

Research summary

The perception and response of the church to Corruption in Latin America and the Caribbean



Corruption: a challenge for Latin America and the Caribbean

Corruption in Latin America and the Caribbean is one of the most significant problems affecting people's lives and the general welfare of societies. The Corruption Perception Index 2020 (CPI 2020), published by Transparency International in 2021, reveals a grim picture of the state of corruption globally.

The problem of corruption is not exclusive to governments and their institutions but also extends to private organisations and society as a whole. The Covid -19 pandemic has highlighted and exacerbated the devastating consequences of corruption, exposing health and tax systems unable to deal with its effects.

The problem of corruption requires urgent intervention by all social actors, including religious communities who, through their faith and their churches, are fundamental to achieving the necessary change.

Our research

Tearfund is committed to working with faith-based organisations and faith communities to promote and strengthen integrity and justice in our societies in Latin America and the Caribbean. As a first step, in late 2020, we undertook some research to better understand the prevalence, causes and effects of corruption; the situation of churches in the face of this social scourge; and possible strategies and programmatic responses to combat corruption adequately and effectively.¹ The research covered ten countries in the region of Latin America and the Caribbean. All the countries in which Tearfund works were included (Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Nicaragua and Peru), as well as Costa Rica and Venezuela.

This research is an exploratory-descriptive study produced using qualitative-quantitative methodologies. It consists of a review of the literature on the topic, and surveys, interviews and focus groups with evangelical church leaders in the ten countries, enabling in-depth inquiry into the subject matter.

¹ Tearfund engaged the services of the *Departamento Ecuaménico de Investigaciones* (Ecumenical Research Department / DEI) to conduct this research. In April 2021, the DEI submitted the final report of its research into 'The perception and response of the church to Corruption in Latin America and the Caribbean'. This document is an executive summary of the final DEI report.

Corruption in Latin America and the Caribbean

Adriana Peralta Ramos tells us that corruption ‘**means obtaining personal benefit at the cost of harming, either directly or indirectly, the rights of third parties. It involves obtaining an advantage through the exercise of power, or gaining a position or economic benefit through deception, influence etc.**’

Corruption has existed in Latin America and the Caribbean since colonial times when those in the centres of power established and legitimised dishonest and immoral behaviour that became ingrained in the local culture.

The Christian church, particularly the established church, was complicit in the normalisation of these corrupt practices.

The current reality is an extremely bleak and worrying one. The following table, with Corruption Perceptions Index data from 2015-2020, shows the level of perceived corruption in the ten countries studied. It is clear that **there has been no significant progress in reducing corruption** in most of these countries, and that in fact the situation has deteriorated, especially in Honduras and Venezuela.

Table 1. Comparison of perceived corruption in the countries studied over the last five years

COUNTRY	2016		2017		2018		2019		2020		Average
	Position	Points	Position	Points	Position	Points	Position	Points	Position	Points	*
Costa Rica	41	58	38	59	48	56	44	56	42	57	57.20
Colombia	90	37	96	37	99	36	96	37	92	39	37.20
Brazil	79	40	96	37	105	35	106	35	92	38	37.00
Peru	101	35	96	37	105	35	101	36	94	38	36.20
Bolivia	113	33	112	33	132	29	123	31	124	31	31.40
Guatemala	136	28	143	28	144	27	146	26	149	25	26.80
Honduras	123	30	**	**	**	**	146	26	157	24	26.60
Nicaragua	145	26	151	26	**	**	161	22	159	22	24.00
Haiti	159	20	157	22	161	20	168	18	170	18	19.60
Venezuela	166	20	169	18	168	18	173	16	176	15	17.40

Source: Table produced by DEI on the basis of data from Transparency International (2021)

The ranking corresponds to the perceived level of corruption in the public sector in 180 countries. They are ranked in order from least corrupt to countries with the highest perceived corruption, on a scale of 0-100, where 0 means high levels of corruption and 100 means no corruption.

* Average country score obtained in the Corruption Perceptions Index from 2016–2020 on a scale of 0-100 where 0 means high levels of corruption and 100 means no corruption.

** No information.

What is the impact?

The consequences of corruption, which is deeply rooted in Latin America and the Caribbean, are devastating. It has had a profound economic, social and environmental impact throughout the region's history. The crisis of governance within institutions is taking a heavy toll on public policies, human rights and social justice in most countries.

