

Ethical Orientation: Key to the Sustenance of the Fight Against Corruption in the Power Sector in Nigeria

Kingsley Uzoma Ahumibe

School of General Studies'

Dr. B. U. Nzeribe State Polytechnic Awomama, Imo State

Email: ahumibek7@gmail.com,

Phone No. 0703 267 5446

Kingsley Onyemekara Emecheta (FCPA)

School of General Studies'

Dr. B. U. Nzeribe State Polytechnic Awomama, Imo State

Email: emecheta.kins@gmail.com

Phone No. +2348034949499

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0008-4026-9529>

Adigwe A.C. Ngwuruakor

School of General Studies'

Dr. B. U. Nzeribe State Polytechnic Awomama, Imo State

Email: adigwengwuruakor@gmail.com

Phone No. 0707 321 1365

Augustine Obinna Okeke

School of General Studies'

Dr. B. U. Nzeribe State Polytechnic Awomama, Imo State

Email: augustineokeke777@gmail.com

Phone No. +2347066092777

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Abstract

Nigeria carried the largest electricity access deficit of any country in the world in 2023, with close to 87 million Nigerians still without a grid connection despite decades of reform and enormous public investment. Indeed, such a deficit is principally attributable to the endemic corruption that has become characteristic of the fabric of Nigeria's national life. This paper seeks to propose ethical orientation as a strategy to combat corruption at all levels of our private and public life, with a focus on the power sector. As several recent studies and experiences since 1999, the beginning of the current democratic dispensation, reveal, corruption is not confined to any one regime, military or civilian. However, all professions have a code of ethics, which is regarded as a code of conduct that all spheres of endeavour are supposed to respect. Since the power sector is regarded as the main engine room for stimulating national economic development and increasing productivity, it has also been embroiled in corruption in various forms, as this paper will show. This has significantly impeded the overall development of the country, and thus, deserves an in-

depth analysis. To provide a good background of the study, this paper employs descriptive, documentary, and qualitative approaches to data collection, using both primary and secondary sources and applying content analysis. The ethical utilitarian theory forms the theoretical basis of the study. The paper posits that corruption has caused enormous damage to the country; thus, ethical behaviour, which will be encouraged not merely by moral persuasion but also by institutions willing to apply sanctions, offers the most feasible path to a less corrupt public and private life in Nigeria.

Keywords: *Corruption, Ethics, Ethical Orientation, Power sector.*

Introduction

Whether primitive or modern, every society establishes some rules to which its members are expected to adhere. In the broadest sense, ethical orientation, to the reminding of citizens that they share some common responsibilities, teaching and informing them about beliefs and principles that should guide their conduct in public and private life (Oxford University Press, 2005). The inculcation of a society's rules and expectations into the consciousness of its individual members is what sociology calls socialization. Socialization is as fundamental for the survival of an individual as it is for that of a society. More elaborate discussions of these concepts, their detailed meanings, and how they relate to corruption will be taken up later in this work.

This study thus enquires whether there exists any significant relationship between ethical orientation and corruption in Nigeria. In this respect, the question is: why has corruption remained so endemic, despite a long history of reforms under both military and civilian governments? The paper focuses on the case of the Nigerian power sector as an important reference point for such questions, considering its multiple failures, discussed in some detail later in the work. In addition, the power sector anchors Nigeria at the bottom of the world's ranking in access to electricity, despite its history of significant public investment and various restructuring efforts. However, while the power sector provides an anchor for this study's question, the argument will draw on the broader base of evidence about corruption in Nigeria, given that the sector's problems are, as will be argued here, inseparable from those of the wider economy.

Statement of the Problem

In the light of the above, Nigeria has waged war on corruption at different times through moral suasion, specialised anti-corruption agencies, and regime changes; however, none of these has yielded long-term success. For example, the 1984 War Against Indiscipline showed that a moral campaign from the top could, in the short term, cause the public to change their behaviour; however, once the government that launched it was no longer in power, the campaign fell apart. While the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and the Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC) have achieved convictions, it has not yet been possible to prosecute and convict the most powerful corrupt person. However, the power sector, the key driver of economic growth, remains one of the most corruptly infested sectors of the Nigerian economy, and the nature of corruption therein remains one of the least understood. This study will focus on this gap in knowledge and whether ethical orientation, when properly practiced with complementary wilful institutions, will provide long lasting solution than any hitherto pursued.

