Anti-Corruption Evidence
Programme

ACE | **GOVERNANCE & INTEGRITY**
Anti-Corruption Evidence Research Programme

ACE
SOAS Consortium
Anti-Corruption Evidence
Making Anti-Corruption Real

SOC ACE
Serious Organised Crime & Anti-Corruption Evidence
Research Programme

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ABOUT THE ACE PROGRAMME

Anti-Corruption Evidence (ACE) **aims to deliver new practical research about what works to tackle corruption, illicit financial flows and serious organised crime**. Funding for ACE is provided by the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO)'s Research and Evidence Directorate (RED) running from 2015 through to 2027. ACE's three component research programmes - Governance & Integrity ACE (GI ACE), SOAS ACE and Serious Organised Crime ACE (SOC ACE) - provide independent, rigorous research with a long-term funding commitment that allows teams to produce a large body of evidence over time as a global public good. ACE directly informs strategy, policy, operations and programming in FCDO, the UK government and beyond with impact around the world.

The ACE programme has three components, each of which specialise in certain thematic areas:

ACE | GOVERNANCE & INTEGRITY
Anti-Corruption Evidence Research Programme

Governance & Integrity ACE (GI ACE)

Researches illicit finance, enablers, corruption in emergency measures, trade and state capture and is led by Professor Liz Dávid-Barrett, University of Sussex.

US UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX | CSC CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF CORRUPTION

ACE SOAS Consortium — Anti-Corruption Evidence
Making Anti-Corruption Real

SOAS ACE

Researches anti-corruption in infrastructure, power, health, education, climate change investments, digital government service delivery and political corruption and is led by Professor Mushtaq Khan, School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) University of London.

SOAS University of London

SOC ACE Serious Organised Crime & Anti-Corruption Evidence
Research Programme

Serious Organised Crime ACE (SOC ACE)

Researches organised crime, illicit finance, kleptocracy and transnational threats and is led by Professor Heather Marquette, University of Birmingham.

UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

INTRODUCTION

To date, the Anti-Corruption Evidence (ACE) programme has worked with over 60 organisations and over 200 researchers across most global regions. The ACE approach is underpinned by six framing principles, ensuring its research generates politically feasible and technically sound findings for use by policymakers and practitioners:

1. Being **problem-led**, not starting with preconceived ideas about the 'right solutions.'

2. Taking **politics** seriously, developing **politically viable** reforms and approaches in ways that are context-sensitive and avoid negative unintended consequences.

3. Focusing on **real world priorities** in sectors in which corruption, organised crime and illicit finance are part of, but rarely all of, the problem.

4. Thinking differently about **prevention** through better understanding the ways in which corruption and organised crime p**rovide solutions to the everyday problems** people face that often have deep social, structural, economic, and political roots.

5. Developing innovative approaches to **testing** and **measuring** the effects of anti-corruption, counter-organised crime, and illicit finance interventions.

6. Planning **'nose to tail'** engagement with policy makers and practitioners – from research design to implementation, delivery, communications, and engagement.

Against these principles, ACE looks at practical, feasible ways to move beyond seeing political will as a barrier to effective responses. This doesn't mean its research avoids challenging those in power who block meaningful reform or refrains from asking difficult questions about often intractable challenges. Instead, it means that the approach of each component of the ACE research programme is sensitive to context and explicitly considers tensions, trade-offs and the potential for negative, unintended consequences. In doing so, researchers on the ACE programme think and work politically in their own research and engagement, considering the potential need for compromise as seriously as the need for collective action.

Through this approach, ACE research aims to generate:

- Conceptually and methodologically rigorous new research
- Practical approaches for strategy, operations, and programming
- Innovations in methodology and analysis for improved decision-making
- New strategic and analytical frameworks
- Learning products to support policymakers and practitioners
- Strong networks and improved connectivity
- Enhanced capacity for researchers to strengthen research uptake

ACE components are designed to complement each other while each offering something different, including a range of ways to think about how to improve strategies and approaches to tacking forms of corruption. Find out more about each part of ACE and their different approaches in the research profiles below.

ACE GOVERNANCE & INTEGRITY
Anti-Corruption Evidence Research Programme

Governance & Integrity ACE (GI ACE)

Based at the University of Sussex's Centre for the Study of Corruption (CSC) and led by Professor Liz Dávid-Barrett, GI ACE focuses on delivering actionable and context-sensitive research. By addressing the complexities of corruption, this research seeks to inform innovative and effective policy options.

