



UNIVERSITY OF  
GOTHENBURG

# **VIOLENCE AND THE COSTS OF HONESTY**

**Rethinking bureaucrats' choice to take bribes**

**AKSEL SUNDSTRÖM**

---

**WORKING PAPER SERIES 2015:2**

**QOG** THE QUALITY OF GOVERNMENT INSTITUTE  
Department of Political Science  
University of Gothenburg  
Box 711, SE 405 30 GÖTEBORG  
February 2015  
ISSN 1653-8919  
© 2015 by Aksel Sundström. All rights reserved.

Violence and the costs of honesty - Rethinking bureaucrats' choice to take bribes  
Aksel Sundström  
QoG Working Paper Series 2015:2  
February 2015  
ISSN 1653-8919

## ABSTRACT

Explanations for bureaucrats' decisions to take bribes have evolved from accounts of incentives to focusing on expectations of others' behavior. However, there are plausibly more considerations when making such choices in contexts of widespread violence, where refusal to take bribes may be associated with high costs. Yet, current insight into this topic is limited. This article investigates how violence upholds bribery through interviews with South African officials that enforce resource regulations in communities where gangs run poaching operations. The findings suggest that while citizens commonly give bribes to enable rule violations, this is a process of both temptations and threats: officials that do not take bribes face violent intimidations by citizens and corrupt colleagues. Through reducing direct costs in such settings, bribe taking is partly a strategy of social protection. This suggests that, besides incentives and expectations, administrative reforms may benefit from 'fixing the security' of bureaucrats in violent contexts.

**Aksel Sundström**  
The Quality of Government Institute  
Department of Political Science University of  
Gothenburg  
aksel.sundstrom@pol.gu.se

## Introduction

In a large number of the world's countries, bureaucratic corruption – interchangeably termed administrative, petty, or small-scale corruption – remains relatively widespread in government authorities.<sup>1</sup> Such behavior is, for instance, when citizens have to bribe officials for services they are entitled to or pay enforcement officers to make law violations go unnoticed. Yet, there is nothing petty or small about this problem. The presence of corruption in a country's civil service is widely credited by scholars as well as policymakers to result in a number of bad outcomes, social as well as economic (see Treisman 2007). However, there is no such consensus over what drives bureaucratic corruption and especially the choice of bureaucrats to engage in bribery. Keeping in mind the point that the treatment of corruption is closely related to its diagnosis (Mungiu-pippidi 2006), this is an important issue for social scientists that seek to advance reforms of public administrations.

Influential rationalist explanations for bureaucrats' decisions to take bribes (or not) focus on *incentives*, stressing factors of gains from bribes in relation to the probability of getting caught and the potency of sanctions (Becker and Stigler 1974). The reasoning prompted corruption scholars to propose that bribe taking may be reduced by reforms such as raising civil servants' salaries or increasing monitoring and punishment for bribe taking (Ades and Di Tella 1999). This approach may be contrasted to a conceptualization of corruption in which scholars depict bureaucrats' choice of engaging in bribery as a social dilemma (Rothstein 2005, 2011). Describing corruption as a collective action problem and using the analogy from game theory, this reasoning posits that an individual bureaucrat will have little to gain from being 'the sucker' who does not take bribes. This thinking put *expectations* in focus as bribe taking is the logical strategy when most others in the bureaucracy are believed to be corrupt (Persson et al. 2013). However, the departure of this article is to propose that these two types of depictions may be in need of complements. Rather than seeking to present a third line of explanation, this article argues that previous perspectives have not focused on the *costs of honesty* – the consequences facing non-corrupt bureaucrats in administrations where bribery is common – and especially so in contexts of widespread violence.

Numerous nation states do not hold the monopoly over violence. In such areas, officials' task of enforcing laws on citizens may be characterized by tension or conflict. One example is policemen on the Afghan countryside having to adapt to independent militias that do not conform to laws and may have more power than the government. Another illustration is the customs officers in a Mexican border town that may have good reasons not to inspect the trucks that are driven by members

---

<sup>1</sup> To be contrasted to *large-scale* corruption, referring to payments that influence policy in decision making.

of the fiercest cartels. Such officials will often be bribed so that law violations proceed as usual. But what are then the reasons for an official in such a context to take a bribe? It seems obvious that incentives matter: a miniscule salary and low risks of getting caught must be important. And surely, expectations should matter: when most other colleagues take bribes, it must feel pointless to be honest. However, these explanations do not involve the role of security for such officials. In these contexts criminal actors may enforce their will by violent threat. And it is plausible that, if it is dangerous to deny violent actors the usual possibilities of paying their way around the law, this will affect the choice of taking bribes. To be precise, this reasoning refers to the form of petty corruption where officials are paid to turn a blind eye to law violations, often termed *collusive* corruption (Smith et al. 2003). The presence of violence should likely not have this effect on *non-collusive* corruption, when officials ask citizens for payments for services they are legally entitled to. Yet, while intuitive, research has rarely explored this reasoning in detail.

The aim of this research endeavor is to gain further insights into how violence and intimidations may affect the choice to take bribes and, therefore, uphold administrative corruption. The article asks: *In what way does violence and intimidations affect bureaucrats' choice to take bribes?* By exploring this question in a thorough analysis of original empirical material, the article seeks to reach both theoretical and empirical insights. It reports the results from interviews with officials in the South African Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (DAFF). These officials enforce regulations on resources in rural areas where they threaten the income of gangs that run lucrative poaching operations. Focusing on bureaucrats that implement policy in a context where violence and bribery occur extensively, this case study has rich potential to offer suggestive insights of this relationship.

This is one of the first studies to examine the costs of refraining from and engaging in corruption against a violent backdrop. Through this investigation, the article contributes theoretically in two ways: first, it shows that bribery is not driven only by aspects of incentives or expectations but that there are also direct costs for a bureaucrat of remaining honest in a context where non-state actors use violence to make way for their legal violations. Second, the findings suggest that in such contexts, corruption may be seen as an institution underpinned by an enforcement apparatus of violence. These findings have implications for policy and suggest that besides fixing incentives and expectations, anti-corruption reforms may benefit from considering 'fixing the security' of bureaucrats working in violent contexts.