Research Questions

1. What factors do stakeholders in Nigeria's power sector perceive as most responsible for corrupt practices within it?
2. How effective have government anti-corruption agencies been in checking corruption in the power sector?
3. What role would ethical orientation play in reducing corrupt practices in the power sector?
4. What lessons can be drawn from Nigeria's previous attempts at moral and institutional reform, especially the War Against Indiscipline and its anti-corruption agencies, in the current campaign against corruption in the power sector?

Research Hypotheses

H1: There is no significant difference among prompt and adequate payment of salaries, greed, and morality as causes of corruption in Nigeria's power sector.

H2: There is no significant difference among ethical orientation, morality, and prompt payment of salaries as factors mitigating corruption in Nigeria's power sector.

Objectives of the Study

On this premise, the study shall have the following objectives:

1. Examine the factors responsible for corruption in Nigeria's power sector.
2. Determine the effectiveness of ethical orientation in the fight against corruption in the power sector.
3. Evaluate whether the anti-corruption agencies put in place by government have been effective.
4. Review previous campaigns against corruption in the power sector, whether moral or institutional.
5. Recommend ethical orientation as complementary to other anti-corruption measures in the power sector.

Literature Review/Conceptual Clarification

The Imperative of Ethical Orientation

The study thus considers ethical orientation as a basis that could complement the present approaches towards tackling corruption in Nigeria, as it transcends ethnic, religious, and political affiliations to stand on the ground of morality. Ethical orientation, therefore, calls upon conscience, which judges one's actions. Hence, it is a “struggle” between good and bad, right, and wrong.

In this regard, this paper submits that corruption is detrimental to national growth, given that it serves only a few to the detriment of the majority. Chinua Achebe made a similar point decades ago when he insisted that Nigeria's troubles are not rooted in soil, climate, or the character of its people, but squarely in the failure of leadership to establish the discipline and example that a nation needs (Achebe, 1983). Indeed, this line of reasoning is consistent with the line of argument in this study, which would trace the roots of the Nigerian crisis to choices made by the Nigerian leadership and not to anything intrinsic about Nigeria. Okonkwo (2009, p. 54) therefore, rightly submits that the major challenges hindering development and growth in the country has been identified as corruption. Against this background, corruption would, therefore, retard the general growth and development of the country. This paper believes if the war against corruption must be won, it must first be won at the level of ethics; that is, the change of perception of persons engaging in corrupt practices.

Has Nigeria Tried Ethical Orientation Before?

It would be dishonest for this paper to suggest ethical orientation without considering what has already been tried in Nigeria and its historical context. In March 1984, the military government of General Muhammadu Buhari and General Tunde Idiagbon launched what was called the War Against Indiscipline, a nationwide campaign meant to correct what the regime saw as the moral decay behind the country's economic troubles (Council on Foreign Relations, October 4, 2016). Soldiers were stationed at bus stops to enforce orderly queuing, late civil servants were made to perform frog jumps in public, and the government pushed a wider message of patriotism, hard work, and honesty that it hoped would eventually stretch into the fight against bribery and corruption itself (Joliba, 2020). The National Orientation Agency, which still exists today and still carries the mandate to shape public values, grew out of this same effort (Vanguard, 2016).

The campaign did produce results people still remember. Nigerians queued at bus stops in a way that surprised outsiders, and public servants briefly turned up on time. But it did not survive its own government. Newspapers that had at first praised the crackdown began, within a year, to accuse the same soldiers enforcing discipline of abusing the very citizens they were meant to be correcting (War Against Indiscipline, n.d.). When the military government that started the campaign was itself overthrown in 1985, the whole effort quietly faded, and the queuing culture it had built collapsed not long after. This is not to say that ethical orientation is a waste of time; the paper has no such view. It is simply to indicate that a morality campaign imposed from above by whip and decree without the institutional capacity to punish corrupt officials, no matter their rank, will only last as long as the government that shouts loudest about it. Any fresh attempt at ethical orientation must reckon with why the War Against Indiscipline did not outlive its founders.