GI ACE has funded over 30 in-depth research projects at leading universities and institutions across the globe, building a network of more than 100 researchers. Its geographical coverage spans several regions, including Africa (including projects in Uganda, Malawi, Kenya and Congo); the Western Balkans and Southeast Europe; Asia (including Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Indonesia); and Latin America (including Brazil, Chile and Colombia). To date, these projects have produced over 150 publications and have helped influence policy development within governments and international organisations.

GI ACE FOCUS AREAS

Since 2015, GI ACE research has addressed corruption in a wide range of sectors and settings, using a variety of methods and approaches.
The current phase of research focuses on four key themes:

- global finance and the enablers of corruption;
- vulnerabilities to corruption during crisis responses;
- corruption risks in global trade and commerce;
- state capture.

SNAPSHOT OF RECENT GI ACE RESEARCH

Sticky Power. Global Financial Networks in the World Economy.
Dan Haberly and Dariusz Wójcik. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022.
By constructing a dataset of global financial regulation and cross-checking it with leaked data on company formation, the researchers identify changing patterns of corruption and money laundering in response to regulatory reform.

Indulging Kleptocracy. British Service Providers, Postcommunist Elites, and the Enabling of Corruption.
John Heathershaw, Tena Prelec and Tom Mayne. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2025.
Offers a powerful and engaging analysis of a notoriously corrosive form of international political corruption, based on a theory that explains the emergence of transnational kleptocracy.

Anti-corruption in aid-funded procurement: Is corruption reduced or merely displaced?
Elizabeth Dávid-Barrett and Mihály Fazekas. World Development, 132, 2020.
By building a huge dataset of aid-funded procurement contracts, and developing appropriate corruption risk indicators, the researchers find evidence that regulatory reforms displaced corruption rather than reducing it.

GI ACE APPROACHES

GI ACE has developed cross-cutting approaches that policymakers and practitioners can apply to their work in different contexts.

The Sector Focus & Reformulation Approach (SFRA).
Mark Pyman and Paul Heywood, GI ACE Research Paper, 2020.
Based on particularities of specific sectors, this approach explores how to translate deep sector knowledge into (re-)formulated, realistic objectives that can be put to practical effect through a mix of broad framings and detailed action proposals.

The Mapping Method: A Guide to Charting Corruption and Influence Processes.
Janine Wedel, GI ACE Research Paper. 2020.
Offers an approach and set of guiding questions that can help identify and track corruption and influencing in different environments and contexts, working by 'following the players' through their interests, their organisations and their networks.

It takes a network to defeat a network: What Collective Action practitioners can learn from research into corrupt networks.
Claudia Baez Camargo et al., GI ACE/Basel Institute on Governance Policy Brief 8. 2021.
Field research carried out in Tanzania and Uganda shows how informal networks link private and public sector actors to pursue common illicit goals The report extracts insights about such networks and discusses implications for anti-corruption Collective Action initiatives.

Corruption, Shell Companies, and Financial Secrecy: Providing an Evidence Base for Anti-Corruption Policy.
Dan Haberly, Tom Shipley and Robert Barrington, GI ACE/CSC Working Paper 16. 2022.
Summarises research exploring patterns of global shell company formation and regulations governing offshore financial secrecy. The research uses big data analytics to examine existing assumptions held by campaigners, practitioners and policymakers, to provide an evidence base for future anti-corruption policymaking.

Criminality Notwithstanding. The Use of Unexplained Wealth Orders in Anti-Corruption Cases.
Tom Mayne and John Heathershaw, GI ACE/RUSI Power Briefs, 05, 2022.
Through careful examination of the use of this new legal instrument, the researchers identify several challenges in its implementation and discuss the implications for law enforcement approaches to kleptocracy.

A cross-cultural basis for public service? Public service motivation measurement invariance in an original survey of 23,000 public servants in ten countries and four world regions.
Kim Sass Mikkelsen, Christian Schuster, and Jan-Hinrik Meyer-Sahling. International Public Management Journal, 24:6. 2021.
Using an original large-scale survey, this article offers the first attempt to explore whether the notion of public service management (PSM) has a similar measurement structure in different national contexts and whether it can be meaningfully compared.