## Explaining a bureaucrat's choice to engage in corruption

### Incentives matter

The seminal work by Becker and Stigler (1974) outlines a model of bureaucratic corruption where the choice of enforcement officers to engage in bribery, or refraining from doing so, is understood through a cost-benefit analysis; The financial gain to enforcers from bribery is weighed against the probability of the state detecting malfeasance and, given that exposure could mean loss of employment, the minimum salary that would discourage enforcers from bribe taking (p. 7). Scholars following this tradition of analyzing the 'market of enforcement' have often focused on modeling the likelihood of detection, penalty rates and the relative size of salaries (e.g. Besley and McLaren 1993; Ales and Di Tella 1999).

This reasoning is similar to frameworks that describe bribery as a problem that is conceptually understood through principal-agent theory. Amongst its various applications, these frameworks are often used to analyze the challenge of delegation in a bureaucracy. A typical principal-agent relationship is the dyadic one between an employer and an employee in a public administration.<sup>2</sup> The goals of principals and agents may conflict and, because of asymmetries of information, principals cannot be sure that agents are carrying out their will (Milgrom and Roberts 1992; Shapiro 2005). Therefore, the principal (such as a senior manager) will face the decision problem that agents (for instance junior clerks) will pursue the principal's objective. These agents have their own interests and will only act according to the employment contract if such behavior is advantageous. In delegating power to agents, the principal will risk that subordinates will act in their self-interest and, with regard to corruption, engage in bribery to benefit themselves or their kin – behavior described as 'agency costs' (Klitgaard 1988; Groenendijk 1997). The challenge for principals is therefore to align the interest of agents with their own, to create incentive structures and to monitor the behavior of agents (Shapiro 2005, p. 271). Accordingly, 'the essence of the principal's problem is the design of just such an incentive structure' (Moe 1984, p. 756). This conceptualization of corruption has been tremendously influential, and following this line of thinking it has been proposed that bribery may be reduced through 'providing the right incentives to bureaucrats' (Ales and Di Tella 1997, p. 504). These explanations, stemming from rational choice theory, assume that civil servants seek to maximize their expected income and that higher pay, increased monitoring and stronger punishments may therefore be successful policies to reduce administrative corruption (Rose-Ackerman 1999; Van Rijckeghem and Weder 2001). Following this reasoning it is said that 'suffi-

---

<sup>2</sup> Although the principal in this relationship may in a hierarchical chain be simultaneously an agent to a principal in other relations, such as the politicians that set the goals of this administration (Shapiro 2005, p. 267).

ciently high rewards would eliminate all incentives to accept bribes' (Polinsky and Shavell 2000, p. 4).<sup>3</sup>

### Expectations matter

Contrasting the incentive-focused view, there is a vein of research pointing to the important role of *expectations* of other bureaucratic actors in upholding bribery (cf. Myrdal 1968). Rothstein (2005) pictured this situation as a 'trap' where actors are caught in a predicament that resembles a social dilemma: what is good for the collective stands in contrast to what is individually rational. This reasoning departs from institutionalist accounts where 'corruption represents an example of what are called frequently-dependent equilibria, and our expected gain from corruption depends crucially on the number of other people we expect to be corrupt' (Bardhan 1997, p. 1331). A 'player' in these game-like situations knows that most of her colleagues will engage in corruption. In such contexts, "street-level" tax bureaucrats or policemen have no incentive to refrain from corrupt practices because even if they as individuals start behaving honestly, nothing will change' (Rothstein 2011, p. 99). Their behavior therefore depends on how 'existing institutions inform the agents' mutual expectations – for example, the expectation about whether the other agents will take part in corrupt exchanges' (ibid, p. 103).

This reasoning criticizes how principal-agent theory depicts corruption, especially the postulation of the principal's intentions: 'A drawback of the principal-agent approach is that to some extent it assumes away the problem, especially in [a developing country] context, because the political will to engage in vigorous monitoring and implement appropriate strategies is lacking, or worse yet the principal is himself corrupt' (Rauch and Evans 2000, p. 529). Similarly, authors have pointed out that the assumption of an 'honest principal' – such as a senior manager – may be problematic when corruption is widespread. From this follows potentially that 'the principal-agent framework becomes useless as an analytical tool since there will simply be no actors willing to monitor and punish corrupt behavior' (Persson et al. 2013, p. 542). Put differently, Shapiro (2005) observes an inherent problem of this theory's recommendations: 'in an escalating cycle of agents overseeing agents, we must ask: Who monitors the monitors?' (p. 280). Persson and colleagues (2013) argue that instead of a framework of principals and agents, corruption should be seen as a collective action problem and they highlight why this conceptualization renders individuals with few reasons to act honestly: 'Being the sole "sucker" in a corrupt game is the even worse outcome to everyone,

---

<sup>3</sup> This thinking has come in modified forms. Rauch and Evans (2000) introduce how meritocratic recruitment, may alter incentives and develop norms of an 'esprit de corps' where bribe taking is no longer the rule. In proposing that this may 'align interests', their argument differs from the incentive model. Yet, their approach agrees with the model in predicting that competitive salaries will reduce incentives to take bribes (p. 49).

which tends to lock the game into the suboptimal “corrupt” equilibrium as long as everyone expects everyone else to be corrupt’ (p. 457). The implications for reforms following from these two depictions are contrasting. While the principal-agent frameworks emphasize incentives, the collective action approach differs; it does not hold too much confidence in increased surveillance of bureaucrats as – in the absence of non-corrupt managers and overseers – monitoring schemes risk being captured. Moreover, programs to increase salaries will supposedly not alter the main problem at hand. According to this reasoning, ‘the important thing will be to change actors’ beliefs about what “all” other actors are likely to do so that most actors expect most other actors to play fairly’ (Persson et al. 2013, p. 464). Thus, this perspective argues that it is essential to ‘fix the expectations’.<sup>4</sup>

### The cost of honesty matters

It has been pointed out that general explanations of bureaucrats’ reasons for bribe taking may fall short for individual irregularities. Becker and Stigler (1974) acknowledge that some bureaucrats will tend to remain honest when stating that ‘for a given bribe, some men will condone offenses that other men would prosecute’ (p. 3). This point is confirmed by Ades and Di Tella (1999): ‘a desirable feature of a model of corruption is that it allows for the existence of both honest and dishonest agents’ (p. 984). However, previous explanations have not extensively reviewed *the costs* of remaining honest. The departure of this article from previous research is the argument that it is conceivable that there is more to bureaucrats’ choices to engage in bribery than financial losses or becoming ‘a sucker’, especially when considering contexts with widespread violence.

