

Anti-Corruption Helpdesk Answer

Public Integrity and Peacebuilding in Post-Conflict Societies

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The potential contribution of public-integrity measures to peacebuilding lies in changing how public power is exercised in post-conflict societies. Given the well-established relationship between corruption and conflict, reforms that make governance more impartial, accountable and inclusive may help address some underlying drivers of conflict, including exclusion, weak institutional legitimacy, limited state capacity and illicit political and economic networks. However, the available evidence on the direct impact of specific public integrity measures on peacebuilding remains limited and does not support confident conclusions that individual interventions themselves produce peacebuilding outcomes. Their effects also depend heavily on context: reforms can be weakened by informal norms and political settlements or applied selectively in ways that deepen distrust and instability. Public integrity is therefore best understood as contributing to the institutional foundations of sustainable peace rather than as a direct means of producing it.



Query

How can public integrity and anti-corruption measures contribute to peacebuilding in post-conflict societies?

Main points

- In some peace processes, corruption, patronage and state capture have been tolerated as the price of ending immediate violence. The resulting arrangements may produce conditions of “no war, no peace” rather than sustainable peace.
- Public integrity matters because institutions determine how power and resources are distributed, whether rules are applied impartially, and whether citizens can challenge abuse.
- Direct evidence linking specific public integrity measures to peacebuilding outcomes remains limited. For example, there is little evidence that simply establishing an anti-corruption agency increases social cohesion or reduces conflict risks.
- Corruption can nevertheless aggravate conflict drivers. It is therefore plausible that public integrity measures that reduce corruption support peacebuilding indirectly by addressing these factors.
- Design and implementation of integrity measures matter. When they are applied selectively or weaponised, they can be used to target opponents and deepen distrust rather than support peacebuilding.
- Participatory and civil society-led approaches can complement state-led reforms by widening participation and creating additional accountability channels.

Caveats

The paper asks how public integrity and/or anti-corruption measures can contribute to peacebuilding and under what conditions they are most likely to do so.

#1 The paper is primarily concerned with societies in which large scale organised violence has ended or significantly declined. However, because much of the literature on corruption and peacebuilding concerns fragile and conflict affected settings, evidence from such contexts is also used where it helps identify mechanisms or risks relevant to more stable post-conflict societies.

#2 The paper focuses primarily on public integrity measures undertaken through public institutions, including measures relating to enforcement, public administration, political finance, public financial management and oversight. Where relevant, it also considers selected participatory, civil society, and collective action approaches that may complement these measures. It does not attempt to provide a comprehensive review of bottom-up anti-corruption or social accountability interventions.

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Introduction

Peacebuilding and public integrity

Peacebuilding

There is no universally accepted definition of peacebuilding. Some definitions restrict peacebuilding to interventions undertaken after a conflict, while broader definitions include conflict prevention and activities undertaken throughout the conflict cycle. Different organisations have also tended to define peacebuilding in accordance with their own mandates and priorities (Barnett et al. 2007: 36).

Galtung (1969) distinguished between negative peace - understood as the absence of weaponised conflict - and positive peace, which is the absence of “structural violence” (Galtung 1969: 183). From this perspective, peacebuilding is not limited to stopping or preventing fighting, but also involves addressing the conditions, such as group based political exclusion, that help drive conflict. This broader understanding of peace has since become more widespread. Following the end of the Cold War, for example, the UN defined post-conflict peacebuilding as ‘action to identify and support structures that strengthen peace and prevent a relapse into conflict’ (UN 1992: 2). In 2016, the UN General Assembly adopted the broader concept of “sustaining peace”, which was considered “...*a process to build a common vision of a society*” in which the needs of all segments of the population are considered (UN 2016: 2). This Helpdesk answer will apply this broader understanding of peace, focusing on how public integrity can strengthen the institutional and social conditions that allow societies to manage conflict without violence.

Public integrity

For the purpose of this paper, we will use the OECD definition of public integrity. The OECD defines public integrity as “*the consistent alignment of, and adherence to, shared ethical values, principles and norms for upholding and prioritising the public interest over private interests in the public sector*” (OECD 2020: 17). Public integrity is a wider concept than corruption, which is typically defined as the abuse of entrusted power for private gain. While corruption focuses on the misuse of power, public integrity also encompasses the institutional norms, values and arrangements that promote the consistent prioritisation of the public interest. In this paper, corruption is therefore treated as one manifestation of failures of public integrity.

Public integrity and peacebuilding

The relationship between public integrity and peacebuilding is widely regarded by practitioners as important, although its effects are difficult to establish empirically. Public integrity is only one of many factors that may affect peace, while corruption and violent conflict can reinforce one another (Hopp-Nishanka et al 2022). Unchecked corruption may deepen injustice, exclusion and grievances, while conflict weakens institutions and creates further opportunities for corruption (Hopp-Nishanka et al 2022: 2-3). These feedback effects make it difficult to treat public integrity as a separate cause of either conflict or peace.

Nonetheless, the United Nations and World Bank's *Pathways for Peace* provides a useful starting point for understanding the relationship. The report argues that violent conflict becomes more likely when grievances arising from exclusion are combined with the capacity of groups or political leaders to organise and mobilise violence. Whether disputes escalate into violence depends partly on how institutions respond: whether they address grievances through inclusive and lawful processes or reinforce perceptions of injustice and exclusion (United Nations, World Bank 2018: xxii-xxiii).

The report identifies four 'arenas' in which access to power, resources and services is frequently contested: political power and governance; land and natural resources; public services; and security and justice. Corruption, weak rule of law, and extractive governance (see below) can intensify pressures within each of these arenas. Arguably, corruption may therefore act as a "driver of drivers" or a "risk multiplier". Corruption deepens exclusion, weakens confidence in institutions and makes disputes over public authority and resources harder to manage peacefully (United Nations, World Bank 2018: 121-122).

A similar argument appears in Acemoglu and Robinson's *Why Nations Fail* (2012), where they make a distinction between inclusive and extractive institutions. Inclusive institutions constrain and distribute power while 'extractive' institutions concentrate power and rents among a narrow elite. The latter enables the capture of resources, economic rents, and political power. This produces inferior economic outcomes, but also becomes a system of political economy in and of itself (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012).

Public integrity therefore matters because public institutions determine how power and resources are allocated, whether rules are applied impartially, whether citizens can challenge abuse and whether the government can deliver security and services. When these functions systematically favour particular groups or political networks, they can reproduce exclusion, weaken legitimacy, and make grievances harder to resolve peacefully.

The evidence considered in this paper operates at different levels. At the broadest level, a substantial body of research links governance failures,

corruption, exclusion and weak institutional legitimacy to risks of violent conflict and difficulties in sustaining peace (United Nations, World Bank 2018; White et al 2025). A second body of evidence identifies mechanisms through which corruption can aggravate other recognised conflict drivers such as group-based inequality and exclusion, weak institutional legitimacy, limited state capacity and illicit economies. Evidence becomes considerably thinner, however, when moving from these broader relationships to the effects of individual integrity measures on conflict and peace. It is therefore important to distinguish evidence that corruption affects conflict risks from evidence that a particular intervention or mechanism (such as an asset declaration system) independently improves peacebuilding outcomes.

Governance risks in post-conflict societies

The end of armed conflict rarely represents a clean break with the forms of governance that characterise conflict. A peace agreement may provide a framework for ending immediate hostilities, but informal networks and practices formed during the conflict often continue to influence the post-conflict political order (Cheng, Zaum 2012: 1).

Post-conflict institutions may also have limited capacity to prevent, investigate and sanction abuses. Administrative, legal and judicial institutions may be understaffed, underfunded or captured by particular factions all while the state may struggle to provide security, justice and other public goods consistently across its territory and population. Under these conditions, wartime elites may be well positioned to convert or formalise their power, for instance by taking up positions within the post-conflict state (Cheng, Zaum 2012).

Formal reforms may change laws and organisations, but the underlying reality of who holds power may continue to determine how institutions work in practice (Hopp-Nishanka et al. 2022: 5).

This creates a dilemma that is present in most countries undertaking reform in the aftermath of violent conflict. Accommodating powerful groups may help end violence in the short term, but the resulting arrangements may also entrench patronage, selective enforcement, illicit economies and political control over public resources (Cheng, Zaum 2012; Hopp-Nishanka et al. 2022).

The short term stability-integrity trade-off

One way of understanding this problem is through the concept of a political settlement. A political settlement describes the underlying distribution of power and how that shapes the way institutions work in practice. Constitutions and laws may describe how authority is formally supposed to be exercised, whereas the political settlement is also concerned with underlying power (Khan 2018: 1-2).

Political settlements, elite bargains, or power sharing agreements are not inherently corrupt. However, post-conflict agreements may give former armed actors access to political office and public resources in order to deter them from spoiling a fragile peace process. International actors have often accepted the resulting corruption, state capture, continuance of illicit activity and patronage as an uncomfortable, but necessary price of ending violence (Cheng, Zaum 2012: 5; Hopp-Nishanka et al 2022: 4).