HOW TO CONTACT GI ACE

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SOAS ACE

SOAS ACE is a research partnership consortium led by SOAS, University of London, and partnering with universities, think tanks and organisations in the global South as well as universities in the UK. It is led by Professor Mushtaq Khan and Dr Pallavi Roy. SOAS ACE focuses on developing and testing sector-specific strategies for effective anticorruption that significantly improve development outcomes. So far, SOAS ACE has worked with 30 organisations and over 90 researchers based in 12 countries. It has funded over 40 projects, producing 142 publications.

SOAS ACE FOCUS AREAS

SOAS ACE focuses on anti-corruption in infrastructure, power, health, education, climate change investments, digital government service delivery, and political corruption. It primarily focuses on Bangladesh and Nigeria but has worked in and is relevant to countries across Africa and Asia. In each country and sector, SOAS ACE maps the distribution of power, capabilities and interests of actors affected by relevant types of corruption. The aim is to identify implementable strategies through which sufficiently powerful actors may be induced to act to support specific types of anticorruption in their own interest.

SNAPSHOT OF RECENT SOAS ACE RESEARCH

De-Risking Private Power in Bangladesh: How Financing Design Can Stop Collusive Contracting.
Mushtaq Khan, Mitchell Watkins, Iffat Zahan, Energy Policy, 168, 2022.

Win-Win: Designing Dual-Use in Climate Projects for Effective Anti-Corruption in Bangladesh.
Mushtaq Khan, Mitchell Watkins, Salahuddin Aminuzzaman, Sumaiya Khair, Zakir Khan, Climate and Development, 14(10), 2022.

Breaking the cycle of corruption in Nigeria's electricity sector: Off-grid solutions for local enterprises.
Pallavi Roy, Mitchell Watkins, Chijioke Kelechi Iwuamadi, Jibrin Ibrahim, Energy Research and Social Science, 101, 2023.

SOAS ACE APPROACHES

SOAS ACE argues that when the rule of law is weak, transparency and accountability do not necessarily lead to impartial enforcement or improved development outcomes. In these challenging contexts, additional strategies are required to create incentives for sufficiently powerful actors involved in these processes to support enforcement and improve development outcomes. The SOAS approach identifies a number of strategies depending on the difficulty of incentivising these 'horizontal checks' that policymakers and practitioners can apply in their own work in different contexts:

Making Anti-Corruption Real: Using a 'Power Capabilities and Interest Approach' to Stop Wasting Money and Start Making Progress.
Mushtaq Khan and Pallavi Roy, SOAS ACE Synthesis Report 001, 2022.
This sets out the SOAS ACE framework: Transparency and accountability systems do not necessarily lead to impartial anti-corruption enforcement in countries with a weak rule of law. In these contexts, we need to identify additional strategies that can incentivise sufficiently powerful actors to demand and support the enforcement of critical rules. Our research demonstrates that this is possible and has an effect on corruption outcomes.

A New Approach to Anti-Corruption: When Rule Breakers Rule: A Toolkit.
Pallavi Roy), Agata Slota and Mushtaq Khan, SOAS ACE Briefing Paper, 2022.
This short document sets out the SOAS ACE framework for quick reference.

Making Anti-Corruption Effective: An Online Course.
SOAS ACE.
This online course provides practitioners with a step-by-step introduction to SOAS ACE anti-corruption strategies with examples from our research output.

Corruption and Policy Distortion: Mapping Actors' Power, Capabilities and Interests to find Feasible Solutions.
Alan Hudson, Katherine Bain, Mushtaq Khan, Pallavi Roy and Duncan Edwards, SOAS ACE.
This "how-to" guide makes the SOAS ACE approach accessible to practitioners and policymakers to pick up and apply within their own anti-corruption and policy design work. It introduces key concepts and provides in-depth guidance, with examples from Bangladesh and Nigeria, of how to understand the national political settlement and the landscape of corruption; analyse sectoral political economy dynamics; and craft and validate feasible policy proposals.

HOW TO CONTACT SOAS ACE

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Serious Organised Crime ACE (SOC ACE)

SOC ACE is based in the School of Government at the University of Birmingham and is led by Professor Heather Marquette. SOC ACE funds research projects from teams based in leading organisations from around the world. The research focuses specifically on organised crime, illicit finance, kleptocracy, and corruption in relation to transnational threats, both state and non-state. So far, SOC ACE has worked with 24 organisations and at least 54 researchers, across 10 countries. It has funded 43 research projects, producing over 100 publications.

