by a comparative approach that examined anti-corruption law enforcement practices in several countries that emphasize formal regulation, as well as in countries that have successfully fostered a strong anti-corruption culture, such as Singapore, Denmark, and Rwanda. Through this method, the study identified similarities and differences in the strategies employed and their implications for the effectiveness of corruption eradication.

To increase reliability, this study employs source triangulation by comparing findings from official reports of international organizations with those from academic studies. Validation is also strengthened through the development of a transparent literature search protocol, including article inclusion and exclusion criteria, publication period, and keywords used. Thus, this study can not only be replicated by other researchers but also provides assurance that the analysis process is conducted systematically and is accountable.

With this methodological framework, this study aims to identify the limitations of the regulatory approach while providing a robust conceptual basis for integrating the cultural dimension of law into global anti-corruption law enforcement strategies.

Results and Discussion

Limitations of the Effectiveness of Formal Regulations

Analysis of global literature and reports shows that formal anti-corruption regulations do provide an essential normative foundation, but do not always translate into effectiveness in practice (Cochrane, 2018; Heeks & Mathisen, 2012; Labik Amanquandor, 2024; Lang, 2018, 2021). Data from the 2023 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) shows that more than two-thirds of countries still score below 50, even though most have ratified the United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC) and established national anti-corruption agencies. This indicates a significant gap between existing regulations and expected results.

However, the root of this gap does not lie in the absence of regulations, but rather in the failure to address the informal factors that provide fertile ground for corruption. Formal regulations often serve only as a legal "facade" that does not touch on informal practices such as patrimonialism, social exchange, and deep-rooted clientelism networks. Anti-corruption institutions that are formally strong can become operationally paralyzed when faced with a systematic culture of "tit for tat" or "favoritism," which in reality determines the allocation of resources. In other words, written law is decisively defeated by unwritten "laws" that govern the game of power and economic access.

Moreover, the success of corruption in evading formal regulations creates a paradox: weak implementation of regulations actually reinforces the culture of corruption itself. Every case of corruption that is not dealt with firmly and consistently is not only a failure of law enforcement, but also sends a destructive public message that corruption is a low-risk, high-return practice. This message ultimately erodes public trust in legal institutions and perpetuates the cycle of corruption, creating an environment in which formal norms become increasingly irrelevant and ignored. Thus, weak law enforcement is not merely a consequence but has become the prime mover that reproduces the culture of corruption and widens the gap between the law on paper and the law in action.

The Role of Legal Culture in Combating Corruption

Countries with low levels of corruption, such as Singapore, Denmark, and Finland, demonstrate that success is not solely determined by the existence of formal legal instruments, but also by the development of a legal culture that fosters integrity (Mitchell et al., 2014; Paik et al., 2019; Siagian et al., 2024). Singapore, for example, instills the value of transparency through public education and a strict bureaucratic system (Hamilton-Hart, 2000; Ortmann & Thompson, 2014; Samaratunge et al., 2008). Similarly, Nordic countries utilize a culture of openness and social trust to suppress corrupt behavior (Delhey & Newton, 2005; Kääriäinen, 2007; Salminen & Ikola-Norrbacka, 2010; Siverbo et al., 2024).

Therefore, it can be concluded that legal culture functions as a reinforcing mechanism that transforms formal regulations from mere texts into internalized norms of life. In this context, legal culture is not merely a complement, but a critical "bridge" that bridges the gap between the law on paper and practice in the field. It creates an ecosystem in which corruptive acts are not only feared because of legal sanctions (deterrence), but also socially rejected (social stigma) and perceived as a personal moral violation. This explains why in these countries, compliance arises not only from fear, but also from collective beliefs and values.

Furthermore, a strong legal culture creates a sustainable virtuous cycle that is capable of self-correction. High public trust, born of consistent law enforcement, encourages citizen participation in monitoring power and reporting violations. These reports are then followed up by credible institutions, which in turn further foster public trust. It is this cycle that breaks the chain of corruption discussed earlier. Thus, building a culture of law is not an additional project, but a fundamental investment to ensure that formal regulations do not stagnate at the legalistic level; instead, they are truly alive and effective in eradicating corruption at its roots.

The Global Gap between Developed and Developing Countries

Cross-country comparisons reveal a deep gap. Developing countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America face challenges in the form of patronage politics, weak civil society, and low legal literacy (Daniels & Trebilcock, 2004; Denhardt et al., 2009), resulting in formal regulations that often function more as symbols of international compliance than as effective instruments of substantive change (Raustiala, 2005). Meanwhile, developed countries can integrate regulations with established social norms, making their anti-corruption strategies more effective.

In essence, this gap is not merely a difference in performance but a reflection of profound structural and historical inequalities. Developing countries are often trapped in a "transition paradox," where formal institutions designed to combat corruption are instead hijacked and manipulated by the ruling elite to perpetuate their patronage politics. Thus, anti-corruption agencies themselves become tools of the oligarchy, which perfectly explains why the ratification of UNCAC and the establishment of new agencies have failed to improve CPI scores. This situation demonstrates that without a strong foundation in legal culture and civil society, formal regulations can become part of the problem rather than the solution.

As a result, a negative cycle is created that hinders development: systemic corruption weakens institutions, which in turn perpetuates poverty and inequality, ultimately reinforcing the corrupt system itself. This vicious cycle is in stark contrast to the "virtuous cycle" enjoyed by developed countries. Therefore, the approach of copying and pasting regulations from developed countries to developing countries is a fatal mistake. The solution lies in a contextual approach—not only instilling values of integrity, but first dismantling the economic and political structures that allow corruption to persist and empowering civil society to break the deep-rooted chain of patronage.