The literature tends to identify three elements of what defines ‘a state’: (i) the existence of an administrative staff able (ii) to sustain the claim to the legitimate monopoly of control of violence and (iii) to uphold that monopoly within a given area (Giddens 1985). Similarly, a key feature of states is to ‘offer [its citizens] protection from local and external violence’ (Tilly 1985, p. 171). Yet, states existing today have different abilities of supplying protection as well as implementing rules and inducing rule compliance among citizens (Levi 1989). Having several synonymous or overlapping terminologies at hand, the notion of state capacity is useful to understand this feature.<sup>5</sup> In Bäck and Hadenius’s (2008) account the concept has two components, administrative capacity and state-ness, and they make the point the latter factor is actually under negotiation in several countries: “[these states] exist in a juridical sense but that do not actually control their territory ... [as] rebel forces

---

<sup>4</sup> A reasoning in anthropological writings on clientelism offer a different take on why ‘expectations’ may inform bureaucrats’ choices of bribe taking – exploring how norms of bribery in social networks and family ties may explain why officials more commonly take bribes in some societies but not in others (see Varraich 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Concepts such as states’ ‘territorial reach’, ‘social control’ or ‘infrastructural power’ (see Herbst 2000).

and warlords exercise military and other forms of control over large parts of the national territory” (p. 1). Examples of more moderate weakness in state capacity are settings with a presence of a criminal syndicate, drug cartels or other actors that challenge the violence monopoly. While authors have discussed such organizations, focusing especially on the Italian Mafia, in terms of a ‘state within the state’ (Grossman 1995, p. 148), others see this as far fetched and rather argue that these actors function along side the state and are ‘best understood as a set of firms specializing in the supply of protection’ (Gambetta 1996, p. 53). A further type of moderately challenged state capacity may be localities where the citizens use violent resistance to defy policies. For state actors, implementing policies in these settings is a process that is often characterized by friction, tensions that have an impact on how these actors may perform tasks. For an illustration, Fjeldstad’s (2001) vivid description of tax collection in Tanzania in the late 1990s may serve as a case in point. In this context, taxpayers in the countryside sometimes physically assaulted public tax collectors that visited distant districts, thus causing the collectors to be lax in certain geographical areas.

In the light of such violence, previous description of bureaucrats’ choice to take bribes may need to be reevaluated. Consider again a situation where an official enforces laws in an area where violent actors operate and may be used to paying enforcement agents bribes to ignore their (illegal) actions. It is quite plausible to imagine that an official working in such an environment is faced with difficult choices and pressured from actors that wish to violate the law. Can present theory explain this agent’s choice to take a bribe or not? The accounts focusing on incentives do not seem to include the impact from violence in their standard analysis. In the perspective where expectations are in focus, the worst outcome for a bureaucrat is the risk of being the solitary employee without an extra income. Yet, if violence is a part of the game there is possibly more to such defection than just being a sucker. Refusing bribery may give more negative effects than financial losses: it could mean that bureaucrats that do not take bribes will face repercussions. Importantly, violence is likely different to other aspects in the calculus of taking bribes or not, because of 1) the *direct* impact of this consequence and 2) the *magnitude* of this cost. Therefore, in a context where violent actors operate on a large scale, it therefore seems that something is missing in previous descriptions of bribery. The article therefore expects that the security for officials must be of importance for understanding their choices. Yet, while intuitive, this reasoning is foremost hypothetical. Few current studies investigate how the choice to take bribes, or not, is affected by the presence of violent actors and intimidations from such.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Current research on the linkages between violence and corruption is scarce. There have recently been some conceptual contributions on disentangling the relationship between organized crime and political corruption (see Sberna 2014).



Having identified this intuitive gap of knowledge, the article explores this issue empirically. The purpose is hence to gain insight into how violence and intimidations affect the choice to take bribes and, therefore, uphold administrative corruption. By investigating original material the article seeks to reach both theoretical and empirical insights in this regard. The article reports the results from interviews with South African officials enforcing resources regulations. In this setting, the enforcement of a legislation that seeks to counter illegal fishing threatens the interests of gangs that thrive from poaching. Moreover, the authority responsible for enforcement is known to have corruption problems. By exploring these accounts the article investigates in detail the process in which violence and intimidations may affect a bureaucrat's choice to engage in corruption, or refrain from doing so. The investigation therefore offers promising opportunities to flesh out our understanding of this relationship.

## **Case and methods**

### **A context of corruption and violence**

This study focuses on the implementation of the South African Marine Living Resources Act (MLRA) by officials in the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (DAFF). This legislation specifies the legal means to conduct fishing, for instance by outlining who has the right to fish, where one can do it and by which methods. It also specifies which actions are illegal, such as fishing without a license, in protected areas or targeting restricted species (Republic of South Africa 1998). The authority that enforces these rules with land-based patrols is the Compliance Directorate of DAFF. Its officers, who work at substations in harbors of rural towns along the coast, will inspect sites where fishers offload catches to monitor their compliance. Noncompliant fishermen will – in theory – face sanctions, such as receiving a fine or losing their fishing license.