SOC ACE FOCUS AREAS

SOC ACE research focuses on developing politically feasible approaches for countering organised crime, illicit finance, and corruption. These transnational threats often have devastating consequences for local communities, national security, and geopolitics alike, creating vulnerabilities that undermine the resilience of states, societies, and economies around the world. The research spans several regions including Eastern Europe and Central Asia, Eastern and South Africa, Western Europe, South and East Asia and Latin America.

SNAPSHOT OF RECENT SOC ACE RESEARCH

New dynamics in illicit finance and Russian foreign policy.
David Lewis and Tena Prelec, SOC ACE Research Paper 17, 2023.

Organised crime groups, criminal agendas, violence and conflict: implications for engagement, negotiations and peace processes.
Huma Haider, SOC ACE Evidence Review Paper 3, 2023.

Old wine, new bottles? The challenge of state threats.
Matthew Redhead, SOC ACE Research Paper 32, 2025.

SOC ACE APPROACHES

SOC ACE research has a number of different approaches that policymakers and practitioners can apply to their own work in different contexts.

Moving from 'political won't to political will' for more feasible interventions to tackle serious organised crime and corruption.
Heather Marquette, SOC ACE Briefing Note 1, 2022.
This adapts Carmen Malena's approach to political will as political want + political can + political must and provides a structured set of prompt questions to assist users.

Politics, uncertainty and interoperability challenges: the potential for sensemaking to improve multiagency approaches.
Christopher Baber, Andrew Howes, James Knight and Heather Marquette, SOC ACE Briefing Note 22, 2022.
This approach looks at the challenges of multiagency teams in addressing SOC, suggesting ways in which sensemaking (the process of understanding complex and dynamic situations) can help improve multiagency analysis and decision-making.

Organised crime as irregular warfare: a framework for assessment and strategic response.
David H. Ucko and Thomas A. Marks, SOC ACE Research Paper 19, 2023.
Drawing on lessons from irregular warfare, this framework consists of two-parts: the Strategic Estimate (which maps the problem, explores its drivers, frames and strategies) and the Course of Action (which uses the Estimate to design an appropriate strategy).

How to map and combat urban organised crime: Lessons from the Medellín Impact Lab.
Christopher Blattman, Benjamin Lessing and Santiago Tobón, SOC ACE Briefing Note 33, 2025.
This note sets out lessons on how the research team have applied the four-pillar impact lab methodology working with Medellín's local government, police, and local non-governmental organisations to diagnose the problem of extortion, to develop, scale and evaluate interventions, and to create scope for a new framework of accountability.

Information manipulation and organised crime.
Tena Prelec, SOC ACE Research Paper 22, 2023.
This framework for understanding the organised crime-information manipulation nexus sets out four dimensions to distinguish different levels of crime-state engagement: confrontation (foreseeing high competition between OC groups and the state), enforcement-evasion (low competition), alliance (low collaboration) and integration (high collaboration), along with two further organisational dimensions: integration (aligned with the crime-state nexus) and intensity (the potentially varying intensity of information manipulation activities).

The Illicit Financial Flows (IFFs) Pyramid.
Tuesday Reitano, SOC ACE Research Paper 14, 2022.
This conceptual model helps to explain the three dominant means by which IFFs are enabled, moved and held: financial flows, trade flows and informal flows, presenting a helpful tool for organising information related to IFFs and for improving understanding of the major negative impacts and harms that IFFs exert on societies and economies, especially in regions where greater levels of informality exist.

Corruption Functionality Framework.
Heather Marquette and Caryn Peiffer, GI ACE.
This four-step framework supports policymakers and practitioners in better understanding the underlying functions that corruption fulfils in response to specific problems, types and sectors in order to develop more effective responses that may be less likely to unintentionally cause harm.

Testing to see if an awareness messaging campaign about 'social bads' will actually work: why experimental techniques are best.
Caryn Peiffer and Nic Cheeseman, SOC ACE Briefing Note 26, 2024.
This note explains why rolling out messaging campaigns without piloting, or even with testing through focus groups and interviews, can produce disappointing results that may even backfire, and sets out an improved approach for tailoring, targeting and testing messages (the 'three T's') using household level population-based survey experiments.

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