Arguably, such bargains sustain a quasi-stable condition of “no war, no peace” (or negative peace) (Forster 2024: 6; Cheng, Zaum 2012: 7-8).

Liberia: Buying peace

Under the transitional arrangements established in 2003, positions in government and public institutions were distributed among the former government, armed movements, and political parties. This gave former belligerents access to the political and economic benefits of public office. Cheng and Zaum (2012) argue that international negotiators accepted these arrangements because ending the violence was the overriding priority. Access to office and resources helped secure the cooperation needed to end large scale fighting, but also created opportunities for wartime actors to preserve their power through the post-conflict state (Cheng, Zaum 2012: 9-11).

North Macedonia: stability after accommodation

North Macedonia provides a contrasting example of a comparatively stable post-conflict political settlement. The 2001 Ohrid Framework Agreement ended the conflict and introduced a power sharing framework intended to accommodate the country's ethnic Albanian population more fully within political and public institutions. The settlement is widely regarded as having reduced the risk of renewed conflict and improved minority representation (Vankovska 2026: 179). At the same time, its longer term governance record has been more mixed: the political system has become segmented along ethnic lines, with strengthened patronage politics (Vankovska 2026: 179).

Thus, the settlement has been successful in securing negative peace, with no return to sustained armed conflict since 2001, while deeper improvements in accountability, civic participation and democratic governance have not been achieved (Vankovska 2026: 194).

Corruption and stability in the longer run: entrenchment of patronage

While there may be a defensible argument that corruption can create incentives for maintaining stability in the short term, over the longer, the political arrangements that initially contribute to stability can become increasingly difficult to reform. Where access to public goods and opportunities is distributed through partisan, ethnic or sectarian networks, these arrangements can themselves become drivers of conflict.

Cross national evidence suggests that governance quality matters significantly for durable peace. Hegre and Nygård analyse country level data from 1960 to 2008 and examine seven dimensions of 'good governance': bureaucratic quality, rule of law, corruption, economic policy, military involvement in politics, political exclusion and repression, and formal political institutions. They find that the risk of renewed conflict declines considerably faster in better governed countries. In their estimates, conflict recurrence is approximately twice as likely under poor governance after six to eight years of peace and three times as likely after twenty years (Hegre and Nygård 2013:1).

More generally, the central problem is one of entrenchment: arrangements that helped accommodate powerful actors at the end of a conflict can gradually become self-reinforcing systems of political and economic control.

Lebanon

Lebanon is often cited as an example of how a political settlement intended to manage conflict can become so entrenched that it produces a lasting gridlock. The 1989 Taif Agreement ended the Lebanese civil war and reorganised the country's confessional power sharing system. Since then, political competition has, to a large extent, continued to be structured around sectarian parties. Public employment, contracts and access to services have consequently become important resources through which political elites maintain clientelist networks and political support (Resimić 2025).

This system has affected the functioning of accountability institutions. Sectarian political arrangements have contributed to patronage, clientelism and forms of state capture, while political resistance, weak institutional capacity and poor implementation have limited the effectiveness of newer anti-corruption bodies and legislation (Resimić 2025).

Political marketplaces

An especially fragile form of patronage can arise where political loyalty depends on continually distributing money, offices or opportunities to powerful actors. De Waal (2015; 2017) describes such systems as "political marketplaces" - systems where political loyalties and services are exchanged for material rewards, while formal institutions become a means through which these resources are obtained. For instance, in South Sudan, oil revenues have played an important part in highly militarized patronage systems in which state resources have been used to buy elite loyalty. Over time, this "political marketplace" has become fiscally unsustainable, and competition over state rents and political loyalty contributed directly to violent conflict (Spatz, Sarkar, De Waal 2021). Political marketplace theory tends to be used mostly in the study of highly fragile conflict settings, and, as an analytical concept, has been used by researchers in the Horn of Africa.

Stabilitocracy

Another term which analysts have used to describe this trade-off between stability and governance, is 'stabilitocracy'. Developed particularly in relation to the Western Balkans and the region's EU integration process, the concept describes political systems in which leaders gain external legitimacy by presenting themselves as guarantors of domestic and regional stability, often, in spite of lacking democratic accountability and rule-of-law standards (Bieber 2018). International partners may tolerate or lend legitimacy to clientelist or semi-authoritarian governments because they are guarantors of stability or regional cooperation. Corruption, clientelism and patronage are widely considered features of such systems. Stabilitocracies generally hold elections, retain some form of formal democratic institutions but may have hybrid or semi authoritarian features (Bieber 2018: 176).

Serbia and Montenegro have frequently served as the paradigm cases for the "stabilitocracy" thesis in the Western Balkans, precisely because both illustrate how external actors have tolerated illiberal governance practices in exchange for the perceived stability these governments provide on issues of regional priority, such as migration management, security cooperation, and, in Serbia's case, the Belgrade–Pristina dialogue. These cases illustrate how external support for governments perceived as guarantors of stability can coexist with concerns about democratic backsliding, clientelism, and weak rule of law (Pavlović 2016).

Thus 'stability' can become identified with the survival of particular officeholders. Anti-corruption mechanisms may be weakened, activated selectively against opponents or displayed as evidence of reform without changing underlying power relations. Stabilitocracy is therefore not the same as a short-term peace compromise; it describes the prolonged conversion of stability into a justification for concentrated power and limited accountability (Bieber 2018: 176).

Bosnia and Herzegovina: Stabilitocracy and state capture

Bosnia and Herzegovina is an example of how a post-conflict political settlement can maintain a negative peace (absence of organised violence) while patronage becomes entrenched within public institutions. The 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement ended Bosnia and Herzegovina's war and established an extensive power sharing system. Politics has continued to gravitate around ethnonational parties representing primarily Bosniak, Croat and Serb constituencies. Critics have argued that Bosnia and Herzegovina continues to experience widespread political influence over public employment, state owned enterprises, procurement and oversight institutions. Access to public resources is, allegedly, frequently used to sustain party networks and political loyalty (TI BiH 2025; BTI 2026). Political parties also exert influence over institutions responsible for oversight and enforcement, contributing to weak accountability and difficulties in constraining political control over public resources (TI BiH 2025).

The public integrity-stability dilemma

The same conditions that make integrity reform necessary can also make it politically difficult. Measures that restrict access to public office, contracts, revenues or protection may alter the distribution of benefits on which a post-conflict settlement rests. Powerful actors may therefore obstruct reforms that threaten their interests or, in more fragile circumstances, mobilise resistance against them (Cheng, Zaum 2012: 7-9).

This does not imply a simple choice between tolerating corruption and risking renewed violence. Indeed, there is a risk in both addressing and ignoring corruption - a risk that may grow over time (UNODC 2025). Instead, design of reforms or of integrity/anti-corruption programmes need to consider who benefits from existing arrangements, which stabilising functions those arrangements may perform and how measures can be introduced without abrupt, potentially destabilising changes (Hopp-Nishanka et al 2022: 7). Hopp-Nishanka et al (2022: 10) distinguishes between three approaches to working with anti-corruption in peacebuilding. First, peacebuilding actors can “work around” corruption: trying to avoid the topic and focusing only on peacebuilding. Secondly, they can “work in” corruption by trying to be sensitive to corruption dynamics that may undermine peacebuilding further down the line. Third, they can work with both conflict and corruption by designing peacebuilding interventions that address the drivers of both.

Peacebuilding endeavours that do not wish to ultimately undermine themselves need either to address corruption directly or to be sensitive to corruption dynamics and their long-term impacts. In such cases, anti-corruption should be addressed early, but gradually and with an eye to conflict sensitivity. Peace processes can establish initial commitments and identify early entry points without attempting to transform the entire political order at once. The objective is thus to prevent temporary accommodations from becoming permanent systems of exclusion while avoiding reforms that unintentionally destabilise an already fragile settlement (UNODC 2025: 10).

Mechanisms linking corruption and conflict

The relationship between public integrity, corruption, and conflict is multidimensional and highly dependent on context. Corruption may contribute to conflict risks, while conflict can also change the nature and forms of corruption (Hopp-Nishanka et al. 2022: 5). The mechanisms discussed below should therefore be understood more as links, or mechanisms, than deterministic causal effects.

The *Pathways for Peace* report identifies four recurring “arenas of contestation” in which grievances and violent conflict frequently emerge: power and governance; land and natural resources; service delivery; and security and justice (United Nations and World Bank 2018, p. 141). Arguably, public integrity cuts across these arenas: corruption affects who has access to political influence, who obtains public resources and public services as well as, in many cases, protection and justice. While corruption may not necessarily be an independent cause of conflict, it can reinforce dynamics of exclusion, perceptions of unfairness, service delivery and institutional distrust (UN, World Bank 2018: 158-160).