The relationship between state agents and citizens in South Africa in general, and in the fisheries sector in particular, has a history of strain and struggle. During Apartheid, small-scale fishermen – where few except boat owners were white – were ‘considered “illegal” by the state or operated under the regulations governing recreational fishers’ (Hauck 2008, p. 638). In the 1990s, the democratically founded legislation outlined a system of rights and quotas that contained several controversies: for instance, not all individuals that perceived themselves as fishermen necessarily got the right to fish or a sufficiently big quota for their livelihood. These aspects have over the years given rise to widespread noncompliance to rules and mistrust between actors. Most accentuated is the

---

While novel, this work is theoretical and focuses on organized criminal groups and their relations to the political sphere rather than bureaucratic agents and their choice of engaging in corruption or not.

situation in the *abalone* fishery (an edible mollusk, harvested through diving). Abalone was heavily regulated over the past decades and – because of depleting stocks – its trade was even prohibited fully in some years. Yet, due to high demand from Asian markets, the harvesting is extremely lucrative and resources are continuously smuggled abroad – increasing the level of conflict: ‘Animosity has escalated to violent proportions where both commercial divers and poachers compete for their livelihood. This has led to what is known as the “abalone war” and has also contributed to violence between authorities and the poachers’ (Hauck and Sweijd 1999, p. 1029). In-depth studies show how criminals from other sectors – such as drug dealers – entered the abalone regime during the 1990s as profits from harvesting grew (Raemaekers et al. 2011). Abalone poaching is now associated with violent groups protecting their income in distant coastal localities. The enforcement should therefore be seen in this light: substations are located in communities that depend on a livelihood threatened by existing regulations.

A further aspect is the weakness in administrative capacity of DAFF and especially the practice of bribery among its low-level officials.<sup>7</sup> Following attention from a number of court cases in the 1990s, corruption has been known to exist in the Compliance Directorate during inspections (Raemaekers et al. 2011; Hauck and Gallardo Fernandez 2013). Such behavior may be exhibited by receiving boxes of fish or money in exchange for ignoring fishermen’s rule violations. Accounts from fishermen depict how they seem to be used to the possibility of paying a bribe when they are caught for violations (Sundström 2013). Even more incriminating, it has been shown that some officers are directly involved in poaching operations themselves (Sundström 2014a). For instance, a police officer was recently convicted of keeping abalone in his freezer with a value exceeding 1.3 million rands [approximately 125,000 US dollars] (Hermanus Times 2014). Another feature of this situation is that a senior manager often controls the substations. These actors have generally stayed at one locality along the coast for longer than junior officers and are perceived as being more fused in corrupt transactions with fishermen in the local community (Sundström 2014b).

## Methods

The study’s empirical material consists of interviews with enforcement officers and key informants. I performed 43 interviews during the winter and spring of 2014. In detail, 34 respondents were inspectors at the Compliance Directorate. Among these were also former inspectors – no longer facing potential risks for speaking openly. The other nine persons were key informants, such as former senior managers from this directorate, including past directors, and stakeholders such as

---

<sup>7</sup> For a comparison of the relative capacity of this enforcement regime with neighboring countries, see Sjöstedt and Sundström (2013, 2014).

journalists, scholars and leaders of fishermen associations. They were sampled because of their insight into the situation and their views are mainly used to corroborate the accounts given by the inspectors.

I was given permission from the senior ranks of DAFF to conduct the interviews. Management contacted the staff with a general message allowing them to speak with me, but they do not know which inspectors I later spoke with. The respondents were purposely selected to vary on a range of individual features that may affect perceptions and experiences of bribery and violence. I also made sure to visit a large number of undisclosed substations along the southern and western parts of the coast, known to have different challenges, for instance varying in how heavy local resistance is from violent poachers. Respondents were then chosen from these differing locations. Without disclosing information about individual respondents that enables their identification it can be said that the sample characteristics includes five women, nine white inspectors, and seven substation managers. The average years of working experience is 12 years and ranges from under one year to over 39 years. Two inspectors were recently retired.

The interviews were most often performed in inspectors' offices and done in English, the first language for a majority of the respondents, so no third party was present during these meetings. The talk generally lasted between 30 minutes and one hour. To ensure confidentiality and maintain trust, the interviews were performed without a recoding device. Instead I took detailed notes that were transcribed the hours after the meeting. The interviews had two parts; a first semi structured section where questions focused on the challenge of enforcing the MLRA and the aspects surrounding bribe taking when inspecting fishermen. The second part contained open-ended questions where respondents were asked to describe how the situation could be improved. They then would often initiate detailed descriptions of violent intimidations and how this was perceived to fuel corruption – accounts that are analyzed in detail in the next section.

## **Results**

The following section is organized thematically: first, a number of subsections show the presence of violent intimidations that these officials are working under and second, the remaining subsections illustrate the implications this has for engaging in bribe taking.

## Bribes are used to make inspectors blind to rule violations

Respondents portray a widespread situation where fishermen and officials are involved in bribery that renders violations to go unpunished.<sup>8</sup> An inspector describes this behavior:

*We have eleven substations [on one part of the coast]. And out of these I know that only three of them are without corrupt officials ... If you should get rid of all corrupt inspectors, then out of our two hundred only thirty would be left. (R 13)*

In more detail, these bribes often consist of giving a part of the catch to the inspector:

*[An owner of a factory making fish meal that had violated certain rules] said “can we make a plan? I will pay you and you will write a better figure.”[i.e. legal level of catches] Then he put something in my pocket, it was a thick wad of money. (R 19)*

*Many fishermen will ask if you want money when they get caught. It is quite common. The person first gives you a fish. Then you know they want something in return. (R 20)*

Stories of this kind are plentiful from the interviews.<sup>9</sup> However, in these accounts it is also obvious that not all inspectors are comfortable with this situation. Many claim that they have problems with refusing to take these bribes and that they take place in the context of violent intimidations.

