



Anticipating future corruption

Strengthening anti-corruption through foresight and anticipatory governance

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About this working paper

This Working Paper explores how insights from foresight and anticipatory governance can strengthen anti-corruption approaches and initiatives. It aims to:

- explain why it is important to understand corruption as a challenge that arises in complex social systems and consider the implications of this for the fight against corruption;
- present key approaches in foresight and anticipatory governance; and
- show how insights from these approaches can help develop and implement more forward-looking and adaptive anti-corruption strategies by anticipating unintended consequences and identifying future risks and opportunities.

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Executive summary

Corruption is a complex problem. It emerges within broad political, economic and social contexts, and is sustained by the actors that are part of those systems. Corruption is not just an anomaly or the result of a few bad apples. It is a functional tool for achieving goals and is enacted through networks whose members and strategies change over time. Traditional anti-corruption approaches that aim to reduce isolated and individual corrupt behaviour are therefore increasingly seen as ineffective in addressing corruption as a dynamic and evolving phenomenon. What is needed are adaptive anti-corruption interventions.

This Working Paper explores how insights from foresight and anticipatory governance – approaches geared towards addressing complex problems – can inform the design and implementation of more forward-looking and adaptive anti-corruption strategies. Strategic foresight, i.e. the systematic exploration of multiple possible futures, and anticipatory governance, i.e. the institutional embedding of foresight in policy cycles, offer a suite of practical tools. Examples of such tools include:

- Cross-impact analysis: assesses how different variables react to each other and how this could influence potential outcomes.
- Horizon scanning: monitors emerging trends and signals of change.
- Trend analysis: tracks macro-level changes.
- Scenario building: projects plausible futures.

Applying foresight and anticipatory governance methods can support more effective detection of corruption problems and inform how we respond to them. They help us better understand how actors within a system respond to each other and to changes in the environment, such as new enforcement efforts or major societal and political transformations.

These insights are critical for designing and implementing interventions that regularly review underlying assumptions, anticipate backlash or corruption displacement, and are more effective, resilient and responsive to their context. This is important because change is non-linear, meaning the outcomes of anti-corruption interventions may be uncertain.

The ways in which foresight and anticipatory governance can strengthen anti-corruption strategies are illustrated using real-life case studies of border corruption at the port of Rotterdam in the Netherlands and the Kapitan Andreevo land border checkpoint between Bulgaria and Türkiye.

In both settings, well-intentioned efforts to strengthen enforcement (for example, enhanced border controls and EU accession-related regulatory changes) inadvertently fuelled new corruption risks, higher bribes and more sophisticated criminal strategies. Yet, the examples also illustrate very practically how incorporating insights from foresight and anticipatory governance approaches can

help anti-corruption practitioners anticipate these consequences, track behavioural signals and adapt interventions before harm occurs.

The paper proposes a three-step framework:

- **Mapping the system:** Understand corruption as emerging from a complex system of actors, incentives and context.
- **Anticipating actor responses and unintended consequences:** Use foresight tools to work out how actors may react to a reform, and to build indicators that catch both risks and progress early.
- **Scanning the horizon for trends, new risks and opportunities:** Track macro-level (political, economic, legal, technological, societal) shifts that create new corruption risks or open windows for reform.

At the same time, the paper emphasises that artificial intelligence tools and other technological innovations can support all three steps, for instance by accelerating scenario generation, processing large volumes of data or modelling how actors might respond to an anti-corruption intervention.

Nevertheless, the paper underlines that foresight and anticipatory governance are not panaceas. Corruption thrives in conditions of irreducible uncertainty, and an element of unpredictability will always persist. Beyond the tools they offer, these approaches are valuable because they prompt us to ask different questions. Why does corruption persist here? Who benefits from the status quo? What signals would indicate changing behaviour? How might actors adapt to a new reform?