There is a direct link between corruption and the achievement of the 2030 targets for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agreed at the United Nations in 2015. **The greater the corruption, the greater the poverty and inequality, and the lower the levels of education, health, environmental protection, water and sanitation, employment opportunities, etc.** Vulnerable populations in the most corrupt countries suffer most as a result of their needs not being met. This is currently reflected in the disproportionate impact of the Covid -19 crisis on countries with the greatest economic needs and the highest incidence of corruption.

Corruption affects the environment, with devastating consequences for indigenous and Afro-descendant

populations. Corruption has an impact on justice, thus fostering impunity. Corruption affects democracy and governance by subverting citizens' rights and civic ethos.

‘Corruption is regarded as an external phenomenon, something that is not within us. It is a phenomenon that is ‘over there’ and we are here... corruption has been normalised.’
(Interview GF2-2)

The extent of its impact on all spheres of life demonstrates the severity of the situation in Latin America and the Caribbean and the urgent need to come up with measures to tackle the problem that will involve the whole range of actors.

Addressing the issue at a structural level will enable the design and implementation of a large-scale programme that grows from the bottom up. We believe that initiating this work from within the churches and faith communities is key to achieving the necessary change.



❏ The lack of solid waste management in Haiti creates an adverse environment for health and disproportionately affects people living in poverty. Photo: Jonathan Clement/Tearfund.

What is being done to combat corruption?

According to a report from the NGO *Poder Ciudadano* (Citizen Power), there are four types of anti-corruption responses that have been implemented: institutional, judicial, citizen-led and international.

Institutional responses take the form of policy reforms and the creation of institutional systems. These institutional responses promote transparency and accountability measures; a simplification of procedures; the increasing use of systems that limit discretionary powers in procurement and contracting processes; and better tools for investigating, criminally prosecuting and litigating cases of corruption.

Judicial responses focus on the activation of criminal prosecution processes, as has been seen in several of the region's countries (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, El Salvador, Guatemala, Panama).

Citizen-led responses occur in several ways: broad-based social movements where the anti-corruption cause is closely linked to discussions around the quality of services and effectiveness of public policies; increased denouncing and public discussion of the issue; use of social networks and conventional media to expose corrupt practices (which can lead to criminal investigations); and civic activism through non-governmental organisations, either individually or by establishing coalitions to promote political, regulatory and institutional agendas.

International responses are provided through conventions and the monitoring of their implementation; financial and technical cooperation; and the promotion of transparency standards such as those of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and international commissions.

A whole raft of anti-corruption policies, rules and institutions are in place in the countries studied. The following should nonetheless be noted in this regard:

- There is a lack of monitoring systems aimed at assessing effective compliance either in public service management as a whole or for each public works contract, including in relation to staff recruitment and entry processes into public service.
- There is no public policy in the countries studied aimed at comprehensively educating people, from school right through to university level, on civic behaviour and public ethics.
- There is a notable absence of transparent and effective procedures and parameters for the implementation of citizen participation as a mechanism of social accountability and, where it is included, it is often not complied with or there are networks of complicity which, far from mitigating corruption, actually facilitate it.
- There is a notable lack of comprehensive legal frameworks providing protection for public officials and citizens who report acts of corruption.
- The regulatory framework governing corruption offences is entirely inadequate. The penalties are minor compared to the damage caused to society, especially given the misuse and misappropriation of state property that is involved.
- In many of the countries, abuse of office is not even criminalised.

From this research, it is evident that the church is not a major actor in the anti-corruption movement but is in contrast largely absent from it.



📍 In Guatemala, 49.8 per cent of children under five years of age experience malnutrition.
Photo: Caroline Trutmann/Tearfund.

The role of churches with regard to corruption

How is corruption perceived?

This research demonstrates that, according to the surveys, interviews and focus groups conducted, corruption is perceived and described in different ways. In terms of the concept itself, some see it very broadly as all dishonesty or any form of injustice. Others view it as an action caused by the pursuit of self-interest, in violation of what is right and fair. Several participants consider corruption to be an action that involves pecuniary gain, while others understand that corruption is not necessarily

financial. The indigenous focus group was notable for its different perception of corruption. This group sees systemic injustice on the part of politicians in their discrimination against indigenous peoples, ignoring and repressing their voice, culturally imposing hegemonic modernity and preventing the practising of their worldview. From a theological perspective, there was agreement that corruption is a deviation from God's will that undermines integrity and is in violation of the commandment to love one's neighbour.

What factors influence the role of churches in relation to corruption?