Causes of Corruption in Nigeria

Some scholars trace the roots of Nigeria's corruption problem back further still, to the country's long history of military intervention in politics. On this reading, the repeated coups, and decades of centralized, unaccountable rule between 1966 and 1999 left behind habits of impunity that outlasted the soldiers who created them, since power concentrated in a small circle with no elected legislature or independent judiciary to answer to made embezzlement and abuse of office difficult to check and, over time, ordinary (Yagboyaju, 2017). This paper does not treat that history as the whole story, civilian rule since 1999 has shown no shortage of corruption of its own, but it is worth taking seriously as one part of how the country arrived at its present state.

Politics and the discovery of oil and natural gas are two major factors that led to sustained increase of corrupt practices in Nigeria. Nigeria's Economic and Financial Crimes Commission put the figure at roughly \$400 billion stolen or misused between 1960 and the close of the twentieth century, an amount close to all the aid Western donors gave to the whole of Africa across the same period (as cited in Global Security, n.d.). Greed and ostentatious lifestyle are counted as factors that have made their marks in contributing to the high spate of corruption among political office holders and public servants. It is also worth noting that oil wealth does not merely fund corruption, it tends to shape the kind of corruption a country experiences. Scholars who study what is sometimes called the resource curse argue that economies which depend heavily on a single extractive resource often see their political institutions grow weaker rather than stronger as revenue flows in, because access to the resource, not service to the public, becomes the real currency of power (Ross, 2012). Nigeria's experience with oil fits this pattern closely.

Further, tribalism and nepotism contribute to corrupt practices among politicians and public officials. This happens because the politicians and public servants are under pressure from friends and relatives to grant favours, as the latter view the politicians and public servants as the key to their survival and enrichment. This places strain on the ethical posture of the politicians and public servants. For example, a now classic study of Nigerian politics by Richard Joseph names prebendalism, as a system where state officials regard their positions as personal properties to be shared with their ethnic or kin groups, and state resources are allocated on ethnic or patronage lines rather than merit (Joseph, 1987; Emecheta, 2016). In such a setting, the pressure from relatives on state officials is not a matter of individual weakness but a standard element of political culture. In the year 2000, Transparency International carried out a survey on the corruption levels of ninety countries including Nigeria. At the end of the ranking, Nigeria was seen as the most corrupt in that ranking because the country occupied the ninetieth position (Transparency International, 2000). In other words, since that time, no major strides have been achieved in reducing corruption due to Nigeria's lack of transparency and its continued embrace of the poor governance model. Nigeria was the most corrupt country in the year 2000. In the year 2017, there was no remarkable improvement in transparency in the country irrespective of promises made by the Muhammadu Buhari led administration to fight corruption. It appears that former President Goodluck Jonathan performed better than him when compared with corruption index result of 2014. By 2018, Nigeria had relapsed deeper into corruption, moving twelve steps backwards from a rank of 136 to 148 (Transparency International, 2018). The picture has not brightened much since then. According to the 2025 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), Nigeria was ranked 142nd out of 182 countries with a score of 26 against a global average of 43. According to Transparency International, this is a score that suggests stagnation rather than reform (Transparency International, 2025). Nearly 25 years after the first survey, which placed Nigeria at 90, the country continues to fight the same battle.

Effects of Corruption in Nigeria

Corruption in Nigeria wears many ugly faces. These consequences represent pains on Nigerians, as money meant to reduce poverty in the country is instead stolen by a handful of individuals. According to Lewis Obi (2015), the National Assembly is nothing but a business enterprise with the primary objective of its members being to make money for themselves. He went further to explain that the National Assembly in Nigeria is the highest paid legislature in the world. The chamber earns more than that of the United States of America, and yet the American economy is far much better than that of Nigeria. According to the documentation, United States Senators earn an approximate annual income of \$174,000 US dollars while that of Nigeria is \$2,183,685 (Authority Economist Magazine, as cited in Lewis Obi, 2015). One cannot help but notice the size of the disparity between the two.