The following key recommendations for policymakers and anti-corruption practitioners emerge from the analysis:

- Shift the focus of anti-corruption intervention design and implementation from linear to adaptive forms.
- Adopt a complexity lens from the outset of an anti-corruption intervention.
- Incorporate foresight and anticipatory thinking into the design of anti-corruption interventions.
- Fine-tune the scale of foresight and anticipatory governance work according to the context, the knowledge of those involved and the resources available.
- Consider how AI tools and other technological solutions can support foresight and anticipatory governance objectives, while also recognising their limitations.

1 Introduction

This paper explores how understanding corruption as a phenomenon emerging from complex systems can improve our grasp of its resilience and adaptability. Building on this, it explores how tools and approaches from foresight and anticipatory governance – geared towards addressing complex problems – can strengthen anti-corruption approaches and initiatives by anticipating unintended consequences and identifying future risks and opportunities.

This research draws on two types of sources: desk research on scientific and grey literature on foresight and anticipatory governance, and two case studies analysing the evolution of corruption at borders as part of the Horizon Europe FALCON (Fight Against Large-scale Corruption and Organised Crime Networks) project.

The paper is organised as follows:

- Section 2 explains why it is important to understand corruption as a complex problem, and considers the implications for anti-corruption approaches.
- Section 3 presents key insights from foresight and anticipatory governance to inform the design of strategies to tackle complex problems.
- Section 4 explores how these insights can strengthen anti-corruption efforts.
- Section 5 concludes the analysis and offers five recommendations for policymakers and anti-corruption practitioners.

2 Corruption as a complex phenomenon

This section elaborates on the conceptual framework that characterises the phenomenon of corruption in contemporary times. This conceptualisation represents the basis for explaining why methods such as foresight and anticipatory governance are increasingly relevant in the fight against corruption.

The framework is based on the idea that corruption is a complex phenomenon, and that complex systems are inherently evolving and adaptive. This suggests that corruption is also evolving and adapting over time. Therefore, methods and techniques that help us explore the future can be useful for understanding how corruption may manifest itself in the future, as well as the risks and unintended consequences that may arise.

2.1 The traditional approach: corruption as a *complicated* problem to solve

Tackling corruption involves properly identifying and understanding the problem and finding the right solutions, such as strengthening systems, institutions, laws and enforcement mechanisms. The ultimate goal is to prevent or detect corrupt practices more effectively.

The underlying key idea is to ascribe causality to anti-corruption initiatives by identifying the root causes of corruption and designing and implementing anti-corruption initiatives that are tailored to each case. At first sight, finding the correct anti-corruption prescription to address a particular challenge can seem like a *complicated* problem.

To explain what is meant by “complicated” here, think of a toaster: it has many parts, and one loose screw can prevent the whole thing from working. To fix the toaster, one must find the loose screw to tighten it so that the machine will work again.

In conventional anti-corruption thinking, we try to understand why corruption happens by identifying the disconnected parts, the loose screw (Ang 2024; Ang 2025). This might be the laws that need amending, the lack of specific skills or insufficient awareness on rights and entitlements. These are understood as the loopholes that allow corruption to flourish, generating the incentives that fuel requests for and acceptance of bribes. Once we identify and fix these problems, we will have toast – or, in anti-corruption language, we will have increased the likelihood of reducing corruption.

The “corruption as a complicated problem” view paves the way for seeking the one solution (or set of solutions) that will fix the problem. For example, police officers with low salaries may request bribes from citizens to avoid issuing tickets and supplement their income. A traditional anti-corruption analysis would suggest that increasing police officers' salaries would make them less likely to request bribes,

as they would no longer need to supplement their low wages, thereby reducing corruption. By doing this, we are tightening the loose screw.

Many scholars have criticised this view of corruption as a linear phenomenon (Mungiu-Pippidi 2016; Hudson et al. 2025; Hudson 2026a; Heywood 2016). At the heart of the problem is the way corruption is viewed as a technical issue – as if it were a machine that needs to be re-engineered.