Particularistic governance and horizontal inequality

The first mechanism concerns patronage and inequality between groups. Corruption and lack of public integrity are inherently particularistic and partial. This can strain relations between groups on bases such as ethnicity, religion and political conviction, which weakens social cohesion and makes it harder for state institutions to mediate impartially between different constituencies (Jenkins et al. 2020: 9).

Such partiality may also produce so called horizontal inequality: inequality between culturally defined groups or groups whose members share a common identity (Stewart et al. 2008). These inequalities may be economic, political, or social in nature. Horizontal inequality has many causes, and corruption and patronage should not be treated as its sole explanation (ethnic hatred, for example, may also play a role). Corruption can, however, reinforce existing inequalities when it gives politically connected groups better access to public offices, services, and resources (Stewart et al. 2008).

Horizontal inequality itself does not necessarily produce war or violence. The conflict lies partly in how these differences are perceived and mobilised. Perceptions of unequal treatment can be particularly important in transforming inequality into grievance. This works partly through narratives that elites construct

to frame inter-group inequality as unfair and assign blame to another group or the state, and partly through diffuse grievances, including perceived corruption and dissatisfaction with public services, that erode trust in the state and heighten a sense of injustice, even where they are not narrowly about group-based inequality (UN, World Bank 2018: 122-124).

Institutional legitimacy, trust and the social contract

A second mechanism that links a lack of public integrity to conflict is the perceived legitimacy in the exercise of public authority. A functioning social contract depends not only on the state's ability to perform its state function (e.g. deliver security and basic services), but also on whether citizens regard states as legitimate entities that have the right to exercise authority (Gemperle 2021:2). Corruption can lead to a loss of that mutual recognition and cause declining confidence in the state's ability to deliver services, which can become potential sources of political instability in conflict affected settings (UNODC 2025:5).

Corruption may also affect legitimacy comparatively: citizens may judge public institutions against other actors - such as armed groups - that claim to offer an alternative form of order (Bak 2023). Islamist violent extremist groups, who openly challenge state legitimacy, make use of government corruption, abusive law enforcement and security services, as well as failures of justice and service delivery, in their propaganda to replace those nation states with new, more rightful ones (caliphates, emirates or other Islamic entities) (Bak 2023:4-9). After all, such caliphates may be considered better at exercising their statehood and more rightful at exercising their authority.

Citizens interact with the 'state' in numerous places in everyday life, such as in schools, health facilities as well as in encounters with law enforcement. Legitimacy is therefore also constructed in large part based on the experience of these encounters. Corruption and abuse tend to make such encounters negative (UN, World Bank 2018:158-160).

Survey evidence also suggests a possible connection between personal experiences of corruption and attitudes towards violence. In a study of Afrobarometer data, Gillanders and van der Werff (2021) find that respondents who reported paying bribes were more likely to express permissive attitudes towards violence - political as well as interpersonal and domestic (Gillanders, van der Werff 2021).

State capacity, services, justice and security

A third mechanism linking governance to conflict and peacebuilding operates through state capacity, i.e. the practical ability of public institutions to carry out decisions and provide services. Corruption can weaken this capacity by siphoning off resources (Jenkins et al. 2020: 9), which can be particularly critical

after conflict. In these situations functioning institutions are needed both to manage disputes over power and resources and to provide essential public goods such as security and justice.

Particularly in the immediate aftermath of conflict, corruption can have a negative effect on security and justice. Corruption can weaken the capacity to provide security. For instance, if salaries, equipment, and other resources are diverted, police and military may lack the capacity to operate (UNODC 2025). Collusion may place coercive resources or official protection at the disposal of criminal or armed networks (White et al 2025). This can, for instance, produce “hybrid” security arrangements in which state officials and security personnel cooperate with criminal, paramilitary, or other armed actors. Such networks can penetrate public institutions and, in some circumstances, end up contesting state authority (White et al 2025: 26-27).

Illicit economies and the material capacity for violence

Corruption may contribute to conflict by giving armed and criminal actors money, official protection and access to illicit markets. Cooperation from public officials and current or former security personnel can allow illicit activities to continue and expand, while security forces may align with particular criminal or armed groups. Such relationships can weaken state authority, expand black markets, and enable criminal organisations to accumulate political as well as economic power (White et al. 2025: 26-27).

These connections can also increase the material capacity for violence. Corruption can allow non-state actors to protect revenues from illicit trade, launder criminal proceeds, and evade enforcement. The resulting resources may then be used to finance weapons, recruitment, and other operations (Bak and Jenkins 2023). In Mali, for example, the protection of trafficking routes has depended on both armed group control and the complicity of state officials, while parts of the state and security apparatus have collaborated with traffickers and organised criminal networks (White et al. 2025: 28-29).

Similar dynamics can occur in settings characterised by organised criminal violence rather than conventional armed conflict. In Mexico, criminal groups have developed collusive relationships with local officials that can provide access to state protection and help entrench control over illicit markets. Recent evidence shows that, in high crime municipalities, criminal groups used violence against rival political candidates to protect cooperative incumbents, while re-elected mayors in some of these areas were more likely to be associated with corruption and misuse of public funds (Weller 2025: 6). Likewise, in Colombia, paramilitary groups have allegedly developed alliances with political elites in parts of the country, using violence and coercion to influence elections while allied politicians provided protection and state resources (Nieto-Matiz 2023).

The relationship can also operate in the opposite direction. Conflict can create or entrench illicit economies, allowing powerful criminal actors to emerge and become embedded within state institutions. If peace processes fail to transform these conflict era economies, illicit markets can continue to provide livelihoods and groups that operate in these markets may continue to wield significant influence (Cheng, Zaum 2012).

Social norms and self-reinforcing corruption

The final mechanism is perhaps best understood as a feedback process that can sustain the pathways described above. Where people expect others to use personal connections or pay bribes, they may feel compelled to do so as well. Even people who disapprove of corruption may participate in acts of corruption when they believe that others are doing so (Kubbe et al 2024:430). Corruption can thus be reinforced by expectations that others are engaging in it, making the system self-sustaining and resistant to conventional legal and institutional reform (Kubbe et al 2024:427).

Social norms may also operate more indirectly. Rather than prescribing a corrupt act itself, broader expectations concerning loyalty or reciprocity can create conditions in which corrupt practices are more tolerated. In a study of natural resource governance in the Philippines, Nash et al (2023) found no evidence that direct social norms were driving corruption. They did, however, identify a set of indirect norms that helped create an environment of inaction (Nash et al. 2023).

These dynamics may be particularly relevant in conflict-affected and post-conflict settings. Alongside pre-conflict formal institutions, informal systems of authority may develop during conflict. There may be competing expectations about what holding public office entails, and officials can face pressure to use their position and access to benefit their constituents in ways that may be considered corrupt (Jackson 2026). Practices described formally as patronage, nepotism or conflicts of interest may, in fact, be seen as mere social obligations (Jackson 2026).

From a peacebuilding perspective, this is significant because such expectations can potentially reproduce the particularistic forms of governance. If officials are expected to favour members of particular political or ethnic groups, access to state resources, security or political influence may continue to depend on group membership (Jackson 2026). Social norms and informal institutions can therefore provide one mechanism through which patronage networks and unequal distributions of public resources become self-reinforcing.

Norms may also matter to peace more broadly than through corruption alone. Using World Values Survey data, Bayerlein et al. (2025), for instance, find that societal endorsement of democracy, tolerance and gender equality is significantly associated with lower levels of violent conflict, while gender equality is also associated with higher interpersonal trust. The study does not examine integrity

related norms specifically, but it supports the broader proposition that different societal norms are associated with different dimensions of both peace and anti-corruption.

This social norm element has implications for the effectiveness of public integrity reforms. Legal and institutional reforms may change the formal rules without changing the informal expectations that shape how those subject to them behave. For example, conflict of interest rules or enforcement institutions may have limited effect if officials continue to face strong pressures to favour patrons or remain silent about misconduct. Nash et al. (2023) argue for analysing corruption as an integral part of a wider system. Social norm analysis can help identify some of the underlying systems that drive behaviour.

At the same time, social norms should not necessarily be divided into 'good' and 'bad' norms. Informal arrangements may fulfil important functions that states or formal institutions cannot necessarily fulfil. Anti-corruption interventions in conflict-affected settings should therefore take into account whether disrupting norm driven practices can actually have destabilising or damaging effects (Jackson 2026).

Strengthening public integrity in post-conflict settings may thus require assessing, and addressing, collective expectations. Top-down integrity measures may not always be the best way to address these, and therefore, participatory and collective action approaches may provide crucial complementary measures. Selected approaches are discussed in the following two sections.

