BUILDING CITIES OF INTEGRITY IN SOUTH AFRICA

Early research results show promise of strengthening professional identity

Christian Alexander and Laura Nkula-Wenz

It is no secret that South Africa faces huge challenges in overcoming corruption in various dimensions of public service – including planning and urban development. As we in the Cities of Integrity team at the African Centre for Cities (UCT) have laid out in past editions of this newsletter, circumstances indicate that planners are both particularly exposed to corrupt dealings and also can play a critical role in counteracting it. To explore how planners might do this, we wanted to understand how leveraging professional networks and associations to promote a professional identity founded on integrity might provide the support planners need to navigate ethical challenges and stand up against corruption. Early results from our research supplement the current outlook on corruption in South Africa: that great challenges still remain but that the tide seems to be slowly turning against corruption, not least through greater public and professional scrutiny. Our research thus also suggests promising avenues for how planners might be better supported in embracing integrity and implementing anti-corruption measures in their daily practice.

"According to our survey, nearly half (46%) of all South African respondents had been asked to violate rules, policies or procedures in order to achieve a particular planning outcome, at least on occasion..."

Over the past two years we have been conducting interviews, focus groups, and workshops in Zambia and South Africa to understand the different mechanics and dynamics of corruption and integrity within the planning profession. To supplement our qualitative work, in 2020 – and with the help of SACPLAN and its members – we conducted a countrywide online survey amongst planners in which we asked a range of questions regarding ethics and experiences of corruption in everyday planning practice. Around one hundred South African professionals responded. While the survey is non-representative vis-a-vis the overall number of professional planners in South Africa, it still provides pertinent insights on day-to-day ethical challenges in the sector, as well as the potential benefits of promoting professional integrity.

The survey results back up the somewhat gloomy outlook reflected in our interviews. According to our survey, nearly half (46%) of all South African respondents had been asked to violate rules, policies or procedures in order to achieve a particular planning outcome, at least on occasion. Furthermore, over a third (37%) of South African respondents had already been asked at least once to manufacture a pre-ordained outcome that benefited particular officials or private parties.

Likewise, South African professionals registered high perceptions of corruption in urban development processes. More than a third of the respondents (38%) indicated that contracting and procurement rules were not properly followed to benefit particular interests at least occasionally, and a similar number (42%) indicated that colleagues, superiors, or senior officials at least occasionally had a personal interest in activities for which they had oversight.

"...a third (35%) of South African respondents expressed feeling emotionally or physically threatened at least occasionally for performing their work in an ethical manner."

Most alarmingly, over a third (35%) of South African respondents expressed feeling emotionally or physically

threatened at least occasionally for performing their work in an ethical manner. Respondents working in government were nearly twice as likely to feel threatened compared to their non-governmental peers, and female planners were at greater risk compared to their male counterparts.

The high perception of corruption amongst planners and urban professionals in South Africa has had an obvious impact on professional moral and sense of identity. As one of our interviewed participants noted, "we are a bit desensitized about corruption because it's so widespread."

However, the good news is that a large majority of respondents in South Africa voiced a strong sense of public purpose and believed that integrity still played an important role in the profession. Respondents also indicated that they believed their respective professional associations – like SACPLAN but also SAPI or SAIA – could and should play a more central role in addressing corruption and promoting integrity, suggesting hope for concerted future progress against corruption.

Two notable patterns also emerged that suggest that promoting professional integrity might be a key lever in combating corruption: First, while a few respondents reported commonly experiencing or perceiving corruption or irregularities, a much larger group of respondents reported that such incidents only occurred occasionally or sometimes (see Figure 1), suggesting that their experience of corruption could be characterized as opportunistic or situational.

Figure 1: Indications of opportunistic corruption amongst South African respondents

How often at work are you required to use your expertise to manufacture pre-ordained outcomes that benefit particular officials or private parties?

Sometimes or occasionally 31%

Always or often 6%

Don't know 5%

Never 58%
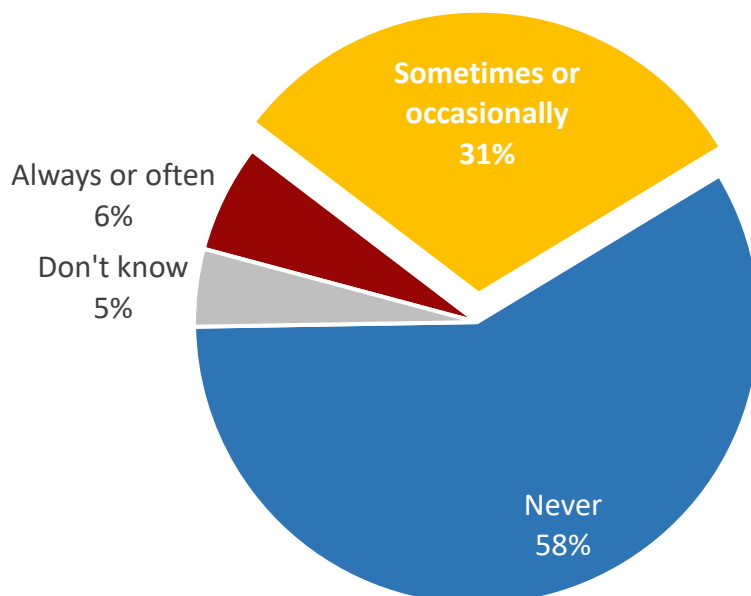
Second, while a large majority of respondents in South Africa did not believe that planners in general were likely to report corruption, a similarly large number indicated that they themselves were at least somewhat likely to report corruption and unethical behaviour (see Figure 2). These results might be explained by the fact that more ethical respondents self-selected to take a survey on ethics, or that respondents overestimated their own ethical behaviour – a common phenomenon in anti-corruption research. However, the extent of the discrepancy in responses could also suggest "*pluralistic ignorance*" amongst respondents, a phenomenon wherein most individuals in a group conform to a social norm (here, not reporting corruption) even though

they privately disagree with it, because they (incorrectly) believe that most other individuals support that social norm.

If the latter is true, the phenomenon could be effectively countered through increased knowledge-sharing and discourse regarding perceptions of corruption and reporting. Indeed, in our interviews many participants expressed hope that planning associations and networks, along with more ethics training and peer support, could help turn the tide. In this respect, there are plenty of opportunities, including participation in newly mandated continuing professional development courses focusing on ethics and integrity. Another opportunity to expand the discourse is through various online and in-person planning-focused platforms, including SACPLAN's newly established online forum (*https://sacplan.org.za/forum/*). In the end, success will depend on the willingness of planners to engage with the topic and one another.

We would like to thank SACPLAN and its members, and in particular the readers of this newsletter, for their willingness to participate in our survey. Thanks to the participation of you and your peers, we now better understand the range of opportunities present for promoting professional identity and cohesion, which can be leveraged to disarm corruption in planning and urban development in South Africa. For further project updates please visit: *https://www.africancentreforcities.net/programme/gi-ace/* or engage us on the SACPLAN forum.

Figure 2: Personal and group perceptions on reporting corruption amongst South African respondents

Likelihood of reporting corruption

- How likely is it that other planners/urban development professionals report corruption at their work?
- How likely are YOU to report an incident of corruption at work?