However, mounting evidence suggests that such technical fixes rarely manage to conclusively deter or prevent corruption. Consider a famous experiment from Ghana that found that doubling police incomes did not reduce petty corruption. Rather, it caused the officers to intensify their efforts to collect bribes, and the value and amounts of these bribes increased (Foltz and Opoku-Agyemang 2015). The measure was meant to tighten the screw, but it loosened it even further.

2.2 Corruption emerges out of *complex* systems

With the oversimplified view of corruption as linear reaching its limits, attention is increasingly paid to how corruption emerges from behaviours arising in *complex* social systems (Hudson et al. 2025).

A complex adaptive system is a system in which many actors interact and adapt to one another and their environments. Out of these interactions and adaptations, corruption emerges as a collectively adopted solution to cope with challenges and problems characterising citizens' everyday life. One of the most significant issues for citizens in this context is their relationship with the state and public services, and the problems that may arise from it. It is no coincidence, therefore, that the state's performance can be regarded as a key factor in shaping citizens' behaviour, including corrupt behaviour (Baez-Camargo et al. 2022).

Complex systems involve an intricate interplay of the social, political, economic, legal and technological spheres (Ang 2024; Ang 2025; Whiting and Park 2023). In such a context, it is difficult to discern the relationship between cause and effect because there are many factors, feedback loops and non-linearities at play (Snowden and Boone 2007). This perspective of corruption as emerging from complex systems has concrete implications.

Let's go back to the example of a police officer asking drivers for bribes during traffic stops. Rather than viewing this behaviour as an isolated incident, we could consider whether it may be the result of broader political, economic or social factors. In a context of resource scarcity, where salaries of public officials are low, police officers may use bribes to supplement their income to meet personal and family needs. Drivers, for their part, realise that offering a bribe to a police officer is cheaper and less cumbersome than paying a speeding ticket. The functionality of bribery for both traffic officers and citizens helps to spread the practice, so more and more individuals join in. Bribery of traffic officials thus becomes normalised.

Over time, both sides adapt: citizens routinely offer bribes, officials come to expect them. Newcomers (whether honest officials or drivers) feel pressured to conform or

get punished by the system. For instance, they may have to endure a lengthy process to pay the fine, or face hostility from other police officers for not acting like them.

Corruption becomes an emergent behaviour; no single police officer or citizen set out to create a corrupt system. Rather, it emerges from the behaviour of many actors within the system in a context of weak governance where such conduct is not effectively punished and remains functional to all parties involved.

Therefore, increasing salaries alone is insufficient to address all the factors contributing to this behaviour. It can even have surprising unintended consequences, for instance, intensifying corruption behaviours.

It is necessary to add a further element to the picture here. Recent empirical evidence supports the understanding that corruption is networked (Costa and Baez Camargo 2026; Baez-Camargo et al. 2022; Costa 2022a, 2017; Marquette and Peiffer 2021). Corruption as a networked phenomenon (Czibik et al. 2021; Yu et al. 2020) is based on multidirectional social exchanges, repetition and peer pressure (Cartier-Bresson 1997; Granovetter 2007). This applies to both grand corruption (Costa 2022b) and petty corruption (Baez-Camargo et al. 2022).

Consequently, corruption does not occur in isolation. It is embedded in the practices and norms of networks of actors, including public officials, private businesses, intermediaries and sometimes criminal organisations. It arises out of layered problem-solving behaviours among the multitude of individuals and clusters that constitute complex social systems.

In addition, these corrupt networks are not static. In fact, they are inherently complex ecosystems that are evolving and adapting over time. Their members constantly adjust their behaviours, shift alliances and change their *modus operandi* in response to reforms, new technologies or changes in political and economic structures (Lubrano 2023; Costa and Baez Camargo 2026). For instance, adaptive responses from corrupt networks can be triggered by: (i) the characteristics of the legal framework; (ii) the level of technological advancement and the introduction of innovations; (iii) market changes in supply and demand forces; or (iv) political shifts.