Public integrity measures and their potential contributions to peacebuilding

The sections below examine selected measures and attempt to map out how they may interact with the conflict related mechanisms discussed in the section on mechanisms linking corruption and conflict.¹

An integrity system consists of the laws, institutions and practices intended to prevent, detect, investigate and sanction misconduct (OECD 2020: 18). Alongside the legal framework, it may include anti-corruption agencies, law enforcement bodies, prosecutors, courts, supreme audit institutions, financial intelligence units, tax authorities, electoral oversight bodies and ombuds institutions.

These institutions perform different functions, but their effectiveness depends partly on how they operate together. An audit finding, for example, will have limited consequences if it cannot be investigated; an investigation may accomplish little if prosecutors are unwilling or unable to bring a case or courts cannot adjudicate it impartially. Public integrity enforcement therefore depends on a functioning chain of prevention, detection, investigation, prosecution, adjudication and sanction (OECD 2020:175).

Broader cross-national evidence supports attention to the quality of the overall institutional environment. Hegre and Nygård (2013) find that, following conflict, the risk of armed conflict declines more rapidly in countries with stronger governance. Their analysis covers several dimensions of governance, including bureaucratic quality, the rule of law and corruption, and finds that these less formal aspects of governance are at least as important as formal democratic institutions in explaining conflict recurrence. The relationship also remains after accounting for economic development (Hegre, Nygård 2013:1).

Peace agreements themselves have incorporated anti-corruption through a relatively broad range of institutional mechanisms. Forster identifies explicit anti-corruption provisions in 140 agreements signed as part of 62 peace processes between 1990 and 2023. The most common approaches involved commitments to implement anti-corruption measures or reform within particular sectors. Integrity and anti-corruption provisions featured in peace agreements also tend to

¹ The amount of available peacebuilding evidence varies considerably between measures. Differences in the depth of treatment partly reflect differences in the available evidence.

include transparency and disclosure requirements, legal reform, audit institutions, anti-corruption commissions and other enforcement bodies, alongside reforms of the civil service, procurement, security sector and judiciary. Peacebuilding practice has therefore generally treated corruption as a cross institutional governance problem rather than one that can be addressed through a single specialised agency (Forster 2024:17-22).

Justice reform

Before specialised anti-corruption institutions, such as anti-corruption agencies or courts, can operate effectively, the wider justice system must be capable of enforcing integrity rules and sufficiently independent to apply them impartially (OECD 2020: 174). Prosecutors must be able bring cases, courts must be able to adjudicate those cases and judgments must be implemented in practice. Weak institutional capacity can prevent suspected misconduct from resulting in effective enforcement, while corruption, political interference or institutional capture can make enforcement selective (OECD 2020: 174).

Justice sector reform in post-conflict settings has taken several forms, such as support for case management systems, judicial training, and support to the staffing of justice institutions (see UNDP 2012).

Reforms in post-conflict settings must also address judicial autonomy and independence, civilian oversight, and democratic accountability. A World Bank review of justice reform, for instance, finds that programmes tend to concentrate on outputs that are easy to measure or quantify in a Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) framework, such as legislation, training and case management systems all of which tend to be ‘technical’ issues (World Bank 2012:6). At the same time, insufficient attention has been given to more difficult underlying governance problems that may weaken the judiciary, such as addressing the incentives of actors capable of obstructing reform (World Bank 2012: 6)

Justice reform during El Salvador’s peace process

El Salvador illustrates both the possibilities and limitations of justice sector reform. Measures associated with the 1992 peace settlement established a National Judicial Council and professionalised judicial careers (Kurtenbach 2019:63). Changes to the appointment system subsequently introduced nine-year terms for Supreme Court judges and the staggered renewal of the Court (Kurtenbach 2019:65). Over time, greater autonomy within parts of the judiciary made it possible to reopen cases concerning serious human rights violations committed during the conflict (Kurtenbach 2019:67). Nevertheless, personnel

continuity and resistance from powerful former armed actors and their political allies limited the transformation of institutional practices (Kurtenbach 2019:67).

Anti-corruption agencies and law enforcement

The United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC) requires states to ensure the existence of bodies responsible for corruption prevention and specialised authorities responsible for combating corruption through law enforcement (UN 2004, articles 6 and 36). Anti-corruption agencies are specialised public bodies mandated to prevent, investigate and, in some cases, prosecute corruption. Some focus on prevention and public education; others operate as specialised units within the police or prosecution service. Others again concentrate primarily on policy development and policy coordination. International standards do not prescribe any specific model, and the specific setup may depend on the existing institutional landscape and what makes sense in that context (OECD 2013:25-27).

Beyond anti-corruption agencies, supreme audit bodies, tax authorities as well as other elements of the 'integrity system/infrastructure' may also perform important preventive or enforcement functions. Anti-corruption agencies therefore require functioning relationships with other institutions that underpin the rule of law, including law enforcement agencies, prosecutors, courts, supreme auditors, tax authorities and financial intelligence units (OECD 2013: 26-27).

Specialised anti-corruption enforcement has several plausible connections to peacebuilding. First, enforcement that reaches high level actors may signal that access to power does not automatically confer immunity, and that public authority is exercised in the public interest. This could strengthen confidence in public institutions. Second, from a peacebuilding perspective, investigating embezzlement, procurement fraud and related offences may also help protect resources intended for public services and other government functions. In other words, anti-corruption laws and their enforcement can help build state capacity. This is, however, an indirect pathway, which appears not to have been empirically tested.

Empirically, however, the positive relationship between the presence of anti-corruption agencies (or its equivalents) and state legitimacy is difficult to establish. First and foremost, there is no clear evidence that the presence of a specialised anti-corruption body leads to lower levels of corruption overall. Moreover, many do not enjoy the operational autonomy, mandate, and legal powers required to be effective (Jenkins et al 2021:1). But even if effective, anti-corruption agencies may inadvertently undermine state legitimacy by exposing widespread corruption, thereby contributing to higher perceptions of corruption (Gemperle 2021:1). The effects of anti-corruption laws and agencies therefore

depend both on their efficiency and their impartiality, as well as whether their achievements in the fight against corruption can avoid creating a perception of higher levels of corruption (Gemperle 2021:8).

At the same time, selective or politically motivated enforcement may reinforce perceptions that public institutions serve particular factions rather than society as a whole (Chêne 2012: 7; UNODC 2025: 10; Gemperle 2021: 8).

Guatemala's International Commission against Impunity

Guatemala's International Commission against Impunity (CICIG) provides both a promising and a cautionary example of the nexus between public integrity enforcement and peacebuilding.

CICIG was not a conventional domestic anti-corruption agency, but, rather, an independent, internationally backed commission that operated under Guatemalan law and worked with domestic prosecutors and police. CICIG's origins can be traced to commitments (made during the peace process that ended Guatemala's armed conflict) to dismantle clandestine security organisations and state embedded crime networks that obtained growing influence during the civil war. CICIG worked with national prosecutors to investigate these networks, support prosecutions, and recommend reforms to domestic law enforcement and judicial institutions (Schwartz 2024: 40).

CICIG supported investigations filed more than 120 cases involving over 1,500 people and achieved a fairly impressive conviction rate. It was successful in exposing high level corruption among those who had long enjoyed impunity (Schwartz 2024: 42). It was also instrumental in developing specialised courts as well as introducing legal tools, including witness protection, that enabled more convictions (Schwartz 2024: 40). Despite what is seen by many as an impressive start, its longer-term legacy is mixed. Investigations generated a strong counter reaction from threatened political and economic elites (known as the 'Pacto de Corruptos'), and CICIG's mandate was ended in 2019. Some of the investigative and legal instruments it helped establish were subsequently used by national prosecutors to target former anti-corruption officials and opposition members (Schwartz 2024: 44).

Building impartial and professional public administration

Personnel management measures have formed part of post-conflict settlements. In Forster's (2024) review, civil service and public administration reform was the most frequently identified anti-corruption reform, appearing in 23 peace agreements. Agreements have included codes of ethics and professionalism,

background verification, vetting, and provisions for dismissing officials. Their inclusion shows that peace agreements have sometimes treated recruitment, professional standards and personnel oversight as part of the anti-corruption agenda (Forster 2024).

Personnel reform nevertheless presents a particular dilemma after conflict. Political leaders may allocate public sector positions to former combatants, political supporters or members of competing factions to maintain a coalition or to reduce the risk of violence reemerging. Such ‘political’ appointments may help preserve a political settlement in the short term, but they may also leave a state with a workforce that does not possess the professionalism that is required to be effective. In a range of post-conflict cases reviewed by Blum and Rogger (2021: 260), public services frequently expanded rapidly through the recruitment of relatively unskilled employees while continuing to lack qualified professional staff.

A professional public administration generally requires transparent recruitment, clear qualification criteria, and some degree of autonomy. Merit based personnel systems can reduce opportunities for patronage and nepotism, while codes of conduct, integrity training, and proportionate disciplinary procedures can set standards for public employees (OECD 2020: 104). Conflict of interest and asset declaration measures can supplement these arrangements but are considered separately in this Helpdesk paper.