A key finding of the research is that the church should play a prophetic role, denouncing corruption authoritatively when confronted with it. It was argued that this is the church's moral and ethical duty when faced with corruption. The church must be involved in speaking out and acting against corruption and injustice. The survey results show that 98.8 per cent of respondents supported the church's involvement in combatting corruption, demonstrating that it is a fundamental aspect of the church's role.

Despite this resounding affirmation of the church's prophetic role, the research results show that **the church in general lacks a voice with which to denounce corruption; it silences it, justifies it and renders it invisible, to the point of normalising it within the church itself and contributing to its prevalence in society.** Most participants acknowledged that the various denominations and expressions of the church in Latin America and the Caribbean have adopted a weak, timorous or invisible position on the issue of corruption.

‘We cannot content ourselves with saying that corruption is a natural part of politics, because that same corruption affects the church. In some cases churches have focused only on aid, such as providing medical care or feeding the hungry. As Christians, we all have this moral and ethical duty, but fighting corruption is also part of it.’
(Interview ET-3)

The research **highlighted different reasons or factors that have contributed to or facilitated not only the church's failure to play a prophetic role against corruption but also its actions in tolerating and practising it.** These reasons fall into three broad categories: (a) theological and biblical factors; (b) political and economic factors; and (c) socio-cultural factors.

Theological and biblical factors include: prosperity theology (the main obstacle according to several interviewees); a traditional theology that restricts the church to preaching the gospel; a lack of training and discipleship; and the absence of a theology of integral mission.

Politically, the relationship between the church and politics, including governments, was repeatedly identified as a conduit for the proliferation of corruption. Several interviewees highlighted the church's complicity with the governments of the day whereby favours are offered in exchange for support. It was also pointed out that the church is used for electoral purposes and that it receives favours and accommodates political power. Several interviewees stated that this was a serious problem in Central American countries such as El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua.

Other political and/or economic factors include: the economic dynamic of consumption, which normalises corruption; a strong correlation between poverty and corruption; poverty wages; government neglect and failure to provide alternatives to poverty; a corrupt and unjust social system; the bureaucracy of municipal authorities; and impunity within the justice system.

In terms of **socio-cultural factors**, it was emphasised that corruption is a cultural norm. Certain behaviours and practices have been normalised and go unchallenged, evidently facilitating corruption even from an early age. The perception is that the church has normalised corruption both in its external and internal actions. Members engage in dishonest practices and even justify them biblically. Christian civil servants in the public sector behave in accordance with the prevailing culture. It was also noted that many churches are not transparent or accountable and that there is a lack of civic awareness and collective responsibility.

What can we do?

The recommendations come from different groups: Tearfund, interviewees, focus groups and the research team. In summarising, there is consensus and agreement regarding the following:



There is a need for internal transformation within the churches. This includes:

- evaluating and reflecting on theologies that place restrictions on the church's mission to speak out and act against corruption
- discipleship and training in civic education, civic ethics and citizen participation and advocacy – the issue needs to be addressed in different educational spaces: Sunday schools, youth associations, women's associations etc
- producing Bible studies and materials on corruption and faith, including liturgical material
- reviewing internal practices related to transparency and accountability
- theological training in seminaries



The church must exercise its prophetic role, denouncing injustice and corruption. This includes:

- the formation of networks of pastors and church leaders engaged in humanitarian work
- re-education from a biblical perspective for social activism and advocacy
- the recognition of the work of other anti-corruption efforts outside the church
- pastoral accompaniment of individuals and groups of Christians engaged in anti-corruption work ('a citizenship ministry')
- the identification and implementation of practical models of social accountability, and working with civil society

- sharing positive experiences so that they create a multiplier effect



The implementation of anti-corruption work requires a multi-faceted approach. This includes:

- the creation of a prayer space and a prayer movement
- a widening of the understanding of corruption as seen from the worldview of indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples
- a detailed and in-depth analysis of the situation of the churches: their history, theology, and the characteristics of their members
- thorough knowledge of the theologies of the Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal churches, especially prosperity theology
- maintaining a critical attitude and seeking different avenues and reflective approaches rooted in the immediate context. Alongside this, retaining a regional and global focus and a commitment to the poorest and most excluded groups
- mobilising Christian youth in Latin America and the Caribbean so that they take part in anti-corruption efforts and, from the perspective of their faith, become a prophetic voice

‘To be a church that is an ‘actor’ requires a praxis of justice that opposes corruption. Naturally, this will not put the church in a privileged position in relation to political power. On the contrary, following Jesus’ praxis means going against the system’s morals.’

Cornejo Hernández, 2020

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