Section 4 will trace this dynamic in more detail through two FALCON case studies of border corruption – at the port of Rotterdam and the Kapitan Andreevo border checkpoint – where well-intentioned enforcement reforms triggered exactly this kind of adaptive, networked response.

Therefore, adopting approaches to tackling corruption that align with the complex nature of the systems they are intended to influence is important, not least because linear assumptions about cause and effect will not be able to tackle the systemic nature of corruption or its non-linear traits (Ang 2024).

Rather than adopting a machine-like approach to fighting corruption (the toaster analogy), we could use the analogy of a garden that needs to be tended, involving many different types of flora and fauna, each with their own functions and interactions that impact each other (Hudson 2024, Hudson 2026b). This helps us to understand why change is not necessarily linear, and how corruption patterns are both emergent and adaptive. For this reason, corruption problems may be highly

resistant to reform efforts. Even worse, new anti-corruption measures may provoke a backlash or simply shift the risk of corruption elsewhere.

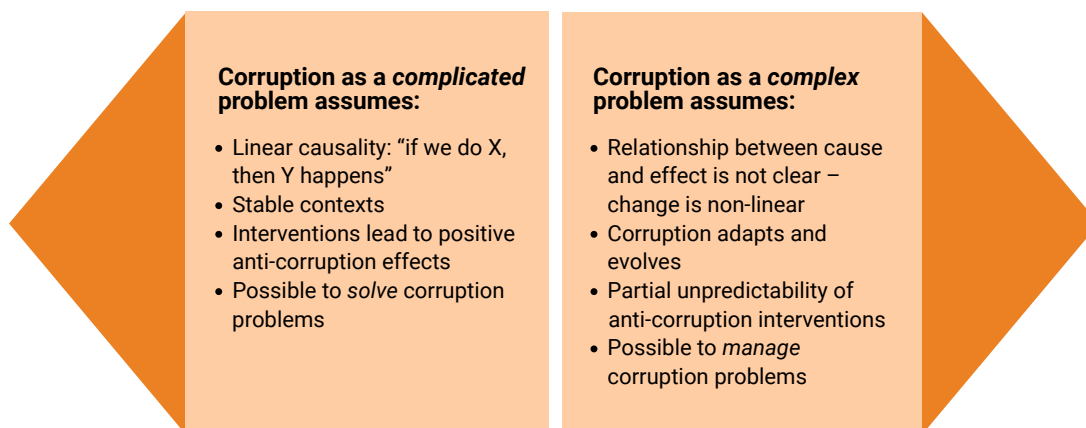


Figure 1: Corruption as a complicated problem versus a complex problem.

Viewing corruption as a complex rather than a complicated problem has important implications for how we design and implement anti-corruption initiatives. With this in mind, the next section explores how insights from foresight and anticipatory governance – geared towards finding better approaches to addressing complex problems – can also help to strengthen anti-corruption initiatives.

3 Foresight and anticipatory governance

3.1 Introducing foresight and anticipatory governance

Strategic foresight and anticipatory governance can help develop better approaches to address complex problems.

Strategic foresight can be defined as “structured and explicit exploration of multiple futures to inform decision-making” (OECD 2019). Strategic foresight typically involves scanning the horizon for signs of emerging change, developing and exploring a diversity of possible future scenarios and identifying potential implications for the strategies and policies being developed in the present. Strategic foresight can provide a powerful foundation for the development of forward-looking public policies and help to ensure the future-readiness of existing policies, particularly in the context of complex and uncertain environments (Prityi et al. 2021).

Anticipatory governance is the “systematic embedding and application of strategic foresight throughout the entire governance architecture, including policy analysis, engagement, and decision-making” (OECD 2019). It can involve a system of institutions, rules and norms that use foresight and anticipation methods to prepare for possible and potential future scenarios (Tönurist and Hanson 2020).

Foresight and anticipatory governance approaches have been applied to strengthen policymaking in various fields, such as disruptive technological development, demographic pressures and climate change (Guston 2014; Koskimaa and Raunio 2022; Poli 2019; Vervoort and Gupta 2018; Williams and Godson 2002).