The relevance of these measures to peacebuilding has not been studied, and remain ‘plausible mechanisms’. Nevertheless, over the long term, employing the right people, with the correct skills, may strengthen state capacity. In addition, limiting discretion over recruitment and promotion may reduce opportunities to distribute public employment principally as a reward for political loyalty or to fill institutions with loyalists.

Personnel vetting

Vetting is a potentially important element of personnel reform. Vetting has as its objective to assess whether public officials meet defined standards for their position. In post-conflict settings, excluding officials who were individually responsible for serious human rights violations, corruption or other grave misconduct may signal a break with the past. At the same time, however, vetting can become an outright political purge when exclusion is based on broad categories, such as party membership or group identity. Such an approach may also run the risk of removing officials with critical skills, which can have negative effects on state capacity.

Iraq’s de-Ba’athification process

Iraq’s de-Ba’athification process illustrates some of the risks involved in moving fast with systematic reform of the public administration. Following the fall of

Saddam Hussein and the Ba'ath regime, tens of thousands of public employees were dismissed primarily on the basis of their rank in the Ba'ath Party or seniority in the civil service. The removal of experienced personnel-led to growing capacity problems in parts of the administration (Sissons and Al-Saiedi 2013: 32). The process also contributed to perceptions of collective punishment among many Sunni Arabs. Critics of the process argue that the process was overly focused on rank in the party rather than individual responsibility in the crimes of the Ba'ath regime and was more of a purge than a vetting programme (Sissons and Al-Saiedi 2013: 31).

Vetting of East Germany's public employees

East Germany provides a contrasting example from a more stable transition. Following reunification, public employees were screened for involvement with the former regime, including collaboration with the Stasi. Vetting, however, formed part of a broader institutional reform process rather than a wholesale removal of personnel based simply on formal affiliation. The process was overall comparatively more just as it relied on individual responsibility, objective criteria and had due process safeguards (Duthie 2007).

Ethics and integrity training

Personnel reform can also include ethics or integrity training. Such measures are intended to strengthen officials' ability to recognise and respond to ethical dilemmas. Evidence that ethics training by itself produces sustained reductions in corruption is limited. Training is generally most useful as one element of a broader integrity system rather than as a substitute for organisational rules, incentives, and accountability mechanisms (OECD 2020). Training measures should therefore be understood as one element in a larger package of institutional changes.

Conflicts of interest and asset declarations

Conflict of interest rules and asset declarations represent further integrity measures to build impartial governance. Asset and interest declaration systems are related but distinct. The objective of interest declarations is to gain information on when a public official's private interests could influence their actions. Declarations require officials to disclose their interests and potentially withdraw from particular decisions (UNODC 2025: 24). Having a conflict of interest is not corrupt as such, but rather a situation where impartiality is at risk. Asset and income declarations can also be used to identify unusual changes in wealth and possible illicit enrichment (Jenkins 2015: 4-5; Dominguez 2024: 5, 9–10).

The anti-corruption logic of these measures is thus both preventive and detective in nature. Conflict of interest rules seek to prevent private interests from affecting public decisions before misconduct occurs, while asset declarations provide information that oversight bodies can use to identify conflicts, unexplained wealth or discrepancies requiring investigation (Jenkins 2015: 4, 6; Dominguez 2024: 14). Regular disclosure may also reinforce expectations towards officials that private interests must be distinguished from public duties (Jenkins 2015: 4). Disclosure alone, however, cannot prevent unethical conduct.

Although causal evidence remains limited, there is some empirical evidence that more comprehensive financial disclosure regimes are associated with better corruption outcomes. A panel data study covering 91 countries found that the financial disclosure regulations were positively associated with improvements in the control of corruption (though it is possibly correlation rather than causation) (Vargas, Schlutz 2016: 458-459). Nevertheless, effectiveness may depend heavily on implementation: declarations need to contain useful information and even then are valuable only to the extent that there are institutions capable of investigating and enforcing sanctions (Jenkins 2015: 5-6; Dominguez 2024: 11-14).

From a peacebuilding perspective, the connection between disclosure regimes and peace is again indirect and does not appear to have been empirically tested. The potential relevance of asset and interest disclosures lies in constraining particularistic uses of public office and policy capture. In post-conflict settings, disclosure and conflict of interest rules could be one tool to support the building of impartial and inclusive institutions.

There are nevertheless important limitations and risks. Overly broad declaration requirements can overwhelm weak oversight institutions. Systems therefore need to prioritise powerful and/or high-risk positions (Jenkins 2015: 5; Dominguez 2024: 9). The bodies that verify declarations also require both independence, and access to relevant and updated data (Dominguez 2024: 11-13).

Conversely, selective enforcement against political opponents can turn disclosure requirements into a partisan instrument rather than a safeguard for impartiality (Jenkins 2015: 6).

Finally, public disclosure requires a balance between transparency and privacy and personal security. This may be particularly relevant in settings affected by high levels of violence, where publication of detailed information about officials' wealth or family members can itself create security risks (Jenkins 2015: 6).

Financial intelligence and asset recovery

Certain illicit financial flows can enable or prolong conflict. They may provide armed groups, organised criminal networks and violent extremists with resources to operate, acquire weapons or evade state enforcement (Cohen 2018). Illicit outflows can also contribute to the conditions for conflict more indirectly by removing resources from the country, weakening state capacity and legitimacy, and damaging social cohesion (Ardigo 2014: 1; Jenkins 2024). Illicit or deliberately opaque finance can also be used in destination countries to support covert political influence. It may be channeled to political parties, candidates, campaigns, media outlets, civil society groups or online advertising, including channels that disseminate divisive or misleading content. Such financing can be coordinated by hostile foreign actors (e.g. Russia) to weaken democratic institutions (Bak 2021).

Financial Intelligence Units (FIUs) identify and analyse suspicious financial activity and may help secure assets before they disappear, while investigators, courts and asset recovery and management bodies are responsible for their eventual confiscation, management, and return (Egmont Group 2025).

There have not been studies made on the links between FIUs or asset recovery bodies' work with peacebuilding outcomes. Nevertheless, in theory, these functions can support peacebuilding, first by disrupting the financial networks that sustain criminal, conflict or hostile actors and, second, by returning illicit assets to the state or victims. So-called 'social reuse' can make the benefits of enforcement visible at the community level. In the Western Balkans, confiscated assets have been used for social purposes such as community and health care centres (Đorđević 2022: 5).

Despite these possible contributions, dealing with past corruption and recovering assets remain uncommon elements of peace agreements. Forster (2024) identifies this combined category in only 11 of the 140 agreements containing explicit anti-corruption provisions.

How counter-illicit finance can undermine peacebuilding

Financial intelligence and asset recovery can also create risks for peacebuilding. Like other forms of law enforcement, access to financial intelligence and

decisions to freeze or confiscate assets can be applied selectively in favour of particular political or economic groups. FIUs may themselves be vulnerable to political interference. Their effectiveness and legitimacy therefore depend on independence, adequate resources, and cooperation with independent investigators, prosecutors and courts (Bak and Jenkins 2024: 14-16). Transparency International's 2026 review of 20 FIUs similarly finds that institutional safeguards remain uneven: in 12 countries, rules governing the appointment and dismissal of FIU leadership contain gaps that may undermine operational independence. The study also identifies constraints relating to staffing, budgets, access to information and cooperation with investigative authorities, all of which can limit the effective use of financial intelligence (Transparency International 2026).

The wider anti money laundering system can also produce additional unintended consequences. In fragile settings, overly restrictive compliance measures can lead to “derisking”, which can cause significant economic damage (Bak and Jenkins 2024: 15).

The final allocation of recovered assets creates an additional risk. Assets returned through captured or weakly accountable institutions may be misappropriated again. Social reuse may also exacerbate intergroup distrust if resources are disproportionately directed towards certain communities.

Political financing and lobbying regulation

Political finance

Political parties and candidates require resources to organise and campaign, and private contributions are a legitimate and common source of political funding. However, unequal access to political resources may restrict opportunities for participation or enable particular interests, including criminal organisations or hostile foreign actors, to exercise undue influence over parties and elected officials (Bak 2021). Political finance regulation must therefore balance open political competition with transparency, fair competition, and protection against undue influence (OSCE/ODIHR, Venice Commission 2023: 93).

These concerns may be especially acute in societies emerging from conflict, where parties may retain links to armed movements, wartime economic networks, state owned enterprises, criminal organisations or foreign sponsors. A comparative study by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) of eight post-conflict societies identifies opaque funding as a recurring risk. In the context of high-stakes elections in the early post-conflict period, weak controls over political finance can allow criminal or armed interests to gain access to and influence the political process (IFES 2006: 7).

Integrity measures that regulate political finance can include measures such as limits or prohibitions on particular types of donations; regulation on foreign

contributions, regulation on anonymous funding; campaign spending limits; financial reporting and public disclosure requirements. These may be underpinned by independent oversight (e.g. from an electoral commission). They can also include public subsidies, free broadcasting time, and other forms of support allocated according to objective criteria (OSCE/ODIHR, Venice Commission 2023: 93-94).

