



POLICY BRIEF

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Citizens' perceptions of trust and corruption in government institutions in South Africa

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Introduction

Public trust in government is fundamental to the stability of democracies, the effective implementation of policies, and the maintenance of social order. However, trust in government institutions across Africa, and particularly in South Africa, has been challenged by perceptions of corruption and inefficiency (Smith, 2023). This policy brief examines the trends in public trust in government institutions in South Africa, using data from Afrobarometer surveys conducted between 2011 and 2023 (Rounds 5 to 9). These surveys offer valuable insights into how public perceptions of government institutions and corruption have evolved over the past decade.

The findings are important as South Africa embarks upon a process of National Dialogue, which, among other things, seeks to rebuild trust in the institutions of government. The analysis explores South Africans' perceptions of trust in the president, parliament, law enforcement institutions (such as police and courts), voting institutions and local government. It analyses perceptions of corruption within government institutions, the level of perceived corruption, and the extent to which citizens feel they can report corruption without fear of reprisal. The goal is to understand the underlying dynamics of trust in government and inform potential policy measures aimed at improving governance and reducing corruption.

Key findings for South Africa

- **Trust in the president:** Trust in the presidential office peaked around Round 5 (2011/2013) after a hopeful national election but declined significantly in subsequent rounds due to multiple high-profile corruption scandals and perceived government inefficiency. These findings align with Smith's (2023) analysis of trust dynamics in African leadership, where trust is closely linked to perceived integrity and performance.
- **Trust in parliament:** Trust in parliament has generally mirrored trust in the president, reflecting the broader public sentiment towards political leadership. In Round 9 (2021/2023), trust in parliament was at one of its lowest points, with 73.9% of citizens expressing distrust in the institution.
- **Trust in law enforcement:** Trust in law enforcement institutions, including the police and courts, has remained consistently low across all rounds. Perceptions of police corruption and inefficiency have been major factors contributing to low trust levels. In Round 9, only 32.4% of respondents indicated that they trust the police, while 49.9% expressed trust in the courts of law.
- **Trust in voting institutions:** Trust in voting institutions, such as the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC), has been relatively stable but showed a decline between 2011 and 2023, with

only 28.3% of respondents expressing confidence in the electoral process. This decline may be linked to growing concerns about the transparency and fairness of elections, as well as the perceived ineffectiveness of electoral reforms (Patel, 2023).

- **Trust in local government:** Trust in local government has been persistently low, with respondents frequently citing poor service delivery and corruption as key reasons for their lack of confidence. In Round 9, seven out of ten (71%) respondents expressed distrust in local government officials (trusting them 'not at all' or 'just a little'), underscoring the need for improved service delivery and anti-corruption efforts at the local level (Nkosi, 2023).
- **Perceptions of corruption:** Across all survey rounds, corruption has been identified as a significant problem in government institutions. In Round 9, over 60% of respondents believed that 'most' or 'all' government officials are involved in corruption. The Office of the President and members of parliament were perceived as the most corrupt entities, with 65% and 63.1% of citizens, respectively, suggesting that most or all officials in these departments are corrupt, which has likely contributed to the low levels of trust in these institutions (Africa Review, 2013).
- **Reporting corruption:** Despite widespread perceptions of corruption, the willingness to report corruption has been limited. In Round 9, only 24% of respondents indicated that they felt they could report corruption without fear of negative consequences. This suggests a need for stronger protections for whistle-blowers and greater public awareness of reporting mechanisms (Thompson, 2023).

Trust in government institutions

The trends in trust in government institutions highlight a complex relationship between political events, governance quality and public perceptions. Trust in the president and parliament tends to rise during periods of political stability and decline sharply during times of scandal or economic hardship.

Trust in the president shows a marked fluctuation over the years, highlighting both spikes and declines influenced by national political dynamics. In Round 5 (2011/2013), for instance, trust in the president reached a peak following the 2009 national elections, which brought renewed hope for political change. However, by Round 8 (2019/2021), trust had plummeted, with approximately 60% of citizens

saying they trust the president 'just a little' or 'not at all', coinciding with allegations of corruption and a sluggish economy (Figure 1).