The public sector, in its many guises, seems to have a strange affinity for corrupt practices: political office, education, industry, private sector. The embezzlement of public money is a regular phenomenon, and the possibilities of corruption within government spendings often distort public officials' incentives to base their choices of expenditures on the needs of the public rather than the opportunities for extracting bribes (Emecheta, 2013). Many historical examples could be cited to illustrate how the recent past of Nigeria was marked by unashamed looting of public wealth. It was alleged that the Abacha administration in the 1990s notoriously looted over \$2 billion US dollars. The Federal Government's agreement with the Swiss Government on the repatriation of looted funds traced to former Head of State General Sani Abacha led to the remittance of \$322 million

US dollars in December 2017. The plan to distribute the returned money among Nigerians was also put in place. The plan was confirmed through the publication of Transparency International in August 2018, which stated, "In Nigeria, plans are in motion to distribute \$322 million recovered in Switzerland from the late General Sani Abacha, the country's former military ruler" (Transparency International, 2018).

Another glaring phenomenon of corruption in Nigeria's body politic is the rigging of elections. During elections, politicians hire thugs who move around the electoral polling stations to hijack ballot boxes and unleash mayhem on citizens who came out to exercise their franchise. Candidates in recent times have adopted vote buying as a new tactic for rigging elections to their own advantage. On many occasions' politicians have bribed top ranking officials to act in their favour. Corruption seems to be a scourge that has been dumped on Nigeria by some supernatural being. It has been reported that even churches and other places of worship are also involved. What then is left for the average Nigerian to hope for if the very places where one would look for some glimmers of hope are in the dark?

Another aspect of corruption in Nigeria is internet fraud, which does not discriminate between graduates and non-graduates. Graduates and non-graduates alike who lack knowledge and skills to earn legitimate money find a kind of joy in indulging in internet fraud, which is a criminal act punishable under the laws of Nigeria. This is yet another dimension of corruption that relates to the pressures of poverty and unemployment discussed below. How does one explain the behaviour of a young man who has watched the holders of political office enrich themselves with impunity? Such a young man absorbs one lesson about how the system works, whatever the law books may say, and the appeal of internet fraud to him lies in its ability to provide an informal, illegitimate outlet for a legitimate grievance against a country that has failed to provide him with an honest place.

Poverty is Another Cause of Corruption

According to international standards of poverty, a person is said to be poor when he lives under \$1.25 US dollars, a little above N1,600 though it varies, per day. Poverty pushes many poor people into corrupt practices. According to the World Bank group in 2004, 63.1% of Nigerians were poor. The poverty level increased in 2010, when 68% of the Nigerian population was estimated to be poor. This is part of the reason why poor youths in the country collect bribes to work as political thugs for Nigerian politicians. The story of poverty in Nigeria has not changed much since. The National Bureau of Statistics, working with the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative, found in its 2022 Multidimensional Poverty Index that 63% of Nigerians, about 133 million people, were multidimensionally poor, with poverty considerably deeper in rural areas than in cities (National Bureau of Statistics, 2022). Driven largely by high inflation and years of economic reform, this confirms that poverty in Nigeria has not merely persisted, it has grown in scale even as the naira value of the economy has grown too. In this way, poverty and corruption reinforce each other in a vicious circle that ethical orientation alone may not break but at least begin to loosen.

Negative Consequences of Corruption

Poor Investment: Companies that would have invested in Nigeria are afraid because they feel the corruption status of the nation will ruin their business investments. Because of this, they refuse to invest in Nigeria. On the contrary, there will be less unemployment in Nigeria, considering the investments it attracts.

Rise in poverty: When heads of public institutions are busy laundering the money that is supposed to be used to create employment for the masses and reduce poverty, what happens is that there will be a rise in the poverty level in the country. Poverty has grown rapidly and does so in Nigeria because the government is selfish and does not work for the common good and welfare of the people.

National Crises: Most socio-political conflicts in Nigeria today result from corruption. In recent times, the insecurity in Nigeria has been worsened by the activities of Boko Haram, which is linked directly to corruption. Corrupt politicians brought in the Boko Haram insurgents and used them as a front to fight the government of Nigeria and seize control of power. Boko Haram and other groups have terrorized Nigerians with violent attacks and forced many citizens to flee for their lives, which has had a serious negative impact on the economy.