## Presence of threats when officials enforce rules

It is apparent that the inspectors often feel threatened in their line of work. Numerous accounts illustrate such situations:

*Poachers here in [name of area] are like rhino killers. Once, we approached some poachers carrying bags with illegal resources. And when we approached them and tried to catch them they started to throw stones. I had to go to the hospital [shows injury on the shoulder]. (R 10)*

*If I'm working in dangerous areas I first have to check my back. You know that they will block the road. They will free the person you arrested and take the catch you confiscated ... [often] they start throwing stones. (R 28)*

---

<sup>8</sup> R, and the following number after a quote, indicates which respondent is cited.

<sup>9</sup> For plentiful illustrations of bribe taking in this context, see Sundström (2014a).

*If you are outnumbered then you are in trouble ... The community will help [i.e. help the poachers]. They will throw stones, threaten you ... A lot of dangerous encounters. (R 19)*

## Violence with implications for enforcement

These threats have implications for the work of the inspectors. Accounts describe how they need to take these threats into consideration when enforcing regulations:

*[Fishermen without fishing licenses] are dangerous. Because we are in their way. They are prepared to do anything ... It is always dangerous to approach a new face. You think to yourself 'Will this poacher be dangerous?' (R 7)*

As a result, sometimes inspectors consider it too risky to enforce as they are supposed to:

*It's very dangerous to go in there [name of town]. You just have to turn around. You cannot arrest them ... Last week some person there threatened us with stones. So we just had to let him walk away with poached resources. See this scar [shows his chin], a poacher cut me here two years ago. (R 24)*

*[Fishermen may] threaten that they are going to burn your house. This happened to a colleague, her kids were traumatized. There was a case a while back when poachers kidnapped the wife of an inspector. This inspector was too enforcing. So there is a balance. (R 6)*

And in practice, this 'balance' often means that inspectors start to be pragmatic when enforcing rules. Being lax to fishermen that violate rules is, in such a situation, the easier choice:

*Once, the community stabbed a colleague when he went to check compliance. He approached some guys who were coming up from the water. And he was stabbed. So you cannot go there alone ... Your approach is important. You cannot be too headstrong. If I see poaching I say to them kindly to throw it in. And I will not write a fine ... So you show a nice attitude. (R 5)*

*There is a scaredness. You know that you can trigger violence ... They threaten to do this if you are too harsh. It hangs over your head. So you start thinking 'why should I?' (R 1)*

*If someone is getting caught they will get aggressive ... So then you have to make a decision, to take their fish or think about your life. (R 22)*

*The community will threaten us ... So it's much easier not to go there, to control, but to stay in the office instead.* (R 29)

It is in such situations that the presence of violence seems to affect the official's choice to take bribes or not:

*Since we work in a dangerous community with abalone poaching it's a choice between honest work and a relaxed lifestyle where you turn a blind eye or become a part of this business.* (R 2)

### The danger of being the only honest colleague

As stated above, 'becoming a part of business' is the name of the corrupt practices between fishermen and inspectors. However, refusing to engage in this behavior while being surrounded by involved colleagues has effects on how one is treated on the substation:

*I was driving around together with two colleagues. And then we see these guys coming up from the water. And I say to my colleague that we should catch them. But my colleagues just said 'leave this guy alone'. So now I don't drive together with my colleagues. And they no longer want to smoke or drink with me.* (R 9)

It is also perceived that there are professional costs of staying honest that are manifested in signals from the senior manager of a substation:

*If the station's supervisor is corrupt, then why wouldn't you yourself be? And no one will report. Because then they will report on each other. So people are quiet. This is how so many substations work along the coast.* (R 13)

*[Our management] wants to promote people who always say 'yes, yes.' But these persons are not hard on poaching. Many of them even had disciplinary cases against them, for corrupt behavior. But these just disappear. And the persons assessing these corrupt guys, of course they get something back.* (R 29)

*You know how you have to act to become a favorite [of senior managers]: you have to play along.* (R 21)

But working side by side with corrupt colleagues has large implications. As described below, this is perceived as affecting personal security:

*I ended up working with myself only because of lacking trust to my colleagues. You need to know that if something happens 'this guy has my back'.* (R 5)

*Working with such colleagues is dangerous. You're in the dark at night, arresting people with colleagues you don't trust. You generally know who the corrupt guys are. Their names come around. So you try to avoid these colleagues in the future. (R 23)*

Inspectors that are colluding with poachers will work as informants, sharing information about enforcement operations. This has effects for inspectors that refuse bribery:

*You need someone by your side. If someone pulls a knife you need to have a backup. Because our job is dangerous. The other day they even threw stones. The community would know that you are coming. They have some ways of knowing about our operations. (R 20)*

*Three years ago I did a bust and it went bad. They threw a firebomb, burning me. And we exchanged gunfire. So they put a price on my head, over 150,000 rand. So I had to move to this station. And the sad thing is that it was my own people who had tipped them off, sharing information about this operation. (R 31)*

But even more importantly, inspectors that do not take bribes will also be threatened directly by other colleagues:

*Being the only inspector at a station that does not accept bribes and that enforces rules hard, it is dangerous. You will be a threat to the livelihood of inspector colleagues ... So you might be threatened because of this. (R 26)*

### Presence of violence shapes an inspector's choice of residence

The occurrence of violent threats also has ramifications for how inspectors structure their life outside the office. One of the most important aspects is the choice of residence. Living in the same community as the fishermen has consequences:

*I don't live in the same community. It is more difficult to enforce rules in your own area. Your life would be in danger. Poachers would come to your place at night and threaten you. (R 15)*

*You don't want to be a neighbor with anyone you have arrested, like abalone poachers. Then you will be in trouble. (R 17)*

*When I came here I wanted to stay in the community, but it was not safe. Some fishermen had put fire to the place of the previous inspector. You confiscate fish and they will do something like this. So it is the price of not playing along. (R 20)*

Besides the pure issue of security, an inspector that chooses to live within the community of fishermen will also face more frequent temptations and pressure to be lax on violators:

*You cannot live with them. Because you are against them. It would be a problem. I would be forced to be lenient [not enforce rules]. I would be threatened otherwise, my family. (R 12)*