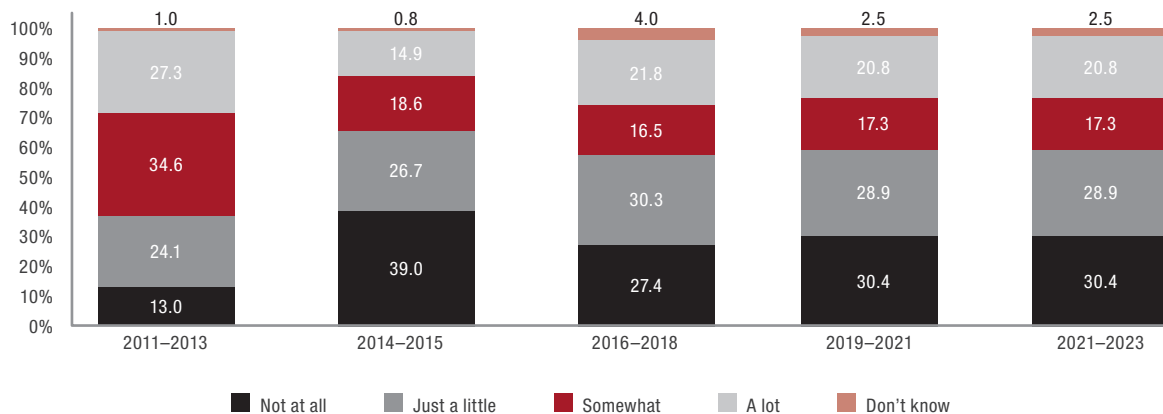
Similarly, trust in parliament (Figure 2) has been closely linked to the performance of the executive branch. Distrust in parliament increased significantly between 2014 and 2016, from 26.2% to 33% of citizens reporting that they have no trust in parliament at all. The data suggests that citizens may view parliament as an extension of the executive, rather than as an independent body capable of holding the government accountable (Bennett & Wiegand, 1994).

The observed trends in trust in government institutions are closely linked to South Africa's policy environment. The decline in trust in the president and parliament during Round 8 (2019/2021) can be partially attributed to the lack of effective anti-corruption measures and accountability mechanisms. The introduction of the Public Administration Management Act (2014), which aimed to enhance accountability and reduce corruption in government, has had limited success due to weak enforcement and insufficient political will (Africa Review, 2013). Strengthening the implementation of existing anti-corruption policies could help restore public trust in these institutions.

Trust in institutions that uphold the law has been consistently low, largely due to perceptions of corruption and inefficiency. The police, in particular, have faced criticism for their inability to address rising crime rates and for instances of abuse of power. Afrobarometer data from Round 9 (Figure 3) shows that less than one-third (32.4%) of South Africans trust the police, reflecting widespread dissatisfaction with law enforcement's ability to maintain public safety and uphold the law (Baumer, 2002). The graph indicates a slight dip from 45.3% to 33.2% in Round 7 (2016/2018), followed by stabilisation around similar levels in later rounds, underscoring a persistent scepticism toward police integrity and effectiveness.

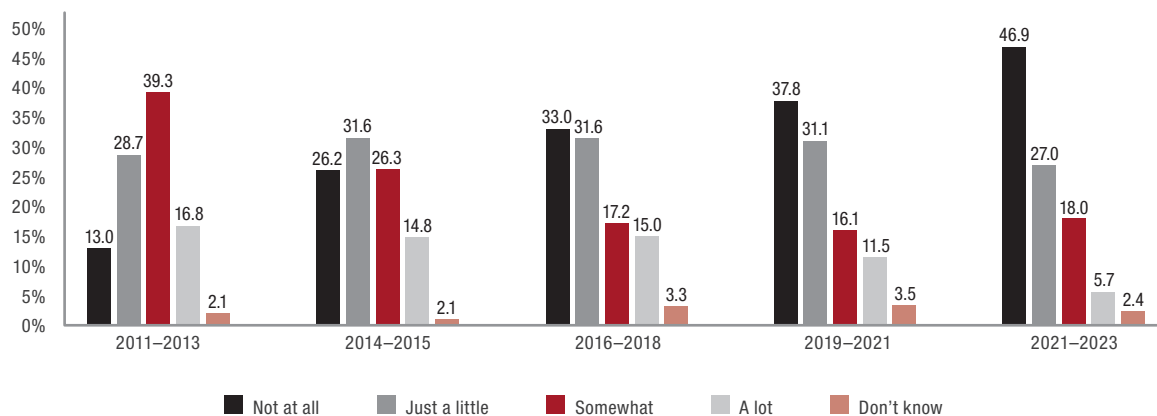
Trust in law enforcement institutions has been impacted by the perceived lack of progress in implementing the Independent Police Investigative Directorate (IPID) reforms, which were intended to improve police accountability and reduce corruption. Ensuring that IPID is adequately resourced and independent could contribute to improving public perceptions of the police and, consequently, increase trust in law enforcement (Azfar & Gurgur, 2008).

