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Corruption in public administration: a systematic review

La corrupción en la gestión pública: una revisión sistemática

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Abstract

This research consists of a study on the factors contributing to the persistence of corruption in Peruvian public administration and its economic, social, and political consequences. To this end, a qualitative approach was adopted and a systematic descriptive review was conducted of eighteen (18) articles selected between 2018 and 2024 from databases such as SciELO, applying the PRISMA (2020) methodology. The results indicate that corruption has multiple causes, originating in governance failures, lack of transparency and accountability, ethical procrastination, clientelism, perceived impunity, and social normalization. Its consequences are evident in economic losses, the impact on sustainable development, the erosion of public trust, the weakening of the social and institutional fabric, and the undermining of democracy. It concludes that corruption is a complex and deep-rooted phenomenon that stems from institutional weaknesses, questionable policies, ethical failures, and social normalization; it hinders citizen well-being and the country's full development and generates a vicious cycle with devastating consequences.

Keywords: corruption, causes and impact on public management, governance

Resumen

Esta investigación consiste en la realización de un estudio sobre los factores de persistencia de la corrupción en la gestión pública peruana y sus consecuencias económicas, sociales y políticas. Para ello, se adoptó un enfoque cualitativo y se efectuó una revisión sistemática descriptiva de dieciocho (18) artículos seleccionados entre 2018 y 2024, provenientes de bases de datos como SciELO, en donde se aplicó la metodología PRISMA (2020). Los resultados señalan que la corrupción es multicausal, originada en fallas en la gobernanza, falta de transparencia y de rendición de cuentas, procrastinación ética, clientelismo, impunidad percibida y normalización social. Sus consecuencias se evidencian en pérdidas económicas, afectación del desarrollo sostenible, erosión de la confianza pública, debilitamiento del tejido social e institucional y socavamiento de la democracia. Se concluye que la corrupción es un fenómeno complejo y arraigado que proviene de debilidades institucionales, políticas cuestionables, fallas éticas y normalización social; obstaculiza el bienestar ciudadano y el desarrollo pleno del país, y genera un círculo vicioso cuyas consecuencias son devastadoras.

Palabras clave: corrupción, causas e impacto en la gestión pública, gobernanza

Introduction

Corruption, defined as the illicit exploitation of public power for personal gain, represents a global issue that undermines sustainable progress and the stability of democratic systems. Ranging from the diversion of state resources to bribery and extortion, corruption takes multiple forms and manifests at all levels of government and across various sectors of society, resulting in severe economic, social, and political consequences (Banco Mundial, 2018).

Olásolo and Galain Palermo (2022) argue that corruption, in its various forms, continues to pose a significant challenge to global governance and sustainable development. Their analysis emphasizes the need for multidisciplinary and comparative approaches to effectively understand and combat corruption at the transnational level. Similarly, Mungiu-Pippidi (2015) explores how societies can develop control mechanisms and promote good governance. Her work underscores the importance of strengthening democratic institutions, fostering transparency in management, ensuring accountability for actions, and cultivating a culture of honesty within the public sector.

In the case of Peru, corruption in public management represents a historical and persistent challenge. From the colonial era to the present, the country has witnessed numerous scandals involving public officials, businessmen, and high-ranking politicians. Notable cases such as the scandal involving the Brazilian company Odebrecht, which included the payment of bribes to Peruvian officials to secure infrastructure project concessions

(IDL-Reporteros, 2017), and the corruption cases during Alberto Fujimori's government (Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación, 2003), have weakened the credibility of institutions in the eyes of the public, provoking profound feelings of indignation and frustration.

The corruption network known as "Los Cuellos Blancos del Puerto," uncovered in 2018, involved high-ranking officials within the Peruvian judicial system, including judges and prosecutors. The investigation revealed a series of crimes, such as influence peddling and the granting of judicial favors, which compromised the independence of the judiciary (IDEHPUCP, 2019). Moreover, the health crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic was exploited to commit acts of corruption related to the irregular procurement of medical equipment and other supplies, involving public officials at various levels and generating outrage due to the illicit exploitation of the health emergency (Contraloría General de la República del Perú, 2021).

To better understand the scope of this issue, it is important to define corruption as the abuse of a public office, power, or delegated trust to obtain undue benefits—be they economic, political, or of another nature—for oneself, family, friends, or interest groups, to the detriment of the common good and the integrity of the system. According to Klitgaard (2019), corruption occurs when there is monopoly, discretion, and a lack of accountability. This implies that public officials may act without effective oversight, facilitating corrupt practices.