*Colleagues of mine are living in this community. They face problems. They are asked to be 'blind' to certain behavior. (R 2)*

*It is not good to work in your area ... Say I would live here in [name], it would be a problem. I would have to turn a blind eye. If I know what is best for my life. (R 6)*

*[Some] inspectors stay by the poachers. When they go out they will meet the poachers. So they live the same life. So they cannot be too strong when enforcing. (R 14)*

*You won't enforce poaching neighbors too hard. You know that you will become threatened. (R 13)*

### **Temptations and threats: Bribe taking reduces dangers**

Besides being dangerous, strict enforcement is also met with social costs for inspectors in their neighborhood:

*Like my son's friends' fathers, they are fishermen. How can I tell him 'don't hang out with them'? Sometimes I have to meet them. So there is a line you should draw. If I am in a restaurant they will contact me and speak to me. It is very disturbing and it gets to you. Like constantly being asked to receive a box of fish. It's a dilemma. (R 16)*

Therefore, taking bribes will solve many of these problems. The following account illustrates that bribes result in reduced threats:

*If you take bribes you are protected. You have a role in the community. You got organization protection and police protection. In the community this is a social thing. They will start helping you. Some inspectors even help the poachers drive their vehicles. So its protection, social protection. (R 7)*

In light of the fact that ignoring rule violations is easier than enforcing the law, several accounts also develop how the choice to take bribes may reduce the threats from fishermen.



*Our personnel are scared to confront poachers ... Instead [of enforcing rules] you start becoming less proud and ethical. (R 7)*

This process seems to be almost a negotiation of both threats and temptations where it is implicitly made clear that taking bribes will make everything much easier for the inspector:

*[The fishermen] will swear at us. Sometimes even throw stones at us, at our cars. I don't think shooting at us is far away ... I will be threatened. Some fishermen will try you. They will say 'your colleague let me do this' and they say that in these areas inspectors do not care about poachers. The abalone community always tries to bribe you. They say 'lets sit down and perhaps we can sort something out'. Here, if you catch them, they will hate you. For the rest of their life. (R 23)*

*We are taking their food so of course they are aggressive. They will try to give you fish to look away. I live in the community of fishermen so it is not safe for me there. They will call me 'heartless', my neighbors, that I am taking away their bread and butter. (R 26)*

The following account shows even clearer how the choice to take bribes reduces the dangers for the inspectors:

*Last week I almost got stabbed. I drove in my patrol car and saw how these guys were hiding their illegal catches. So I parked my car next to them. Then one broke a bottle, coming towards me and another one had a knife ... So it is very risky. It is much easier to be blind. Some inspectors are blinder than others. And these officers will receive some fish. Not in the harbor, but at their homes, as a gratitude. (R 30)*

The officers that start to ignore rule violations are therefore rewarded in the form of bribes. And rather than only ignoring rule violations, accounts describe how colluding fishermen and colleagues prefer such officials to engage in bribe taking as this reduces the risks that they would choose to disclose corrupt practices for outsiders.

### **Presence of violence renders whistle-blowing dangerous**

The presence of violence also works as an efficient means to hinder inspectors telling outsiders of the commonly occurring bribery:

*I would rather shush [puts finger on her lips]. If anyone is on the take here I cannot say anything, then I would be on the bit [makes the gun sign to her head]. This happened to me as a traffic officer. Back then I had to find the crooks threatening me to be silent and pay them. Not again. (R 9)*

Yet, besides the fear of threats, a further issue is that several inspectors are confident that management will not take such warnings seriously or could even make these warnings widely known since actors in management may also be involved:

*Will the system support you if you expose such behavior? ... Confidentiality is required. Then you could blow the whistle. Honestly it is not there now. Say you give information to the head office about the actions of your colleague. The next day everybody at the office will look at you. You can get threats. (R 12)*

This, in turn, reduces the willingness to make outsiders aware of the wide use of bribes in the sector:

*I'm not scared to blow the whistle. That's why what happened took place [he almost got killed by poachers throwing a firebomb at him after a tip from a colleague]. And although I told everybody in the department about this, nothing happened. Everybody knows that nothing happens when you blow the whistle, so then no one will do it. (R 31)*

## **Discussion**

This investigation has provided empirical flesh on the intuitive argument put forward in this article, that the presence of violence might give rise to direct costs for those civil servants that abstain from bribe taking. The accounts also suggest several important aspects of this process. As shown, there are dangers associated with refusing to partake in bribery: intimidations come from rule-violating citizens and also from colluding colleagues. Further, the material illustrates the social consequences of not taking bribes, for instance by shaping inspectors' choice of residence. In this context, taking bribes reduces such costs. Becoming corrupt may therefore be seen as a strategy of social protection. Moreover, the presence of violent actors and colluding colleagues that will act as informants, make whistle-blowing a risky decision.

A question that begs an answer is why violent actors simply do not defy regulations, without offering bribes, and why reluctant officials engage in corruption instead of isolating themselves from such practices. My response to this question is to suggest that it is a story of an 'insurance strategy' that resonates quite well with the incentives of the involved actors. From the perspective of law violating citizens and colluding bureaucrats, they are more secure if they know that all inspectors

are involved in corrupt practices. In such situations, the more bureaucrats that are involved in bribery, an increasing number of officers would have incentives not to blow the whistle themselves. Therefore, pressuring reluctant agents to be involved in corrupt practices reduces the number of people that may threaten involved parties by telling outsiders of this behavior. Conversely, an individual bureaucrat will benefit from engaging in bribery since it reduces the friction with colleagues, neighbors and regulatory subjects. Together, this creates an incentive structure where involved parties will strive to include bureaucrats in bribery and these will face high costs from refusing to do so.