Foresight and anticipatory governance go hand in hand: they help us to understand what is to come and strengthen our capacity to respond to it (Fuerth 2009; Kimbell and Vesnić-Alujević 2020). A key characteristic of foresight and anticipatory governance is the ability to recognise the factors contributing to future changes in the system and its environment. However, they are also action-oriented; the ability to look ahead aims to strengthen our current approaches.

3.2 Approaches to foresight and anticipatory governance

There are many approaches to foresight and anticipatory governance. We synthesised examples and their features in the [Annex](#). While the approaches and methods can differ, some key aims emerge:

- Foresight is about understanding how the broader context may evolve and what it may look like in the future. It involves collecting data, making sense of it and developing scenarios.
- Anticipatory governance uses this data and the insights from the scenario building to strengthen policy action. It moves from evidence to action.



Figure 2: Leveraging foresight and anticipatory governance to develop forward-looking policies.

Key methods of foresight and anticipatory governance include collecting data from diverse sources to identify significant changes, engaging with experts and their areas of expertise, analysing the data to interpret emerging evidence and using this analysis to inform policymaking. Some examples include:

Cross-impact analysis: This method helps assess how changes may occur by considering how different variables may react to each other and the extent to which they influence potential outcomes (Discover Your Solutions 2024).

Horizon scanning: This qualitative method relies on the analysis of published materials from research, news and social media sites, as well as expert engagement, to gather insights on emerging risks, events, threats and opportunities (Farinha et al. 2023; Joint Research Centre 2024).

Trend analysis: The focus is on understanding the emergence of macro-level trends, including mega trends at the global level, which can impact changes at the national and local levels. Examples include the evolution of inequalities and associated risks at a societal level, changes in voting trends and governance structures, and shifts in the balance of international relations between regions and countries (Dufva and Rekola 2023; Whyte 2024).

Scenario building: This aims to illustrate possible future developments by creating alternative descriptions of the future. It involves emphasising differences with the present and revealing alternative choices for interventions and activities, as well as their unintended consequences. Scenarios can be constructed based on interviews, expert panels and focus group discussions. The Delphi method is a well-known technique that supports this process and helps inform decision making on policy formation. It involves engaging panels of expert stakeholders through interviews and repeated rounds of surveys to gather insights on how to strengthen the formulation of innovative policies in key areas (Dannemand et al. 2023).

Technology can be incorporated into various areas, for instance, using AI in support of scenario building (Trujillo-Cabezas 2021). In fact, all the techniques described above can benefit from the application of AI and machine learning tools and solutions:

- a) Accelerating labour- and time-intensive activities (e.g. generating scenarios in response to changes in the environment or system, or using technology to search for and categorise online sources).
- b) Including an AI tool as an actor in the production of knowledge on potential futures (e.g. discussing interview results or systematising literature reviews).
- c) Assigning the AI tool the role of a character in a scenario (e.g. an acting agent, covering a specific role in the narrative) and asking it to interact with humans.
- d) Using AI to organise results (e.g. producing a cross-impact matrix from raw data or extracting trends from big data).

4 Strengthening anti-corruption approaches and interventions

The following section explains how insights from foresight and anticipatory governance can help us strengthen the design and implementation of anti-corruption programmes, interventions and policies. The three key steps are:

- 1) **Mapping the system:** Understand corruption as emerging from a complex system of actors, incentives and context.
- 2) **Anticipating actor responses and unintended consequences:** Use foresight tools to work out how actors may react to a reform, and to build indicators that catch both risks and progress early.
- 3) **Scanning the horizon for trends, new risks and opportunities:** Track macro-level (political, economic, legal, technological, societal) shifts that create new corruption risks or open windows for reform.

It is important to note that these steps are part of an ongoing cycle, not a one-off measure.