Figure 1: Citizens' perceptions of trust in the president, South Africa, 2011–2023



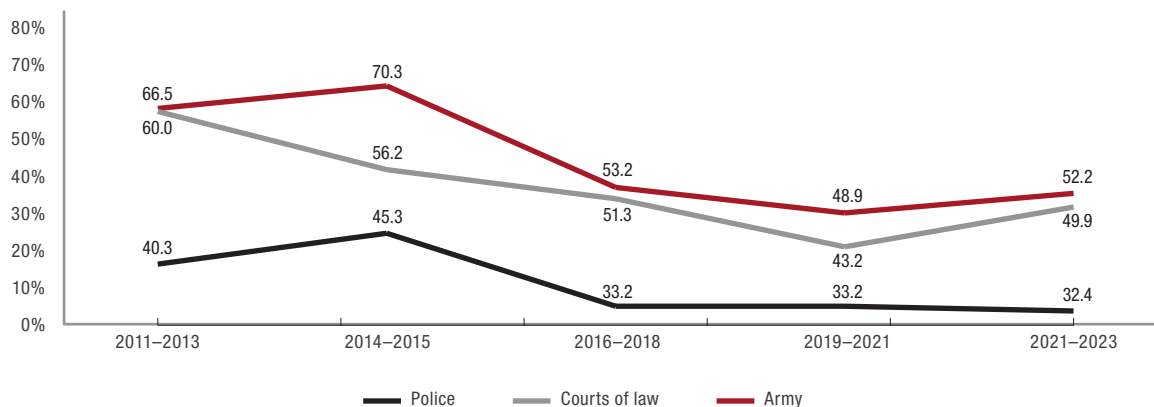
Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: the president?

Figure 2: Trust in Parliament, South Africa, 2011–2023



Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Parliament?

Figure 3: Trust in government institutions that uphold the law, South Africa, 2011–2023



Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: the police, courts of law, the army?

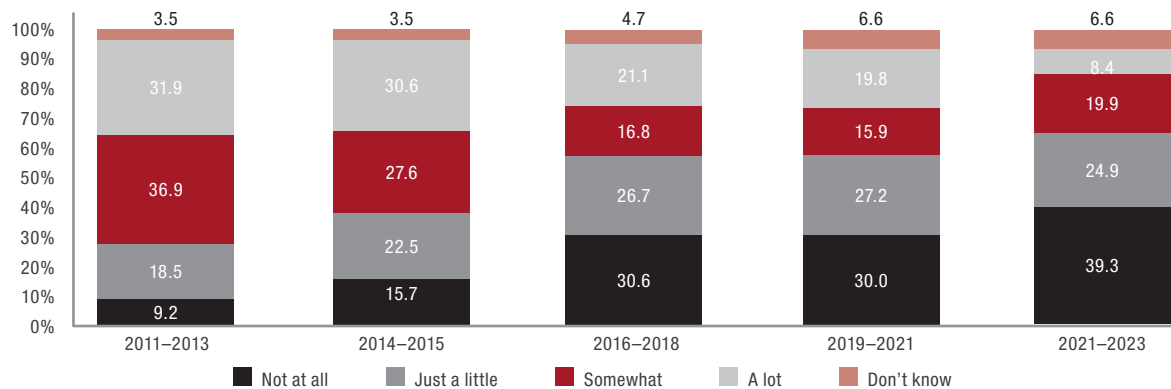
Trust in voting institutions, represented by the IEC (Figure 4), shows a noticeable decline. In Round 5, trust was high, with more than two-thirds (68.8%) of citizens indicating that they trust the IEC ‘somewhat’ or ‘a lot’. This remained stable through 2014/2015, but began to decrease significantly by Round 7 to only 37.9% who reported the same sentiments. By 2021/2023, only 28.3% trusted the IEC, which likely reflects rising concerns over electoral integrity and transparency amid broader governance challenges. As Patel (2023) notes, the perception of fair and transparent elections is a cornerstone of democratic trust, making it essential for the IEC to maintain its independence and credibility.