From a theoretical perspective, it seems that this type of bribery has evolved into an established system. Teorell (2007) has in fact suggested that corruption may be understood in terms of an institution in itself. As pointed out in the literature, while institutions are often seen as solutions to problems – for instance by coordinating behavior – they may also be problems themselves when there are truly bad ‘rules of the game’. According to Teorell such a perspective may give analytical benefits as it ‘highlights another dimension of social conflict produced by and reproducing corruption ... an institutional view of corruption instead stresses horizontal conflicts between different sectors of society which may benefit or lose from corruption’ (p. 5). This may in fact be a fitting description of what is seen in the empirical investigation. In this setting the arrangements of bribery are clearly beneficial for powerful actors, both rule violating citizens and colluding bureaucrats. Moreover, it seems that this institutionalized form of corruption is also enforced by an apparatus of intimidations and actions, further pointing to how violence may uphold bureaucratic corruption.

## Implications

There are possible inferences for policy from taking the role of violence seriously. Besides fixing the incentives and expectations that exist in the structure of a civil service, this suggests that anti-corruption reform may benefit from further considering ‘fixing the security’ of bureaucrats working in violent contexts. To reduce the costs of being honest, policy should attempt to find strategies to guarantee that violent actors may not be able to intimidate bureaucratic agents. For instance, enforcement officials working under dangerous conditions are known to be helped by threat assessment that can determine vulnerability and guide interventions (Fein and Vossekuil 2000). Introducing such schemes may be one practical implication derived from this argument.

Providing security for bureaucrats in such environments is inherently a challenge when the very problem at hand is the lack of administrative ability. Having a bureaucracy infested with corruption and difficulties to monopolize the use of violence is usually seen as two results from a low state capacity (Bäck and Hadenius 2008). Herein lies also the dilemma of building good government

structures as countries with poor institutions tend to be bad in several aspects and these features may even reinforce each other. But the insights from this study illustrate the chicken and the egg debate: not knowing which came first, makes it difficult to break the cycle. A suggestion following from this article could be that if violent threats to honest actors were to decrease, some part of the drivers of corruption among bureaucrats would disappear. Therefore, this provides guidance on how to blend and pace reforms in such settings and implies that anti-corruption policy should focus increasingly on the security of civil servants.

### Generalizability

Since the relationship between violence and bribery remain relatively unexplored, one may merely reflect on how the findings travel from the context of this investigation to other settings, both within the country and beyond. Is the dynamics of the fisheries sector more prone to generate violence than other sectors in South Africa? Is this story simply about the dynamics of the South African state building? While such questions demand thorough investigations in themselves one can find anecdotes that suggest that violent resistance toward government regulations occur in other segments of the South African society as well. One of the more publicly known examples are the “taxi wars” that has plagued urban centers for over two decades, in which local drivers violently oppose governments attempt to enforce transport policies of communal bus routes (see Dugard 2001). Regarding settings outside of South Africa one may argue that the challenge depicted in this investigation is well comparable to other African states where the administrative capacity of the state is limited. In fact, the previously mentioned study by Persson and colleagues (2013) report interviews with citizens in Uganda that also touch upon coercive aspects of the relationship between citizens and public servants involved in corruption. They also discuss in detail the case of the Kenyan whistleblower John Githongo – a high-ranking public servant under President Mwai Kibaki – that had to flee the country after exposing corruption in the Kenyan civil service. This suggests that South Africa is not the only state in which there are costs associated with honesty. Yet, looking beyond low development states, one may also find such anecdotes among enforcement officers in highly developed countries such as the U.S. Consider for instance the situation of the New York City Police Department in the 1960s’, made famous through the Hollywood movie *Serpico*. In reality, Frank Serpico – a patrolling policeman that received death threats and became pariah among colleagues after testifying of corrupt practices – witnessed in 1971 in front of a public commission of the problem of being an honest officer: “the atmosphere does not yet exist in which an honest police officer can act without fear of ridicule or reprisal from fellow officers” (cited in New York Times 2010). What these anecdotes suggest is that there are possibly plenty of cases – both within and outside of South Africa – where the findings of this article may resonate quite well.

## Conclusions

This article argues that more aspects than financial incentives and expectations of others' behavior may affect bribe taking among bureaucrats if violence by non-state actors is widespread. Interviews with enforcement officials in the South African civil service illustrate this argument and provide further suggestive insights into the mechanisms of this process. It is one of the first studies to examine the consequences of refraining from and engaging in corruption against a violent backdrop. The results indicate that intimidations from citizens and corrupt colleagues are an important issue for bureaucrats' decisions to take bribes, or not, because they considerably increase the costs of remaining honest.

This argument pertains specifically to bureaucratic corruption that is collusive, that is, when violators may pay enforcement agents to be lax in sanctions. The insight that violence may increase the presence of bureaucratic corruption of this sort has ramifications for sectors where bribery is known to spur noncompliance to regulations – for instance, customs offices (where bribes enables smuggling) or city police (thus enabling actions such as drug trade). To tackle these civil servants' propensity to take bribes from rule violators, considering their security – and hence altering the costs of remaining honest – may be a worthwhile option for policymakers to explore. Therefore, anti-corruption reforms should make further use of insights from research on protection and threat assessments of officials.

To investigate this argument further, future research may benefit from developing this reasoning through formal models as well as by nuancing the theoretical expectations of the argument. Research may also gain from investigating this reasoning empirically. For instance, research would benefit from exploring the situation of civil servants comparatively in settings with both better and worse state. It may also be worthwhile to explore the role of intimidations in relation to explanations focusing on incentives and expectations, for instance through investigating observational data of civil servants' stated reasons for bribe taking, in order to examine the relative merit of this insight.