A first possible mechanism through which such regulation may affect peacebuilding outcomes is by preventing funds derived from crime, corruption or conflict economies, as well as deliberately concealed foreign funding, from entering politics. Without effective regulation, conflict linked or criminal actors may finance parties, capture existing ones, or obtain political protection from elected officials. Transparency can help expose these relationships, while restrictions on anonymous, corporate, and certain forms of foreign funding, together with requirements to use traceable financial channels, can make them more difficult to conceal (IFES 2006: 7; Bak 2021).

A second pathway concerns political inclusion. Public funding for political parties, free airtime and other forms of support can enable smaller parties to compete electorally. In post-conflict settings, such support may give former armed movements and previously excluded groups a viable route into peaceful politics.

Mozambique's 1994 election

Mozambique provides one example of how funding can be used to reduce political tensions during an election that could be contested. Following the 1992 peace agreement, RENAMO had to transform itself from an armed opposition movement into a standard political party. As part of that process, it would have to compete against FRELIMO, the former liberation movement and Mozambique's incumbent political party. International donors established a trust fund to support RENAMO's transformation, while also providing some form of balance against FRELIMO's many advantages (IFES 2006: 105). IFES (2006) concludes that this assistance reduced political tensions and contributed to the perception of the election's legitimacy (IFES 2006: 112). The process had important limitations. It did not remove FRELIMO's incumbency advantages nor significantly alter the balance of political power, but nevertheless was considered a successful intervention because it reduced political tensions and encouraged continued opposition participation (IFES 2006: 112)

Lobbying regulation

Lobbying is a legitimate part of democracy and an important means through which businesses, civil society organisations, trade unions and other groups

advocate with decision-makers. Integrity problems arise when access is unequal or influence is concealed, allowing narrow interests to exercise disproportionate influence over public decisions (OECD 2024).

Lobbying regulation may require disclosure of who is seeking to influence whom, the interests represented, the decisions targeted, and the objectives pursued. Other measures include public information about lobbying contacts; codes of conduct; conflict of interest rules; and 'revolving door' restrictions addressing movement between public office and private employment. A public decision making "footprint" can record which stakeholders sought to influence a decision or were consulted, what input they provided and what steps were taken to include different interests (OECD 2024).

The peacebuilding relevance of these measures is plausible but, again, largely indirect and have not been empirically tested as such. Arguably, transparent and accessible channels for advocacy may allow social groups to pursue competing interests without relying on personal connections, patronage, or violence. In divided societies, it is a reasonable hypothesis that meaningful access to decision-makers across society can strengthen the social contract.

Risks of weaponisation of political finance regulation

As with many other types of interventions, political integrity measures can themselves distort political competition. Political finance rules can affect political competition because sanctions may include loss of public funding, exclusion of candidates, or removal from the ballot. Moreover, financial regulation is arguably at risk of biased implementation in favour of incumbents (SCE/ODIHR and Venice Commission 2023: 119–120).

Georgia's 2012 parliamentary election provides one such example. After a billionaire began financing the then main opposition coalition, new political finance rules gave the national audit body broad enforcement powers. Authorities subsequently seized his holdings in two banks and another company after imposing fines worth millions of dollars (Antidze 2012). Critics also argued that enforcement disproportionately targeted opposition figures and that investigations were conducted without adequate due process and in ways that could deter potential donors (Lomsadze 2012).

Public financial management, procurement, internal control and audit

Public Financial Management - the “mechanisms through which public resources are collected, allocated, spent and accounted for” (Transparency International 2015) - is central to public integrity. Weaknesses across the budget cycle can allow officials to direct public funds and contracts towards political allies or favoured groups, while limited scrutiny of finances can then make such misuse harder to detect (Transparency International 2015).

PFM reforms commonly include streamlining budget processes, strengthening revenue administration, procurement rules, and improving external oversight. Such reforms typically seek to improve fiscal and operational performance as well as strengthening oversight and transparency (Transparency International 2015). Supreme audit institutions provide independent external oversight of government finances, and their audits may deter misconduct or identify matters requiring investigation by other competent authorities (Chêne 2018: 3).

Public financial management (PFM) and related financial oversight measures have also formed part of peace agreements. Forster (2024: 21) identifies provisions concerning auditing bodies, national budget oversight and procurement rules across a range of settlements, including in Liberia, Nepal, South Sudan, Yemen and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

These measures could support peacebuilding. PFM could, in theory, help mitigate the potential unequal distribution of public resources and help establish whether public finances are used for their desired purposes. Moreover, PFM reform is a possible measure that contributes to state capacity and legitimacy (World Bank 2012b: 48). These expected benefits, however, have not been empirically tested. The relationship between progress in PFM reform and improved service delivery, state capacity and legitimacy is difficult to prove outright and while PFM reform may improve the management of money, it is difficult to find its exact effect on quality-of-service provision (World Bank 2012b: 6).

Security sector reform

Security sector reform (SSR) is a critical component of most instances of post-conflict stabilisation and longer-term peacebuilding. SSR concerns security providers, such as the police, armed forces and intelligence services, as well as the institutions that oversee them. The typical objective of SSR is to make security provision more effective and more accountable within a framework of civilian control and rule of law (DCAF 2017: 5). From a public integrity perspective, SSR measures should strengthen civilian oversight; PFM, accountability mechanisms and personnel management (White et al. 2025:

21). This is particularly important in cases where security institutions have been politicised, corrupt or associated with abuses against particular groups, since weak governance can erode public trust and deepen perceptions that security institutions serve particular political or communal interests rather than the population as a whole (White et al. 2025: 22).

SSR has indeed been addressed directly in peace agreements. Forster identifies 14 agreements containing anti-corruption commitments concerning the police, gendarmerie or military. This places the security sector as one of the most common specific parts of the public sector for integrity reform in peace agreements (Forster 2024:19).

Corruption and governance risks in the security sector are particularly important to address in the aftermath of conflict. A corrupt or politicised security sector can contribute to human rights abuses that undermine public trust and the state's legitimacy as a security provider (White et al. 2025: 22). Weak personnel and salary systems can also be associated with risks such as fraudulent payrolls that conceal "ghost soldiers" or low pay that encourages bribery, predatory behaviour and involvement in organised crime (White et al. 2025: 23). Integrity oriented SSR could accordingly support peacebuilding by making security provision more impartial and accountable (White et al. 2025: 20-23).

Police reform in Northern Ireland

Police reform in the aftermath of the conflict in Northern Ireland provides an example of how representation, oversight and accountability can support a peace settlement. The Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), which policed Northern Ireland during the conflict (the Troubles), was predominantly Protestant. It held considerable support within the unionist community, which favoured remaining part of the United Kingdom, but was distrusted by many Catholic nationalists (Caparini and Hwang 2019). The 1998 Good Friday Agreement called for a police service capable of commanding support across the divided population. The Independent Commission on Policing for Northern Ireland subsequently recommended restructuring the RUC as the Police Service of Northern Ireland, introducing more balanced recruitment and establishing a new Policing Board and independent Police Ombudsman (Caparini and Hwang 2019). The share of officers from a Catholic community background rose significantly throughout the 2000s. Evidence suggests that the Northern Ireland police subsequently enjoyed growing acceptance on both sides of the political divide (Caparini and Hwang 2019).

Participatory and civil society approaches to public integrity

The preceding section has focused primarily on public integrity measures implemented through state institutions. Such measures remain important, but formal institutional reform may be insufficient where corrupt practices are sustained by dynamics such as informal expectations, norms, and weak external accountability (Berghof Foundation 2025).

More broadly, the evidence on the effectiveness of conventional anti-corruption interventions is itself mixed and uneven. Recent reviews find that some interventions can reduce corruption under particular conditions, while the evidence for others remains limited, context dependent, or inconclusive. Overall, the effectiveness of anti-corruption interventions continues to be understudied relative to the scale of investment in them (Wathne 2022; Maslen, Bergin 2026: 1).

Participatory and civil society approaches, including so-called social accountability mechanisms, can complement state-led reforms by creating additional bottom-up channels of accountability. Social accountability mechanisms seek to involve citizens or civil society directly in monitoring government performance, influencing policy or by creating grievance redressal mechanisms. They can take various forms, including participatory planning and budgeting, social audits, community scorecards, complaints mechanisms and interventions that provide civil society with information on governance processes (Ringold et al. 2012; Bak 2021: 10-14). These approaches can strengthen the so-called “short route” of accountability between citizens and service providers by improving information flows, increasing public scrutiny and by giving citizens more direct opportunities to influence public institutions (Ringold et al. 2012: 5-6; Bak 2021: 10).