The Institutions Meant to Complement Ethical Orientation

In the introductory paragraph, this study claimed that ethical orientation complements all other measures of fighting corruption. This raises a question not yet answered in this study: What other measures are there, and what is their level? The most visible are Nigeria's two standing anti-corruption agencies. The Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission, ICPC, was set up in September 2000 under President Olusegun Obasanjo to investigate corruption in public office, and the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, EFCC, followed a few years later with a wider mandate covering financial crimes generally (Independent Corrupt Practices Commission, n.d.). Between them the two commissions have secured hundreds of convictions and recovered enormous sums in looted assets over the years, including funds traced back to the Abacha years (SOAS Anti-Corruption Evidence, 2021). According to the SOAS Anti-Corruption Evidence, 2021, the bright side of this story is that. The sad part is that cases involving top powerful individuals usually collapse in courts. Human Rights Watch documented the trial of a former state governor, James Ibori, in which a judge threw out all one hundred and seventy criminal counts against him despite evidence that he had paid EFCC officials fifteen million dollars in an apparent attempt to influence the case (Human Rights Watch, 2011). Ibori was eventually convicted, but only after the matter moved outside Nigeria entirely and was tried in a British court. It is cases like this that make most Nigerians look at EFCC arrests with fatigue rather than hope because they have learned that an arrest does not mean a conviction and that a conviction is not guaranteed and, if it happens, takes years and much political will to obtain. If ethical orientation is to complement enforcement, then this is precisely the gap that it needs to fill, for no amount of moral education will be relevant if the ordinary citizen can see with his own eyes that the powerful are hardly punished. One more recent effort deserves mention. In December 2016 the Federal Ministry of Finance launched a Whistle-blower Policy, offering ordinary citizens a reward of about two and a half percent of any stolen public funds they help recover (Nkwede, et al. 2023). It has led to some real recoveries, including tens of millions of dollars traced within its first months. But without a law protecting whistle-blowers from retaliation, something the National Assembly had still not passed at the time of this writing, the policy asks ordinary Nigerians to take on real personal risk for a reward that is not guaranteed. It is another case of a good idea in Nigeria that lacks the institutional strength to deliver as intended.

Conceptual Clarification

Ethics

Every society has a way of evaluating the behavioural standards of individuals. There will always be an element that differentiates the right from the wrong and good from the bad at both individual and social levels. Ethics may be said to deal with moral issues. It is the understanding of what is right and wrong or good and bad. As one of the branches of Philosophy, ethics deals systematically with moral ideals and goals, the motives of choice, and the patterns of good and bad conduct. It explains, among other things, the motivating factors behind people's actions and attitudes, feelings, and responses to specific situations, events, or objects. Ethics is derived from the Greek *ethikos*, meaning "character." Today we talk about individual character and societal expectations. The character of the individual tells more of his beliefs, likes and dislikes. Profoundly, it speaks about the person's orientation and background. That link between ethics and character was, in fact, where the idea began. Aristotle taught that a person becomes just by doing just acts and becomes courageous by doing courageous acts, meaning that character is less a fixed trait a person is born with and more a habit built up through repeated right action (Aristotle, trans. 2009). Applied here, this suggests that ethical orientation in Nigeria is not simply a matter of teaching people the difference between right and wrong in the abstract, it is a matter of building a public culture, where doing right is practiced often enough, and rewarded often enough, that it becomes second nature rather than a constant uphill struggle against temptation.

Ethics is related to morality, often both words are used interchangeably. While morality refers to the social norms people are taught and made to imbibe, ethics refers to the rational investigation and questioning of these norms. R. M. Hare contends that ethics is nothing but the logical study of moral language (Hare, 1952). Ethics by implication probes moral actions and cuts across several disciplines. To a sociologist, it attempts to explain and understand varying cultural norms and practices. Psychologists study ethics to understand how people's values influence their thinking, behavioural motivations, and personal development. Theologians study ethics and morality in relation to religious teachings and divine commands. In the public service, organizations and other related groups, ethics refers to a code of conduct for members. It stipulates the rules and regulations everyone must adhere to, while defaulters are promptly sanctioned.