Despite the introduction of the Electoral Amendment Act (2020), which sought to enhance transparency in the electoral process, many citizens remain sceptical about the effectiveness of these reforms. Strengthening the independence of the IEC and ensuring transparent electoral processes are crucial

for restoring public confidence in voting institutions (Bennett & Wiegand, 1994).

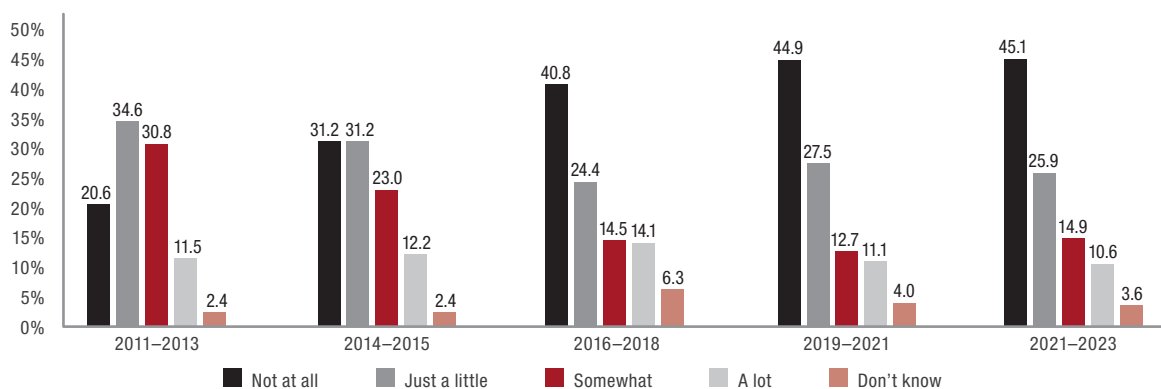
Trust in local government has been increasingly low across all survey rounds. In Round 9, only one in four (25.5%) trusted local government officials ‘somewhat’ or ‘a lot’. This low level of trust in local government reflects similar trends seen at the national level, indicating that distrust is pervasive across different tiers of government. Respondents often cited poor service delivery and corruption as key reasons for their lack of confidence in local officials. The persistent mistrust in both local and national governments highlights the systemic nature of governance challenges in South Africa, and suggests that efforts to restore public trust need to address both levels comprehensively. However, Nkosi (2023) argues that trust may not only be linked to corruption, highlighting that for local government to rebuild trust, addressing core service delivery issues and ensuring accountability are vitally important.

Figure 4: Trust in the Independent Electoral Commission, South Africa, 2011–2023



Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: the Independent Electoral Commission?

Figure 5: Trust in local government, South Africa, 2011–2023



Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: local government?

Citizens' perceptions of corruption

The data on corruption in government institutions reveals that perceptions of corruption are widespread across different tiers of government in South Africa. In 2021/2023, over 60% of respondents indicated that they believed corruption to be prevalent among, respectively, local government councillors, the police, members of parliament and the Office of the President (Figure 6). This reflects a systemic challenge in tackling corruption, which has been a consistent issue in South Africa's governance landscape.

The level of perceived corruption varies across different government institutions, with the Office of the President and members of parliament being perceived as the most corrupt (65% and 63.1% respectively). Notably, 61.4% of citizens perceive most or all police to be corrupt. This perception has serious implications for public trust, particularly in institutions responsible for maintaining law and order and delivering essential services. The high level of perceived corruption in the police force is especially concerning, as it undermines the legitimacy of law enforcement and hinders efforts to maintain public safety.