Public management encompasses the set of activities, processes, and decisions undertaken by the state and its institutions to administer public resources, implement policies and programs, and meet the needs and demands of society, aiming for general well-being and sustainable development. According to Osborne and Gaebler (2018), public management should focus on innovation and efficiency to address social needs. Furthermore, Pollitt and Bouckaert (2020) emphasize the importance of accountability and transparency in public management, suggesting that these are key to effective governance.

In light of this context, the present study poses the following question:

What factors contribute to the persistence of corruption in public management in Peru?

This question seeks to identify the underlying causes of corruption in the country, as well as propose viable and effective solutions for its prevention, detection, and sanctioning.

The relevance of this research lies in its potential to generate useful knowledge for the formulation of public policies and the implementation of concrete measures that contribute to strengthening transparency, accountability, and integrity in the Peruvian public sector. By gaining a better understanding of the dynamics of corruption, more effective strategies can be designed to promote public management that is efficient, equitable, and results-oriented for the benefit of citizen well-being. Moreover, this study aims to contribute to the public debate on corruption in Peru, fostering greater awareness and citizen engagement in the fight against this serious issue.

The objective is to analyze the factors that contribute to the persistence of corruption in public management through a literature review. A specific goal is to analyze the consequences of corruption on the economic, social, and political development of the country. This analysis is crucial, as corruption not only affects the effectiveness and credibility of public institutions but also undermines citizens' trust in the democratic system.