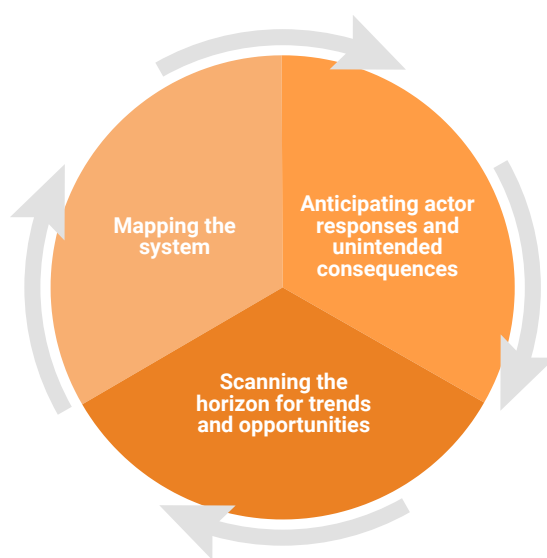


Figure 3: A continuous cycle: three steps to apply foresight and anticipatory governance to anti-corruption interventions.

Research on border corruption with insights from two case studies on the port of Rotterdam and the Kapitan Andreevo land border crossing provides the background and examples to show how adopting foresight and anticipatory governance can strengthen efforts to combat corruption and crime.

4.1 Step 1: Mapping the system

The FALCON project studied border corruption in two settings: the port of Rotterdam in the Netherlands and the Kapitan Andreevo land border checkpoint between Bulgaria and Türkiye. It soon became apparent that focusing on the individual corruption practices of border staff was insufficient to understand border corruption involving enforcement personnel.

The port of Rotterdam is the largest port in Europe. In such a setting, illicit trade latches onto legal trade. This makes Rotterdam's seaport a critical node and gateway for the trafficking of drugs from Latin America into Europe. Similarly, the Kapitan Andreevo border checkpoint is one of the busiest land border crossings in Europe, connecting EU and non-EU regions, with different regulatory environments shaping trafficking patterns into Europe.

In order to understand border corruption and the practices of enforcement personnel, we adopted a broader view, gaining an understanding of the ecosystems of ports and land borders, the various stakeholders involved and the criminal networks that use these border spaces to enter Europe and traffic illicit goods (Costa et al. 2026; Kassa and Costa 2025).

To understand border corruption and bribery of enforcement personnel at ports and border checkpoints – or indeed any other type of corruption problem – it is important to dig deeper. Why does it happen? Who are the people involved, and which role profiles are essential for a corrupt exchange? What purpose does corruption serve for those involved? What are the mechanisms? What are the specific corruption patterns emerging? Are they patterns, or rather outliers?

Applying such questions to the study of border corruption could, for example, reveal that border personnel are co-opted, through collusion and coercion, to support criminal networks. Mapping out the relevant parties and their interests and motivations can help us to understand that corruption can arise from the interplay of many different factors. Weak governance, inadequate monitoring systems, the lure of financial gain, peer pressure and social norms that normalise “looking away” may all play a part.

System mapping tools can support this. The aims may differ; for instance, understanding system dynamics, identifying points of leverage and anticipating changes that may occur, or rather focusing on emergence, exploring underexplored areas where interventions may be fruitful (Lynn and Coffman 2024).

There are many ways to go about this, from simpler to more elaborate approaches. The important thing is that system mapping helps to shed light on the causal relationships and the emergent patterns and dynamics of the whole (the system) and its parts (the actors) (Hudson and Bain 2023). The UK Government Office for

Science offers guidance and examples in its 2023 “Introductory systems thinking toolkit for civil servants” (UK Government Office for Science 2023).¹

Where possible, system mapping should be collaborative and involve different perspectives to help build a better understanding of how stakeholders interact with each other and with broad context-dependent factors leading to the occurrence of corruption. The mapping can support analysis, ongoing reflection, learning and adaptation (Hudson and Bain 2023).

Corrupt behaviour among enforcement personnel cannot be understood by focusing on their individual interests and incentives only. We have to look at the bigger picture, the system around it.