From a peacebuilding perspective, these approaches may matter because they can potentially widen participation and provide institutionalised channels through which grievances and competing claims can be expressed and addressed non-violently. Inclusive and legitimate institutions are better placed to manage contestation peacefully than institutions perceived as closed, partial or unresponsive (UN, World Bank 2018: xxii-xxiii, 121-122). Participatory or social accountability mechanisms may therefore contribute to peacebuilding if they can broaden access to decision-making, if they can create channels for challenging

particularist governance, or if they can strengthen perceptions that institutions are responsive and accountable to different groups.

These approaches should not, however, be treated as inherently effective or peacemaking. Just as with more ‘top-down’ approaches, the evidence that social accountability mechanisms lead to better governance is highly context dependent. Participatory mechanisms can become box ticking exercises, be captured by better organised groups, or fail due to reasons such as citizens lacking confidence that institutions will respond to their input. Reviews of participatory budgeting and other social accountability tools therefore find considerable variation in outcomes across contexts (Bak 2021: 10-14).

Participatory governance and participatory budgeting

Participatory approaches seek to involve citizens more directly in public decision-making rather than limiting accountability to elections and formal oversight institutions. Participatory budgeting is one such mechanism. It is broadly understood as a process through which citizens participate in budgeting (de Soysa 2022: 2). Participation is most common during budget formulation/creation, but may also extend to monitoring implementation in later parts of the budget cycle (de Soysa 2022: 2).

From a public integrity perspective, participatory processes can supplement conventional oversight through a form of “vertical accountability” in which citizens themselves scrutinise public decisions (de Soysa 2022: 2). Participatory budgeting may strengthen accountability by reducing the informational distance between citizens and public authorities and subjecting decisions over public resources to greater scrutiny. Making information on revenue, expenditure and proposed investments accessible allows citizens to scrutinise spending (de Soysa 2022: 10).

The empirical evidence on whether participatory budgeting’s efficiency as an accountability tool is nevertheless mixed. Campbell et al.’s (2018) review of 37 evaluations found that participatory budgeting was frequently associated with political learning, in some cases increased political participation and broader influence spending on public services. However, effects varied substantially across contexts, particularly regarding the inclusion of disadvantaged groups (Campbell et al. 2018: 6-7).

From a peacebuilding perspective, the potential significance of participatory budgeting lies in its potential to broaden access to decisions over public resources. If unequal or particularistic allocation of resources can contribute to perceptions of exclusion and horizontal inequality, then participatory budgeting may provide otherwise disadvantaged groups with a mechanism to advance competing priorities (de Soysa 2022: 12).

North Macedonia: participatory budgeting after conflict

Decentralisation formed an important part of the institutional settlement following the 2001 conflict, and subsequent reforms transferred greater responsibilities to municipalities (Janevska 2026: 178-179). Community Forums were introduced in 2006 to support this decentralisation process, followed by specific Budget Forums from 2008 (Janevska 2026: 180).

These forums bring citizens, civil society organisations, municipal officials and other stakeholders together to discuss local spending priorities. Citizens receive information on municipal budgets and get the chance to provide input. An evaluation of Budget Forums conducted between 2014 and 2017 found that citizens prioritised almost 300 budget programmes and around 900 projects. The vast majority were adopted by municipalities (Janevska 2026: 184).

There are also important limitations and risks. Participatory budgeting can reproduce existing power imbalances rather than overcome them, such as when better connected or organised groups dominate participation. Processes may also be perceived as tokenistic when citizens have limited real influence over decisions (de Soysa 2022: 17). Adequate access to information, genuine political commitment, and an organised civil society are important enabling conditions for meaningful participation (de Soysa 2022: 14-19).

Independent civil society oversight and monitoring

Whereas participatory mechanisms involve citizens directly in public decision-making, independent civil society oversight concerns scrutiny exercised from outside or alongside public institutions. This can include analysing public financial and administrative data, monitoring whether governments implement anti-corruption commitments, investigating suspected wrongdoing, and producing independent assessments (OECD 2020; Maslen 2024).

As an anti-corruption mechanism, civil society oversight principally works through detection, exposure and pressure. Independent monitoring can reveal information that would otherwise remain hidden, increase the political or reputational costs of misconduct, and provide a documented basis for action. Its effectiveness therefore depends both on adequate access to information, broader civic freedoms, and a general responsiveness of public institutions to respond to findings (OECD 2020; Maslen 2024).

Independent oversight may also interact with the social norms discussed earlier. In situations where corrupt practices persist partly because they either are normalised, hidden or rarely challenged, civil society monitoring can arguably help challenge expectations of non-interference and strengthen expectations of transparency and accountability (Hopp-Nishanka et al 2022: 34).

Moreover, from a peacebuilding perspective, civil society oversight may provide continuing scrutiny of how post-conflict institutions and political settlements operate in practice. Civil society actors can raise neglected issues, monitor whether political commitments are implemented, and create pressure for accountability (Hopp-Nishanka et al. 2022: 28-29).

There are nevertheless important risks. Civil society is not inherently neutral or representative and may itself be embedded in political, ethnic, or patronage networks. Highly confrontational or politicised accountability initiatives may also contribute to polarisation or expose participants to retaliation (Hopp-Nishanka et al. 2022: 29, 35). Independent civil society oversight is therefore just one component of a wider accountability system and certainly cannot be thought of as a substitute for functioning public institutions.

Targeted social accountability and integrity mechanisms

Alongside broader forms of participation and civil society oversight, a range of more targeted mechanisms seek to involve citizens or civil society in monitoring particular public processes, services or grievances. These include integrity pacts, social audits, community scorecards, complaints and grievance mechanisms, and whistleblowing mechanisms. They differ in design, but all seek to improve public integrity by creating additional channels through which information about public performance or misconduct can be generated and acted upon.

Integrity pacts

Integrity pacts are primarily used to reduce corruption risks in public procurement. They involve an agreement between a contracting authority and bidders committing the parties to refrain from bribery, collusion and other corrupt conduct. A central feature of an integrity pact is independent monitoring of the procurement process. This is often undertaken with involvement from a civil society or citizen representation. Depending on their design, breaches can result in sanctions such as exclusion from the contract, damages or debarment (Transparency International 2013a: 9-10). Independent monitors can scrutinise tender documents and decisions, access relevant information, and raise concerns where they identify suspected violations (Transparency International 2013a: 69).

The anti-corruption logic of integrity pacts is mostly preventive in nature. By establishing common commitments against bribery and collusion, increasing transparency and combining independent monitoring with sanctions for violations, integrity pacts seek to raise the risks and costs of corrupt behaviour throughout the procurement process (Transparency International 2013a: 9-10).

Integrity pacts, however, depend on a number of preconditions, including political commitment and transparency laws (Transparency International 2013a: 10). A systematic review of Transparency International evaluations from 2020 found evidence that integrity pacts had to some extent strengthened civil-society monitoring, encouraged fairer competition and improved transparency and procurement practice. However, it also stressed that it is by nature difficult to demonstrate whether corruption would have occurred in the absence of the integrity pact (Transparency International 2020: 17)

Social audits

Social audits involve citizens and civil society organisations checking whether public institutions, projects or services perform as they should (Transparency International 2018: 5). These are performance oriented social audits that examine whether programmes reach their intended social objectives (Transparency International 2018: 5). In practice, social audits may involve obtaining public documents, training community volunteers to identify red flags, conducting field visits, publishing findings and referring identified irregularities to relevant authorities or oversight bodies (Transparency International 2018: 4-6).

The underlying logic is that citizen involvement can both uncover irregularities and strengthen accountability by giving people greater insight into how public institutions operate and encouraging them to hold authorities to account. Social audits are thus only effective when critical findings lead to follow-up and are acted upon (Transparency International 2018: 6).

Experiences from countries such as Guatemala, Peru and Ghana illustrate the potential of the approach. Social audits have contributed to enforcement of access to information requirements in Guatemala, reduced costs in monitored public works in Peru and helped challenge an illegal education fee in Ghana (Transparency International 2018).

Community scorecards

Community scorecards provide a structured process through which users assess the performance of public services and discuss the results with the relevant providers. The process typically combines information on service performance with citizen assessments. It may then be followed up by meetings between communities and providers (Ringold et al. 2012: 54-59; Bak 2021: 13). The mechanism is therefore oriented around downward accountability by making shortcomings in service provision visible.

There is evidence that well designed scorecards can improve service provision. Experimental evidence from health services in Uganda found substantial improvements in provider performance and health outcomes following an intervention combining information, community monitoring and dialogue between communities and providers (Ringold et al. 2012: 54-56).

These results should not, however, be interpreted as evidence that scorecards generally reduce corruption. Their effects depend on whether information is accessible, citizens participate, providers have the capacity to respond, and agreed corrective measures are subsequently followed up on (Ringold et al. 2012: 58–59).

Complaints and grievance mechanisms

Complaints mechanisms provide formal channels through which citizens can report grievances (including complaints of corruption) and seek a response or remedy. They can include hotlines, online reporting platforms, complaints offices, ombuds institutions or channels operated with civil society support. Effective mechanisms should be safe and tied to specific review and escalation procedures (Transparency International 2016: 6-8).