Ethical Orientation

Ethical orientation has to do with the education and information on the beliefs and principles about what is right and wrong. Ethical behaviour means knowing the difference between right and wrong and consciously choosing to do the right. Ethical orientation therefore is a form of moral training. It deals on the good virtues of society. "To educate a person in mind and not in morals is to educate a menace to society" (Theodore Roosevelt Center, n.d.). Roosevelt was right when he said this because ethical orientation is a moral reawakening programme. It is an appeal to one's conscience, which is that part of the mind that tells a person whether their actions are right or wrong. It discusses the rights and privileges of citizens and the obligations attached to them.

Corruption

Corruption includes unethical acts perpetuated for the betterment of self. It is both an illegal and anti-social behaviour. It is fraudulent and morally unjust. According to Transparency International, corruption could be seen as a form of dishonesty or criminal activity undertaken by an individual or organization entrusted with a position of authority, often to acquire illicit benefits, or the abuse of entrusted power for one's private gain. Corruption could also include all activities associated

with bribery and embezzlement of public funds. Surprisingly, it involves practices that are legal in many countries. Political corruption can occur when a public office holder or other governmental employee acts in an official capacity for personal gains. Although corruption is a global phenomenon, it has become a norm in some nations like Nigeria.

Corruption may occur on different scales depending on the amount of funds involved. It could range from small favours between a small number of people, known as petty corruption, to corruption which affects the government on a large scale, known as grand corruption, and society, including corruption as one of the symptoms of organized crime. Corruption and crime go hand in hand. Both are endemic sociological occurrences which appear with regular frequency in virtually all countries on a global scale. Nigeria is not an exception to this corruption malady. The Nigerian nation is rated as one of the most corrupt nations in the world.

Power Sector

This is the energy industry that is involved in the production and sale of energy, including fuel extraction, manufacturing, refining and distribution. The power subsector of the economy is part and parcel of the public service, which Akamere (2003) described as characterized by permanence, anonymity, political neutrality, impartiality, and conservatism. Undoubtedly, the power sector has over the years remained a melting pot of corrupt practices.

The scale of the problem is worth setting out plainly. As of 2023, Nigeria held the largest electricity access deficit of any country on earth, with about 86.8 million Nigerians lacking a grid connection. This is a distinction it has held for almost three consecutive years even as smaller, poorer economies elsewhere have managed to close their own gaps (World Bank, 2025). This is not for lack of trying to reform the sector. The federal government privatized the industry in 2013, breaking up the old Power Holding Company of Nigeria into separate generation and distribution companies with the stated aim of bringing in private discipline and fresh investment (Energy for Growth Hub, 2019). More than a decade later, national grid output has stayed close to where it started, well below what was projected for the sector at the time, and researchers who have studied the reform describe the shortfall as compounded by what they call legacy corruption, including politically connected bidders securing stakes in the privatized companies and years of poor maintenance carried over from the period of state ownership (SOAS Anti-Corruption Evidence, 2020). The distribution companies have themselves complained of losing well over a billion dollars in a single two-year stretch to unpaid bills, a sum large enough to fund meaningful infrastructure repair on its own, though the sector's revenue troubles are as much a symptom of low public trust in the companies collecting the money as they are a cause of the outages that follow (The Guardian, 2021). Corruption in the sector does not take just one shape. A detailed review of the sector identifies political corruption in how licenses and major contracts are awarded, petty corruption at the point where field staff collect payments from ordinary households, and what researchers describe as private to private corruption between companies themselves, each form carrying its own cost in outages, bribery demands, and the quiet exclusion of investors who lack the right political connections (U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Centre, October 5, 2023). Given this, the case for treating the power sector as a genuine test of ethical orientation is not hard to make. It is one thing to speak of ethics in the abstract, and another to ask whether the official approving a contract, the field officer reading a meter, or the executive negotiating a licensing deal will choose honesty when almost nothing in the system currently punishes the alternative. That, more than any other sector discussed in this paper, is where ethical orientation will be tested against the real incentives people face every day