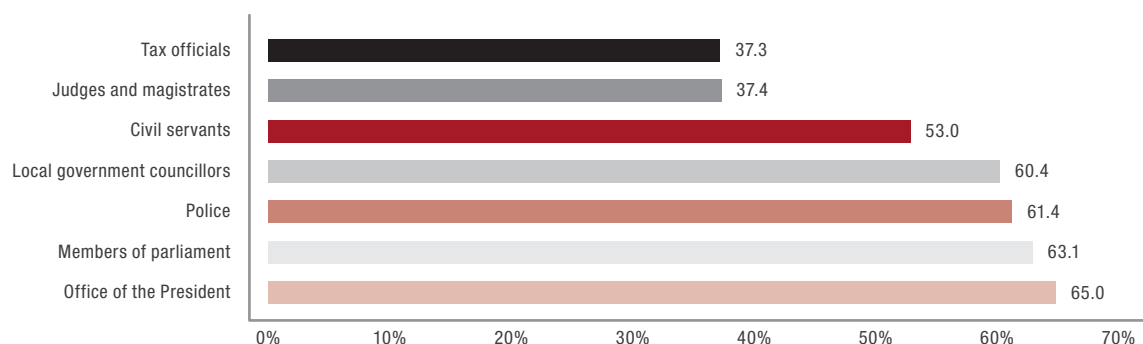
In the South African context, these perceptions are often linked to experiences of bribery, abuse of power, and lack of accountability, which have been documented in both national and international reports. The police, in particular, face a unique challenge, with corruption perceptions consistently high. This trend underscores the negative impact that

corruption has on law enforcement legitimacy, a theme highlighted by Azfar and Gurgur (2008).

The high levels of perceived corruption in national institutions mirror those at the local level, pointing to a pervasive mistrust in the ability of government to operate transparently and ethically. Figure 7 shows that in 2021/2023, more than eight in ten (81.7%) South Africans reported that corruption had increased in the past year. Addressing corruption effectively requires comprehensive reforms and strengthened oversight mechanisms at all levels of government to rebuild public trust.

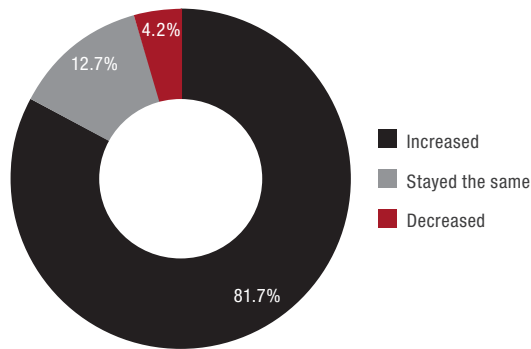
The willingness of South Africans to report corruption remains low, with only 24% of respondents in Round 9 indicating that they feel they can report corruption without fear of negative consequences (Figure 8). This low willingness to report is a significant barrier to addressing corruption and improving accountability within government institutions. Fear of reprisal, lack of trust in authorities to take meaningful action, and weak whistle-blower protections contribute to this reluctance. In South Africa, the Protection of Whistle-blowers Act (2000) was intended to safeguard those who report wrongdoing, but weak implementation has limited its effectiveness. Strengthening these protections and ensuring that citizens are aware of their rights is essential to foster a culture of accountability and transparency in government institutions.

Figure 6: Corruption in government, South Africa, 2022



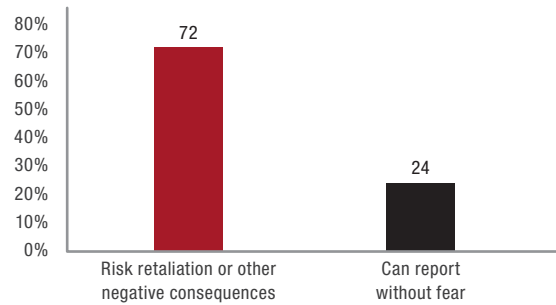
Respondents were asked: How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: tax officials, judges and magistrates, civil servants, local government councillors, police, members of parliament, the president and officials in his office?

Figure 7: South Africans' perception of the level of corruption, South Africa, 2021/2022



Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, over the past year, has the level of corruption in this country increased, decreased or stayed the same?*

Figure 8: Citizens' perception of being able to report corruption, South Africa, 2021/2022



Respondents were asked: *In this country, can ordinary people report incidents of corruption without fear, or do they risk retaliation or other negative consequences if they speak out?*

Analysing the impact of perceived corruption on trust in government

In order to examine the effect of perceived corruption on sentiments of trust in government institutions, an Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression analysis was undertaken. This analysis aimed to identify factors that influence public trust in government institutions in South Africa, and examines how perceptions of corruption, government performance, and socio-demographic variables influence the trust index (dependent variable) in South African government institutions.