Their integrity relevance lies partly in providing information about misconduct that may otherwise remain hidden and partly in creating a route through which affected individuals can demand corrective action. Their usefulness consequently depends heavily on whether citizens know about and trust the mechanism, and, not least, whether complaints actually result in investigations or corrective actions (Transparency International 2016: 6-8).

Available evidence on the effectiveness of grievance redress mechanisms is mixed and remains relatively limited, but reviews suggest that well designed systems can improve responsiveness and accountability (Pande and Hossain 2022: 3). However, effective grievance redress depends on both willingness to complain and capacity to respond. Citizens need accessible channels, knowledge of their rights and protection from retaliation, while public authorities need the independence, resources, and authority to escalate and resolve complaints (Pande and Hossain 2022: 21).

Whistleblowing mechanisms

Whistleblowing differs from complaints mechanisms. Complaints are typically made by service users seeking redress. Whistleblowing involves disclosures of wrongdoing by people with inside knowledge, usually employees or contractors, who risk retaliation for speaking up. Insiders are often the first to learn of embezzlement, procurement fraud or abuse of office, which makes their disclosures a significant source of detection (OECD 2016).

UNCAC requires states to consider measures protecting persons who report corruption in good faith (UN 2004, article 33). It also provides for anonymous reporting to anti-corruption bodies and for reporting by public officials (UN 2004, articles 13(2) and 8(4)).

Effective frameworks combine four elements. The first is legislation defining protected disclosures. The second is accessible internal and external reporting channels, including channels operated by civil society. The third is protection against dismissal, harassment and other retaliation, with remedies where it occurs. The fourth is organisational practice that encourages reporting, keeps reporting persons' identities confidential and ensures reports are investigated (Transparency International 2013b; Terracol 2018). Legal protection alone is insufficient. Where organisations penalise reporting persons or fail to act on disclosures, potential whistleblowers learn that silence is safer (OECD 2016).

The link between whistleblowing and peacebuilding outcomes has not been tested empirically. Protected disclosure can nevertheless expose wrongdoing beyond the reach of other oversight bodies, such as security sector payroll fraud (Bullock 2019; White et al. 2025: 23) or misuse of reconstruction funds (OECD 2025). Retaliation risks may, however, be heightened after conflict, where exposed actors may retain political influence or links to armed networks (Hopp-Nishanka et al. 2022: 29, 35; White et al. 2025: 26-27). In the Western Balkans, every country has adopted a whistleblower protection law since 2013, yet reprisals persist (Southeast Europe Coalition on Whistleblower Protection 2019; Worth and Dyrnishi 2020; Transparency International 2024). In Serbia, a whistleblower at the state-owned Krušik arms factory was arrested by the Security Intelligence Agency in 2019, days after reporting revealed that its munitions had reached Islamic State fighters in Yemen (Southeast Europe Coalition on Whistleblower Protection 2019). Confidentiality, anonymous channels and credible protection are therefore particularly important.

Peacebuilding relevance

These mechanisms may be relevant to peacebuilding because they create structured ways of either identifying or responding to grievances in public management. Each of these mechanisms has distinct objectives.

Integrity pacts can subject politically sensitive procurement and reconstruction spending to external scrutiny; social audits can establish whether promised resources or projects have actually reached communities; scorecards can structure dialogue around failures or inequalities in service provision; complaints mechanisms can provide institutional routes through which individuals or communities seek redress; and whistleblowing mechanisms can surface wrongdoing known only to insiders, including in institutions that external scrutiny struggles to reach.

The peacebuilding connection remains indirect, but it is more than purely theoretical. Hopp-Nishanka et al. identify social accountability as an area in which anti-corruption and peacebuilding practice can overlap, particularly through community monitoring, citizen engagement and sustained dialogue around accountability and integrity. They argue that inclusive social accountability processes may help connect communities with public institutions and potentially strengthen trust and social cohesion, while also warning that poorly implemented interventions can expose participants to harm, intensify confrontation or contribute to polarisation (Hopp-Nishanka et al. 2022: 34–35).

The common lesson across these mechanisms is therefore that voice and scrutiny require institutional response. An integrity pact without credible monitoring and sanctions, a social audit whose findings are ignored, a scorecard without follow-up, a complaints mechanism without redress, or a whistleblowing channel that leaves reporting persons unprotected or reports uninvestigated, may have little effect. Their contribution to both integrity and peacebuilding is most plausible where citizens and insiders can safely raise concerns, information is credible, participation is sufficiently inclusive, and public institutions have both the capacity and willingness to respond.

Civil society participation in asset recovery and return

Asset recovery is primarily a responsibility of public authorities, including law enforcement bodies, prosecutors, courts and specialised asset recovery institutions. Civil society organisations, however, can support different stages of the process through advocacy, research and investigations, and by monitoring the management and return of recovered assets (International Centre for Asset Recovery 2020).

Civil society participation may be particularly important during the return phase of assets. Recovered assets can themselves be vulnerable to mismanagement, renewed corruption or political capture. Civil society organisations can therefore play an important role, both in monitoring and scrutinising individual return agreements, but also in potentially advocating for recovered assets to be used for public or social purposes, including community projects, social services or support for victims (CIFAR 2026). One large scale example comes from the return of assets stolen by former Nigerian ruler Sani Abacha. During the monitoring of a US\$320 million tranche returned from Switzerland, more than 100 civil society organisations participated in monitoring implementation, helping identify problems including corruption risks and so-called ghost projects (UNICRI 2025: 49).

From a peacebuilding perspective, participation in asset return may be particularly relevant where corruption has deprived communities of public resources or formed part of a previous system of state capture. Returning

resources for public benefit can provide material redress, while transparent and participatory management may help demonstrate that recovered wealth is being used in the public rather than particularistic interests. More broadly, addressing past corruption during political transitions can acknowledge socio-economic harms and signal a break with previous abuses of public office (Dupuy 2026: 1-2).

The contribution of asset recovery to peacebuilding remains conditional. Returned assets can themselves become a new object of political competition if decisions over beneficiaries, regions or projects are opaque, dominated by elites or perceived to favour particular groups, the return process may reproduce the same patterns of particularism and exclusion that asset recovery is intended to remedy. Weak oversight can also allow recovered resources to be mismanaged or diverted again, undermining the symbolic value of recovery and potentially reinforcing distrust in public institutions. Transparent allocation criteria, traceability of returned funds, and meaningful civil society involvement in monitoring their use are therefore particularly important where recovered assets are directed towards social or community purposes (Bak 2026).

Conclusion

The evidence reviewed in this paper suggests that public integrity is relevant to peacebuilding primarily through indirect pathways. Corruption can aggravate recognised conflict risks by reinforcing exclusion and horizontal inequalities, weakening institutional legitimacy and state capacity, and sustaining illicit political and economic networks. It can also become embedded in post-conflict political settlements, making arrangements initially accepted for the sake of stability increasingly difficult to reform over time (Cheng and Zaum 2012; Hopp-Nishanka et al. 2022).

Public integrity measures may therefore contribute to some of the institutional conditions associated with more sustainable peace. They can potentially reduce the extent to which access to public resources depends on political or group affiliation, strengthen the capacity and impartiality of institutions, constrain abuses of public office and increase opportunities for citizens and oversight bodies to challenge misconduct. These are plausible pathways through which integrity reform may address some of the mechanisms linking corruption and conflict identified in this paper (UN, World Bank 2018; Jenkins et al. 2020). The evidence for the peacebuilding effects of individual measures in isolation nevertheless remains limited.

Integrity reform is also not inherently peace promoting. Enforcement bodies, vetting processes, political finance rules, and other integrity mechanisms can be selectively applied or weaponised against political opponents. This potentially reinforces distrust and perceptions that public institutions serve particular political interests.

In post-conflict settings, the relevant question is therefore not simply whether stronger anti-corruption measures should be introduced, but how and when. Reforms need to take account of the political settlements and informal arrangements on which short-term stability may depend. Anti-corruption may need to be introduced gradually and with attention to conflict sensitivity. At the same time, temporary accommodations should not be allowed to become permanent systems of exclusion and patronage (Hopp-Nishanka et al. 2022; UNODC 2025).

Formal rules may also have limited effects in situations where corruption has normative drivers. Public integrity reform may therefore require attention also to the norms that help shape how public authority is exercised in practice (Kubbe et al. 2024; Nash et al. 2023; Jackson 2026). Participatory governance, civil society monitoring, and other collective action approaches can complement state-led measures by creating additional sources of scrutiny and accountability.

Overall, public integrity is best understood not as a direct instrument for producing peace, but as an important foundation for sustainable, positive peace.

More impartial, accountable, and capable public institutions can strengthen the social contract and provide channels through which competing interests and grievances can be addressed without violence.

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