Theoretical Framework

The ethical theoretical foundation of this paper is ethical utilitarianism. Utilitarianism is most closely associated with Jeremy Bentham, who set out the principle of utility, that an action is right insofar as it produces the greatest happiness for the greatest number, and who wrote at some length on how such a principle could guide law and government (Bentham, 1789). John Stuart Mill later refined and popularized the theory, giving it the more familiar shape, it holds in ethical and political thought today (Mill, 1863). This is not the place to discuss deontological ethics as formulated by Immanuel Kant, who argued that the rightness of an action depends on duty and principle and not on the consequences for the majority (Kant, trans. 1993). They are often mentioned together because they are the two great rival answers to one question but are answered in diametrically opposite ways. The present paper uses utilitarian rather than Kantian reasoning deliberately.

Under such a framework, the Nigerian anti-corruption programme would seek to develop policies and programmes that would create the greatest good for the greatest number of people. It is an approach that is fundamentally other-regarding rather than self-regarding. In this way, the anti-corruption programme would contribute to maximizing social utility by achieving the maximum good for every person affected by the decision. Corruption is obviously one of the worst activities by which collective resources are channelled toward a few select persons.

Methodology

As already noted, the study is descriptive and qualitative. This is why the methodology adopted in this study is mixed methods-descriptive survey, document review, and content analysis. Secondary data for the study were obtained from published and unpublished government reports, agency publications, and previous research studies. Primary data were obtained through a descriptive survey of respondents purposively selected from relevant institutions exposed to the power sector in Nigeria. Considering that this study has a national argument, respondents were drawn from the six geopolitical zones of the country to ensure that the findings are nationally representative and do not represent a local area or zone. Respondents from the Ministry of Power, ministries of energy and power at the state level, Nigerian Electricity Regulatory Commission (NERC), Rural Electrification Agency, employees of the major electricity distribution companies working within the DISCO zones, and the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) were purposively selected to participate in this study, as each of these institutions is located within the ambit of the operations of corruption in the power sector.

The questionnaire formed the major research instrument, supplemented by interviews with some respondents to obtain additional information about the phenomenon under study. The sample size was computed using Yamane's formula for the determination of sample size from a finite population (Yamane, 1967). The content validity of the instrument was ascertained by an expert in the field of study before the instrument was administered. A total of 150 questionnaires were administered, out of which 100 were returned, representing 67 percent. Each item was rated on a three-point scale of Strongly Agree, Agree, and Not Agree, as a pilot of the instrument revealed that a broader six-point scale employed in earlier drafts of the instrument yielded no meaningful use of the lower half of the scale. The data were analysed using frequency counts, percentages, and chi-square tests of independence. The level of statistical significance was set at an alpha level of .05.

Table 1

Causes of Corruption in the Power Sector

Variable	SA	A	NA	Total (%)
Lack of prompt and adequate salary payment	70	10	20	100
Greed	20	20	60	100
Low morality	10	50	40	100

Source: Field survey, 2026

Table 2

Mitigating Factors Against Corruption

Variable	SA	A	NA	Total (%)
Ethical orientation	80	10	10	100
High morality	40	20	40	100
Prompt payment of salaries	70	10	20	100

Source: Field survey, 2026

Key: SA = Strongly Agree, A = Agree, NA = Not Agree

Results and Discussion

The study sought to examine ethical orientation as a factor in sustaining the fight against corruption in Nigeria's power sector. A chi-square test of independence found that responses to the causes of corruption differed significantly across the three variables measured, $\chi^2(4, N = 300) = 114.50, p < .001$, indicating that respondents did not view lack of prompt salary payment, greed, and low morality as equally responsible for corruption in the sector. Seventy percent of respondents strongly agreed that lack of prompt and adequate remuneration was a leading cause, ahead of greed, which only twenty percent strongly agreed with, and well ahead of low morality, which only ten percent strongly agreed was a cause at all, with forty percent of respondents declining to agree that morality played a role in the first place. A similar pattern held for the mitigating factors, where responses again differed significantly by variable, $\chi^2(4, N = 300) = 38.68, p < .001$. Eighty percent of respondents strongly agreed that ethical orientation was an effective factor in fighting corruption in the power sector, the strongest endorsement of any variable measured in either table, ahead of prompt salary payment at seventy percent and high or low moral upbringing, which drew strong agreement from only forty percent of respondents and was declined outright by another forty percent. In general, the two tables tell more of a coherent than a contradictory story. Respondents were far more willing to name a structural failure, poor remuneration, as the driver of corruption than they were to blame individual moral weakness, yet those same respondents rated ethical orientation as the single most effective response available. These two results are not contradictory; according to the utilitarian framework on which this paper is based, the respondents consider corruption a rational response in a system that leaves public servants underpaid and unsupervised. Accordingly, ethical orientation should be considered in relation to other incentives in the system, such as timely and adequate remuneration, to serve as many people as possible. This is consistent with the argument put forward above about the WAI and Klitgaard's formula for monopoly, discretion, and accountability, according to which moral appeals alone can never be enough, and in that respect, the respondents to this survey seemed, in their own way, to intuit this already.