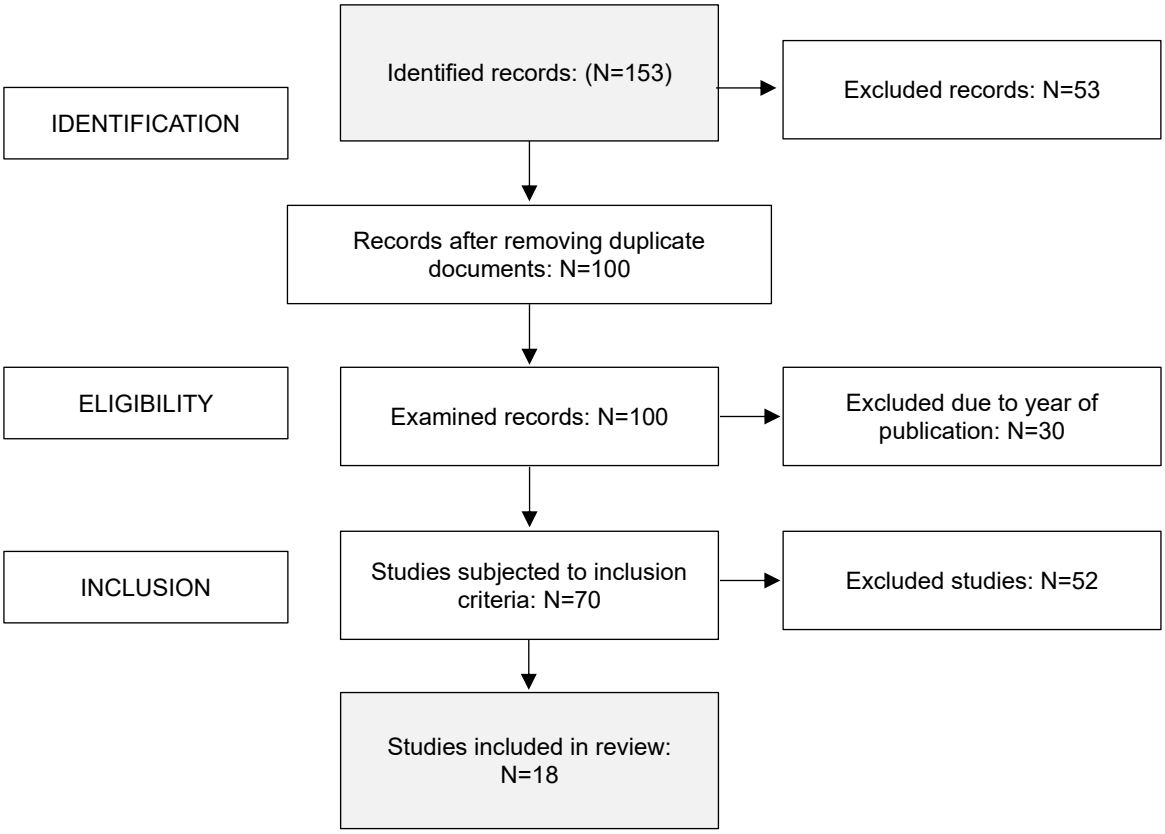
Methodology

A qualitative approach was adopted to analyze corruption from a legal perspective, following the PRISMA 2020 model. This approach ensures transparency and rigor in the systematic review (Mendizábal, 2023). Data collection was conducted through the analysis of bibliographic sources, prioritizing scientific publications from indexed journals in recognized databases, such as SciELO. A descriptive systematic review was performed, focusing on the exhaustive collection of concepts and definitions regarding corruption in public management. This approach required a structured framework to highlight the multiple perspectives on the issue. Following Garrard's (2017) methodology, the process was methodical and explicit, minimizing bias and ensuring replicability.

During the initial phase, a search was conducted in academic databases, such as SciELO, focusing on journals specialized in social and political sciences. Keywords such as "corruption" and "management" were used to ensure a comprehensive understanding of relevant information. The preselected articles were evaluated based on their thematic relevance and methodological quality, following the search equation ("corruption" AND "public management") ("corruption factors" OR "nepotism" OR "misappropriation") AND ("economic development" OR "social development" OR "political development") ("impact of corruption" AND "public administration").

In this second phase, inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied to select articles that were relevant, current, and of high quality. Articles published between 2018 and 2024, in English or Spanish, were chosen, excluding those that did not address the study topic or were over ten years old. This process ensured the relevance of the reviewed literature. A total of 153 relevant articles were selected, which underwent thorough analysis.

Figure 1
Flowchart of the article selection process according to the PRISMA method



Results and discussion

Table 1
Database according to the year of cited and referenced articles

No.	Author (s)	Year	Country	Objective	Sample	Results
01	Cardona, L., Ortiz, H., & Vázquez, L.	2018	Mexico	Analyze the relationship between corruption and human rights violations in Mexico.	Information on complaints from the CNDH and observations from the Superior Audit Office.	Significant relationship between levels of corruption and violations of human rights.
02	Chamorro Mejía, R., & Chamorro Llantoy, S. P.	2021	Peru	Analyze how procrastination of ethical principles influences corruption in the educational sector in Junín, Peru.	Educators and administrators in the educational sector in the Junín region.	A significant relationship was found between the procrastination of ethical values and the increase in corruption.
03	Meza, L., & Pérez, C	2021	Latin America (general)	Examine how corruption affects governance in Latin America.	Case analysis in various Latin American countries.	Corruption weakens institutions, affects public trust, and reduces the effectiveness of governance.

04	Murillo Tacuri, C. J.	2022	Ecuador	Examine the economic repercussions of corruption in Ecuador.	Study based on economic data and corruption cases in various sectors of the country.	Corruption generates significant economic losses and affects sustainable development in Ecuador.
05	Quispe, G.	2021	Peru	Examine the connection between governance and corruption in public administration in Peru.	Public management data and surveys of officials and citizens.	Identified deficiencies in governance that facilitate corruption in public management.
06	Pastrana Valls, A.	2019	Latin America (general)	Examine how the perception of corruption influences citizens' democratic satisfaction.	Political and economic contexts of various Latin American countries.	The perception of corrupt officials affects approval of the democratic regime.
07	Vílchez-Chau, F. J.	2021	Peru	Analyze manifestations of corruption and their effects on public administration in Peru.	Case studies and data on corruption in various public institutions.	Identification of various forms of corruption and their impact on administrative effectiveness.
08	Ramírez, C & Ferreira, L.	2023	Mexico	Examine the elements that favor corruption at the municipal level and its effects on communities.	Data from various municipalities and surveys of officials and citizens.	Identification of factors such as the absence of transparency and accountability that foster corruption.
09	Oliveira, B. & Torres, A.	2024	Brazil	Examine the relationship between political clientelism and corruption in Brazil.	Analysis of clientelism cases in different regions of Brazil.	Identification of how clientelism fosters corrupt practices in Brazilian politics.
10	Solano, I. & Duarte, M.	2022	Costa Rica	Examine tactics employed by Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in their fight against corruption.	Case studies of various CSOs and their initiatives.	Identification of achievements and obstacles faced by CSOs in their anti-corruption efforts.
11	Estévez, A.	2021	Venezuela	Analyze the different dimensions of corruption in public management in Venezuela.	Case studies and data analysis on corruption in public institutions.	Identification of various dimensions of corruption and its effect on public management.