Table 1, which shows only the significant findings ($p < 0.05$), indicates that high perceived corruption is not a significant predictor of lower levels of trust in government ($\beta = -0.03$, $p = 0.7220$). The age group 56–65 shows a significant positive association with trust ($\beta = 0.1509$, $p = 0.033$), suggesting that older South Africans may have higher levels of trust in government. This trend might be reflective of generational differences in experiences with government and institutional efficacy. Education level generally shows negative but non-significant coefficients, suggesting that higher education is not a strong independent predictor of trust. This aligns with some studies indicating that, in high-corruption contexts, higher education levels may correlate with lower trust due to increased awareness of government shortcomings (Johnson, 2023). The Lived Poverty Index does not show significant effects

on the trust index. All poverty levels (low, moderate and high) yield non-significant coefficients, suggesting that while poverty might affect individual perceptions of government, it does not independently predict trust in institutions when controlling for other factors

Importantly, the findings reveal that perceptions of government performance are the strongest predictors of trust, with respondents who approve or strongly approve of the performance of the president, members of parliament (MPs), the premier and local government councillors showing significantly higher trust levels, with strong approval of the president ($\beta = 0.364$, $p < 0.001$) and MPs ($\beta = 0.449$, $p < 0.001$) being particularly influential. This underscores the importance of perceived government performance in fostering trust and suggests that efforts to improve governance must focus on delivering tangible, effective leadership.

These results could point to the idea that positive evaluations of government effectiveness can play a larger role in shaping trust than negative perceptions of corruption, and emphasise that citizens may prioritise government performance over corruption in determining their trust, a sentiment echoed in literature on trust in governance (Patel, 2023).

Table 1: OLS regression on the association between perceived corruption and perceived trust in government institutions | Key findings | South Africa | 2021/2023

	Coefficient	Standard error	Level of significance
Trust Index	-0.0358	0.1007	0.7220
Age			
56–65	0.1509	0.0706	0.0330
Performance of the president			
Approve	0.2721	0.0623	0.0000
Strongly approve	0.3640	0.0934	0.0000
Performance of MPs			
Approve	0.2460	0.0751	0.0010
Strongly approve	0.4492	0.1221	0.0000
Performance of your premier			
Disapprove	0.1654	0.0746	0.0270
Approve	0.3450	0.0770	0.0000
Performance of your local government councillor			
Approve	0.2590	0.0612	0.0000
Strongly approve	0.2939	0.1084	0.0070

Note: Only results that were significant at $p < 0.05$ are presented.

Conclusion and recommendations

This policy brief provides valuable insights into the factors influencing trust in government institutions in South Africa. High levels of perceived corruption are not significantly associated with lower trust. Positive evaluations of government performance play a crucial role in building trust. To restore and sustain public trust, the government must focus on enhancing transparency, improving public services and fostering a culture of accountability. By addressing these issues comprehensively at both national and local levels, South Africa can work towards a more trustworthy and effective system of governance.

The following recommendations are proposed:

- Strengthen anti-corruption measures:** The significant negative relationship between perceived corruption and trust highlights the urgent need for robust anti-corruption measures. The government should prioritise the implementation of effective anti-corruption frameworks at both national and local levels. This could include empowering independent anti-corruption bodies, enhancing oversight and ensuring accountability for those involved in corrupt practices.
- Improve government performance:** Given the strong positive impact of perceived performance on trust, it is crucial for government officials at all levels to focus on delivering quality public services. Efforts to enhance transparency, improve efficiency and engage with citizens in meaningful ways are essential to building trust. Regular assessments of public service quality and responsiveness can help identify areas for improvement. While reducing corruption is important, delivering tangible results in areas such as healthcare, education and infrastructure may more effectively build trust. Increasing transparency can include making government budgets and spending reports publicly available and involving citizens in decision-making processes (Africa Review, 2013).
- Enhance whistle-blower protections:** The low willingness to report corruption highlights a significant barrier to accountability. Strengthening whistle-blower protections, as stipulated in the Protection of Whistle-blowers Act, and ensuring that citizens are aware of these protections are critical steps in encouraging the reporting of corruption. Public awareness campaigns and support systems for whistle-blowers could help foster a culture of accountability.

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