A Necessary Caution, and a Lesson from Rwanda

This paper would be doing too much if it left the impression that ethical orientation, in and of itself, can be a panacea for all forms of corruption in Nigeria. Robert Klitgaard, whose name has become synonymous with a well-known insight in the corruption literature, has argued that corruption will arise whenever an official enjoys a monopoly over a benefit, considerable discretion in allocating that benefit, and little or no accountability for the choices made (Klitgaard, 1988). It does not follow from this, however, that the official must know the difference between right and wrong. No matter how moral one person may be, if placed in a system in which no one is held accountable, one will inevitably meet a variant of oneself who is willing to bend. Conversely, even if a person is thoroughly corrupt, it will be difficult for him to get away with anything if he is placed in a system subject to constant oversight. Thus, the ethical orientation argument developed in this article has a genuine limitation: educating people about the right and wrong of their actions will be of little consequence if the system does not impose a penalty for wrongdoing. That said, a quick look at Rwanda may be instructive. Not because the history of the two countries is comparable, but because it shows that the corruption culture can change dramatically in a single generation. In the mid-1990s Transparency International ranked Rwanda alongside some of the most corrupt states in the world (American Enterprise Institute, 2022). By the time of the 2025 Corruption Perceptions Index, Rwanda scored its highest-ever rating, an achievement owed far more to institution-building and the consistent political will to prosecute offenders irrespective of rank than to moral appeals (Transparency International Rwanda, 2025). Whatever one may think about the political costs of this transformation (and reasonable people may disagree), the results with respect to corruption indicate that ethical orientation is more likely to work if it is backed by institutions that ensure that there are consequences for acts of corruption, rather than in a vacuum. This is the one thing that this paper hopes future policymaking in Nigeria will seriously consider.

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Endnotes:

Prebendalism - The concept of prebendalism, developed by the Nigerian political scientist Richard Joseph, holds that public office is a personal or communal entitlement and that office holders are entitled to use public resources for the benefit of their ethnic, kin, or patronage networks rather than apportioning these resources on any basis of merit.

Resource curse - Resource curse refers to a theory in development economics arguing that countries with abundant natural resource endowments tend to have worse governance and higher levels of corruption than those with fewer natural resource endowments, given that access to resource revenues reduces the need for wide-based public accountability.

Whistle-blower Policy (2016) - Whistle-blower Policy (2016): Initiative of the Ministry of Finance of Nigeria under which informants who provide information leading to the recovery of stolen public funds are financially rewarded; 2.5–5% of the recovered amount. Effectiveness compromised due to the nonexistence of a whistle-blower protection law.

Klitgaard's corruption formula - According to Robert Klitgaard's formula: Corruption = Monopoly + Discretion – Accountability. He explains that corruption arises when an official has a monopoly and discretion in his hands but is not adequately held to account.

Utilitarianism vs. deontology - Two contrasting ethical frameworks: utilitarianism (Bentham, Mill) judges' actions by their consequences for overall welfare; deontological ethics (Kant) judges actions by adherence to moral duty regardless of outcome. Utilitarianism vs. Deontological Ethics: According to the theory propounded by Bentham and Mill, an action is right if the consequence of that action brings about the greatest happiness or welfare of the greatest number of people. Kantian ethics focuses on the rightness or wrongness of the action itself, irrespective of its consequences.