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12	Shack, J., & Reyes, L.	2022	Peru	Analyze the economic cost of corruption and functional misconduct in the Peruvian context.	Economic data and cases of corruption in various public institutions.	Identification of significant losses due to corruption in the public sector.
13	Mendoza, E. & Castillo, G.	2023	Latin America (general)	Examine the impact of corruption on public infrastructure projects in the region.	Case studies of infrastructure projects in several Latin American countries.	Identification of delays, cost overruns, and quality failures in projects due to corruption.
14	Rodríguez Puerta, M. J.	2023	Spain	Examine corruption as a collective action challenge and promote public integrity and citizen participation.	Examination of perceptions of corruption and its social effects.	Acceptance of corruption promotes tolerance and deteriorates social relations.
15	Zavaleta Cabrera, E.	2023	Peru	Examine the causes and consequences of corruption in public administration.	Case studies and data analysis related to corruption in various institutions.	Identification of factors that perpetuate corruption and its impact on public management.
16	Ibáñez, R. & Montero, A.	2023	Spain	Examine how citizens perceive impunity and corruption in the judicial system.	Surveys and interviews with citizens and legal professionals.	High perception of impunity and distrust in the judicial system among the population.
17	Fernández, P. & Pastás, E	2023	Latin America and the Caribbean	Analyze how corruption affects sustainable development in the region.	Study of data and cases on corruption and sustainable development.	Corruption hinders progress towards sustainability and equity goals.
18	García Chavarría, O.	2018	Panama	Explore the interrelation between democracy, development, corruption, and the influence of social movements.	Case studies in Panama and other Latin American countries.	Corruption undermines democracy and development, while social movements can be agents of change.

The analysis of the reviewed literature, comprising eighteen studies conducted in various countries across Latin America and Spain between 2018 and 2024, allowed for the identification and systematization of key factors contributing to the persistence of corruption in public management, as well as its multifaceted consequences on the economic, social, and political progress of a nation.

Regarding the main objective of analyzing the factors contributing to the persistence of corruption in public management, the results converge on a complex interaction of institutional, political, ethical, and social elements. Various studies highlight deficiencies in governance and public management as breeding grounds for corruption (Meza & Pérez, 2021; Quispe, 2021; Vílchez-Chau, 2021; Zavaleta Cabrera, 2023; Estévez, 2021). Specifically, the lack of clarity and accountability emerges as a recurring factor that fosters corrupt practices in the municipal sphere and other areas of administration (Ramírez & Ferreira, 2023).

Furthermore, it is suggested that the procrastination of ethical values in the educational sector can significantly impact the increase in corruption (Chamorro Mejía & Chamorro Llantoy, 2021). Politically, clientelism is noted as a factor that drives corrupt practices in the public sphere (Oliveira & Torres, 2024). A crucial aspect for understanding persistence is the perception of impunity and the normalization of corruption, which generate social tolerance and weaken community ties and trust in institutions, including the judicial system (Rodríguez Puerta, 2023; Ibáñez & Montero, 2023). These findings suggest that the persistence of corruption is not due to a single cause but rather a web of institutional weaknesses, individual and collective ethical failures, and political dynamics that create a conducive environment for its reproduction.

Concerning the specific objective of analyzing the consequences of corruption on economic, social, and political development, the collected evidence underscores the devastating impact of this phenomenon.

In the economic realm, corruption generates significant losses, affecting sustainable development (Murillo Tacuri, 2022; Shack & Reyes, 2022; Fernández & Pastás, 2022). It manifests in direct economic costs, cost overruns, and delays in public infrastructure projects, and even failures in quality (Mendoza & Castillo, 2023). This not only implies a waste of public resources but also distorts markets and disincentivizes productive investment.

From a social perspective, corruption erodes public trust and weakens social cohesion (Meza & Pérez, 2021; Rodríguez Puerta, 2023). The perception of corrupt officials negatively affects citizens' democratic satisfaction (Pastrana Valls, 2019). Additionally, corruption may be intrinsically linked to human rights violations, emphasizing its impact beyond mere financial or administrative concerns (Cardona et al., 2018). Distrust in the judicial system, exacerbated by the perception of impunity, further deteriorates the relationship between the state and citizens (Ibáñez & Montero, 2023; Rodríguez Puerta, 2023).