## REFERENCES

- Ades, A., and R. Di Tella. 1997. The New Economics of Corruption: A Survey and Some New Results. *Political Studies* 45: 496–516.
- Ades, A. and R. Di Tella. 1999. Rents, Competition, and Corruption. *American Economic Review* 89 (4): 982–993.
- Bardhan, P. 1997. Corruption and Development: A Review of the Issues. *Journal of Economic Literature* 35 (3): 1320–1346.
- Becker, G. and G. Stigler. 1974. Law Enforcement, Malfeasance, and Compensation of Enforcers. *Journal of Legal Studies* 3 (1): 1–18.
- Besley, T. and J. McLaren. 1993. Taxes and Bribery: The Role of Wage Incentives. *Economic Journal* 103 (416): 119–141.
- Bäck, H. and A. Hadenius. 2008. Democracy and State Capacity: Exploring a J-Shaped Relationship. *Governance* 21(1): 1–24.
- Dugard, J. 2001. *From Low Intensity War to Mafia War: Taxi violence in South Africa (1987–2000)*. Johannesburg: Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation.
- Fein, R. A. and B. Vossekuil. 2000. *Protective Intelligence and Threat Assessment Investigations: A Guide for State and Local Law Enforcement Officials*. Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Justice.
- Fjeldstad, O.-H. 2001. Taxation, coercion and donors. Local government tax enforcement in Tanzania. *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 39 (2): 289–306.
- Gambetta, D. 1996. *The Sicilian Mafia: The Business of Private Protection*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Giddens, A. 1985. *The Nation-state and Violence*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Groenendijk, N. 1997. A principal-agent model of corruption. *Crime, Law and Social Change* 27 (3–4): 207–229.
- Grossman, H. I. 1995. Rival Kleptocrats: The Mafia versus the State, *Economics of Organized Crime*. In Fiorentini G. and S. Peltzman (eds). London: Centre for Economic Policy Research.
- Hauck, M. and N. A. Sweijd. 1999. A Case Study of Abalone Poaching in South Africa and its Impact on Fisheries Management. *ICES Journal of Marine Science* 56 (6): 1024–1032.
- Hauck, M. and G. L. Gallardo Fernández. 2013. Crises in the South African abalone and Chilean loco fisheries: shared challenges and prospects. *Maritime Studies* 12 (3): 1–20.
- Hermanus Times. 2014. Policeman Caught with Abalone Worth R1,3 Million. March 24.
- Herbst, J. 2000. *States and Power in Africa*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Klitgaard, R. 1988. *Controlling corruption*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

- Levi, M. 1989. *Of Rule and Revenue*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Milgrom, P. and J. Roberts. 1992. *Economics, Organization, and Management*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.
- Moe, T. M. 1984. The New Economics of Organization. *American Journal of Political Science* 28 (4): 739–777.
- Mungiu-Pippidi, A. 2006. Corruption: Diagnosis and Treatment. *Journal of Democracy* 17 (3): 86–99.
- Myrdal, G. 1968. *Asian Drama: An Inquiry into the Poverty of Nations*. London: Penguin.
- New York Times. 2010. Serpico on Serpico. January 22.
- Persson, A., B. Rothstein, and J. Teorell. 2013. Why Anticorruption Reforms Fail—Systemic Corruption as a Collective Action Problem. *Governance* 26: 449–471.
- Polinsky, A. M. and S. Shavell. 2000. Corruption and Optimal Law Enforcement. *Journal of Public Economics* 81: 1–24.
- Raemaekers, S., M. Hauck, M. Burgener, A. Mackenzie, G. Maharaj, É. E. Plagányi, and P. J. Britz. 2011. Review of the Causes of the Rise of the Illegal South African Abalone Fishery. *Ocean & Coastal Management* 54: 433–445.
- Rauch, J. E., and P. B. Evans. 2000. Bureaucratic Structure and Bureaucratic Performance in Less Developed Countries. *Journal of Public Economics* 75 (1): 49–71.
- Republic of South Africa. 1998. Marine Living Resources Act, Act No. 18 of 1998, Government Gazette, South Africa 1998, 395 (18930).
- Rose-Ackerman, S. 1999. *Corruption and Government: Causes, Consequences, and Reform*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Rothstein, B. 2005. *Social Traps and the Problem of Trust*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Rothstein, B. 2011. *The Quality of Government: Corruption, Social Trust, and Inequality in International Perspective*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Sberna, S. 2014. Conceptualizing Organized Crime: A transaction cost approach to make-or-buy decisions and corruption. ANTICORRP, European Commission 7<sup>th</sup> Framework.
- Shapiro, S. P. 2005. Agency Theory. *Annual Review of Sociology* 31 (1): 263–284.
- Sjöstedt, M and A. Sundström. 2014. Coping with illegal fishing: An institutional account of success and failure in Namibia and South Africa. *Biological Conservation*.
- Sjöstedt, M and A. Sundström. 2013. Overfishing in Southern Africa: A Comparative account of regime effectiveness and national capacities. *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis*, 15 (5): 415-431.
- Smith, J., K. K. Obidzinski, and I. Suramenggala Subarudi. 2003. Illegal logging, collusive corruption and fragmented governments in Kalimantan, Indonesia. *International Forestry Review* 5: 293–302.

- Sundström, A. 2013. Corruption in the Commons: Why Bribery Hampers Enforcement of Environmental Regulations in South African Fisheries. *International Journal of the Commons* 7 (2): 454–472.
- Sundström, A. 2014a. Covenants with Broken Swords: Corruption and Law Enforcement in Governance of the Commons. Quality Of Government Institute Working Paper 2014:10.
- Sundström, A. 2014b. Not to be used during fire: Performance-related pay for civil servants as an anticorruption tool. Quality Of Government Institute Working Paper 2014:11.
- Teorell, J. 2007. Corruption as an Institution: Rethinking the Nature and Origins of the Grabbing Hand. Quality Of Government Institute Working Paper 2007:5.
- Tilly, C. 1985. War making and state making as organized crime. In Evans, P., D. Rueschemeyer, and T. Skocpol (eds). *Bringing the State Back In*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Treisman, D. 2007. What Have we Learned about the Causes of Corruption from Ten Years of Crossnational Empirical Research? *Annual Review of Political Science* 10: 211–244.
- Van Rijckeghem, C. and B. Weder. 2001. Bureaucratic corruption and the rate of temptation: do wages in the civil service affect corruption, and by how much? *Journal of Development Economics* 65: 307–331.
- Varraich, A. 2014. Corruption: An umbrella concept. Quality Of Government Institute Working Paper 2014:04.