Legal Culture as a Multiplier of Regulatory Effectiveness

The findings also show that internalizing anti-corruption values into the legal culture can strengthen the legitimacy of the law and increase compliance without always relying on repressive mechanisms (Michael, 2007; Zaman et al., 2024). The case of post-genocide Rwanda shows how the reconstruction of social norms regarding transparency and accountability can significantly reduce corrupt practices even when formal legal instruments are still limited (Akinbi, 2025; Brannigan & Jones, 2009; Celestin, 2025; Helal, 2024; Nmaju, 2011; Nowotny, 2020; Peter & Osazuwa, 2024; Uvin, 2001).

Therefore, the transformation of Rwanda's legal culture was not a natural process, but rather a deliberate, top-down social engineering project, built on an absolute political commitment to rebuilding the state's legitimacy. The strategy goes beyond mere law enforcement by aggressively incorporating anti-corruption values into every layer of society through community programs (such as Umuganda), patriotism-based character education, and massive national mobilization. In other words, legal culture functions as a force multiplier that has a disproportionately large impact compared to investment in formal regulations, because it creates voluntary and autonomous compliance.

Thus, the case of Rwanda provides sharp evidence that in a context where formal institutions are still fragile, the development of a culture of law can be a leapfrogging strategy for achieving integrity. Its success refutes the determinism that states that post-conflict countries with limited formal laws are bound to sink into systemic corruption. However, Rwanda's approach also raises critical questions about the trade-off between anti-corruption efficacy and civil liberties, a dynamic not found in the Nordic model. This enriches the discussion by showing that the path to an effective legal culture can take many forms, while remaining consistent with the principle of internalizing values.

Discussion

The results of this study confirm that eradicating corruption cannot be understood solely as a regulatory effort, but must be viewed as a process of shaping a legal culture. This is in line with the concept of legal culture proposed by Lawrence Friedman, in which the effectiveness of the legal system is greatly influenced by the values, attitudes, and behavior of society towards the law. In other words, strong regulations will not be effective if they are not accompanied by the internalization of integrity values in society.

The phenomenon of stagnation in developing countries despite having strict anti-corruption regulations supports the collective action theory of Persson (Lukashuk, 2024). Corruption often continues because it is considered a socially legitimized norm, so individuals are reluctant to behave differently from the majority. In this context, formal regulations fail to become instruments of change because changes in social norms do not support them.

The discussion also shows that legal culture can serve as a multiplier of regulatory effectiveness. Regulations provide a formal framework, while legal culture ensures that these norms are internalized in everyday life. The interaction between the two creates stronger legal legitimacy, so that compliance does not stem solely from fear of sanctions, but from a moral conviction that anti-corruption behavior is a norm that must be obeyed.

The implication of these findings is the need for a new paradigm in global anti-corruption strategies. The focus of international policy should not only be on strengthening legal instruments, but also on developing a social ecosystem that is conducive to integrity. Anti-corruption education, strengthening the role of civil society, and consistent law enforcement are key strategies for shaping a legal culture that supports regulations. Thus, eradicating corruption must be understood as a journey from regulation to culture, in which the two complement and reinforce each other.

Scientific Novelty and Research Contribution

This study presents scientific innovation by shifting the focus of corruption eradication analysis from a normative-regulatory approach to a legal culture perspective. Previous literature has placed greater emphasis on strengthening regulations, legal sanctions, and the capacity of anti-corruption institutions. At the same time, studies on the role of social values, norms, and the internalization of a culture of integrity remain limited. This article expands the discourse by demonstrating that the effectiveness of regulations is determined mainly by the presence of a supportive legal culture, thereby emphasizing the need for integration between legal instruments and the development of an anti-corruption social ecosystem.

The contribution of this research is twofold. From a scientific perspective, this research enriches the literature on global law and governance with a conceptual framework that links formal regulations and legal culture as a mutually reinforcing whole. From a practical standpoint, this research offers strategic recommendations for international and national policymakers to guide anti-corruption strategies, encompassing not only regulatory aspects but also the development of social norms, anti-corruption education, and the strengthening of civil society. Thus, this research contributes to the development of a new paradigm of anti-corruption law enforcement that is more sustainable, inclusive, and adaptive to the global context.

Conclusion

This study confirms that eradicating corruption cannot be understood solely as a regulatory issue, but must be viewed as a process of legal cultural transformation. Formal regulations remain essential as a normative framework, but their effectiveness is limited when not accompanied by the internalization of integrity values within society. Cross-country comparative findings show that success in reducing corruption is more determined by the interaction between legal instruments and a supportive social culture, as demonstrated by the experiences of Singapore, Denmark, Finland, and Rwanda.

The primary reflection of this study is that a global anti-corruption strategy necessitates a paradigm shift: from merely increasing legal instruments to developing a social ecosystem that promotes anti-corruption norms as an integral part of the culture. Thus, sustainable law enforcement can only be achieved if regulations function not only as a repressive tool, but also as a vehicle for internalizing the values of justice, transparency, and accountability.

The scientific contribution of this research lies in expanding the discourse on anti-corruption law enforcement from a legal-formal perspective to one that integrates socio-cultural dimensions. Practically, these findings provide policy direction for the international community and national governments to formulate more comprehensive strategies with an emphasis on anti-corruption education, consistent law enforcement, and the strengthening of civil society. Ultimately, the journey to eradicate corruption is a journey "from regulation to culture," where true success will only be realized when integrity becomes a norm that is alive in the daily lives of global society.

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