In the political and administrative sphere, corruption weakens state institutions and reduces the effectiveness of governance and public administration (Meza & Pérez, 2021; Vílchez-Chau, 2021; Estévez, 2021; Zavaleta Cabrera, 2023). It undermines the foundations of democracy and development, creating a vicious cycle where institutional weakness facilitates more corruption, which in turn further weakens institutions (García Chavarría, 2018; Meza & Pérez, 2021). The deficiencies in public management identified in studies on Peru, for example, illustrate how corruption hinders efficient administration aimed at citizen well-being (Quispe, 2021; Vílchez-Chau, 2021; Zavaleta Cabrera, 2023).

The studies confirm that the persistence of corruption in public management is a multi-causal phenomenon, fueled by institutional weaknesses, questionable political practices, ethical failures, and social normalization. Its consequences transcend economic impacts, negatively affecting social development by eroding trust and community fabric, and weakening the political sphere by undermining democratic institutions and governance effectiveness.

This research analyzed the elements that help maintain corruption in public management, especially in Peru, along with its devastating consequences. The findings confirm that corruption is a deeply rooted, multi-causal phenomenon driven by a complex interaction of institutional, political, ethical, and social elements.

Key factors identified include deficiencies in governance and public management (Meza & Pérez, 2021; Zavaleta Cabrera, 2023), validating the premise of Klitgaard (2019) regarding the proliferation of corruption in scenarios of monopoly, discretion, and, crucially, a lack of accountability. The recurring lack of transparency (Ramírez & Ferreira, 2023) and procrastination of ethical values (Chamorro Mejía & Chamorro Llantoy, 2021) also contribute to the issue. A critical aspect is the perception of impunity and the social normalization of corruption (Rodríguez Puerta, 2023; Ibáñez & Montero, 2023), which generates tolerance and weakens trust in institutions. In the Peruvian context, cases such as Odebrecht and "Los Cuellos Blancos del Puerto" exemplify how these systemic weaknesses and impunity perpetuate the cycle.

The consequences of corruption are extensive. Economically, it generates significant losses, cost overruns in projects, and disincentivizes investment (Murillo Tacuri, 2022; Mendoza & Castillo, 2023), hindering sustainable development. Socially, it erodes public trust and weakens social cohesion (Meza & Pérez, 2021), affecting democratic satisfaction (Pastrana Valls, 2019) and even linking to human rights violations (Cardona, Ortiz, & Vázquez, 2018). Politically, it weakens state institutions and reduces governance effectiveness (Vílchez-Chau, 2021; Estévez, 2021), creating a vicious cycle where institutional weakness facilitates more corruption (García Chavarría, 2018), undermining the foundations of democracy.

These findings imply the need for comprehensive strategies that transcend mere punitive measures. It is essential to strengthen clarity and accountability, promote ethical education, and ensure the independence and effectiveness of the judicial system to combat impunity. Active citizen participation is crucial for monitoring public management.

While this review is exhaustive, its limitations include a descriptive focus and reliance on existing literature, which hinders establishing direct causality. Future research could explore the impact of specific anti-corruption reforms in Peru or the role of new technologies in promoting transparency.

Conclusions

Corruption in public management is a multi-causal and persistently rooted phenomenon, driven by a complex interaction of institutional weaknesses, questionable political practices, individual and collective ethical failures, and a concerning social normalization. Its consequences are devastating and transcend economic impacts, negatively affecting social development by eroding public trust and social fabric, and weakening the political sphere by undermining democratic institutions and governance effectiveness. Essentially, the persistence of corruption lies in a web of factors that create a conducive environment for its reproduction, impeding citizen well-being and the comprehensive development of the country.

Future lines of research could deepen the understanding of the corruption problem and seek more effective solutions: It is proposed, first, to thoroughly investigate the mechanisms of impunity, both legal and political and social, that perpetuate the lack of exemplary sanctions in high-profile corruption cases in Peru, analyzing the reasons why certain processes do not advance or conclude. Additionally, it is crucial to explore the role of technology, including tools such as blockchain, artificial intelligence, and big data, to strengthen mechanisms of clarity, oversight, and accountability in Peruvian public management, identifying their challenges and opportunities. Finally, further investigation into citizen perception and participation in the anti-corruption struggle is essential, assessing citizens' willingness to actively engage in reporting, monitoring, and social control mechanisms, and identifying barriers and facilitators for greater effective participation.

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