This has significant implications. If we only consider individual behaviours when designing approaches to combat corruption, we assume that the context is stable and that no other factors are shaping it. Viewing corruption as a complex system – that is, taking a broader view of the problem by applying a systems lens – can help us to identify different entry points to the manifold drivers of corruption and suggest new or different approaches.

Applying this systems lens to the FALCON case studies surfaced concrete findings. In Rotterdam, stronger enforcement against drug trafficking and the digitalisation and automation of controls did not eliminate corruption – it changed who was drawn into it. Bribery of inspectors, previously used to avoid detection of drugs in shipments, increasingly gave way to collusion and coercion targeting a different profile of port staff: those with the credentials to access and manipulate automated systems.

At the Kapitan Andreevo border checkpoint, Bulgaria's accession to the EU – intended to strengthen the regulatory environment – coincided with higher bribes to bypass new EU regulations and tax regimes, the emergence of routine corruption schemes across units and authorities, and new protection mechanisms involving high-level politicians and bureaucrats. New concealment strategies and smuggling routes emerged at both sites (Costa et al. 2026; Kassa and Costa 2025).

4.2 Step 2: Anticipating actor responses and unintended consequences

Mapping the actors in a system and their interests and incentives (step 1) is the foundation for a further task: working out how a new anti-corruption measure is likely to trigger reactions and adaptations among the actors it affects – often in ways that were not intended.

¹ For more specific approaches to system mapping see (Hudson and Bain 2023) and these examples:

- SOAS-ACE approach, <https://ace.soas.ac.uk/publication/a-new-approach-to-anti-corruption-when-rule-breakers-rule/> and <https://ace.soas.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/ACE-SynthesisPaper001-MakingAntiCorruptionReal-1.pdf>
- The Governance Action Hub, <https://r4d.org/projects/governance-action-hub>
- Cynefin's Estuarine framework, https://cynefin.io/wiki/Estuarine_framework
- Actor-based change framework, <https://actorbasedchange.com/resources>

The key shift here is moving away from the assumption that a change will have only one effect. Strengthening border enforcement, for instance, may reduce trafficking opportunities in the short term, but – as the Rotterdam and Kapitan Andreevo case studies show – it can also displace the corruption risk elsewhere, change who is targeted for bribery or push criminal networks towards new concealment strategies (Costa et al. 2026; Kassa and Costa 2025).

Cross-impact analysis is a useful method here: it helps identify how a change affecting one group of actors may trigger responses not only from that group but from others connected to it. It can, for example, be applied to understand the likely positive and negative effects of increased penalties for bribery of customs officials, or of digitalising controls to reduce discretionary decision making by inspectors. The Delphi method – bringing groups of experts together through iterative rounds to build consensus – is a complementary way of exploring how different actors might respond to a proposed measure.

An important focus of this exercise is anticipating negative unintended consequences. Which actors benefit from the status quo and might resist or undermine a reform that threatens their interests? How might they respond? And who has the power to block change? Thinking through these questions in advance – rather than only after a reform is implemented – helps identify the complementary measures needed to pre-empt backlash.

The value of this exercise lies in sensitising decision-makers to the range of reactions they might expect, so that they can watch for early signs of adaptive behaviour once an intervention is under way. Where a system's actors and recurring patterns have already been mapped (step 1), monitoring for these signs afterwards is more tractable: We know roughly what a shift away from established behaviour would look like. This makes it easier to define red flags that indicate potential changes in criminal or corrupt activity – and to act on them before harm compounds.

The same logic applies in reverse to positive change. Foresight work should also identify which stakeholders stand to benefit from a reform and could become champions of it, and where overlapping interests across stakeholders can be leveraged to build momentum for reform. Practical examples include shifts in organisational culture – such as growing pride in public service, or a sense that integrity enhances professional standing – which, when detected early, can be reinforced so that new norms take hold and become self-sustaining. We propose calling these “progress markers”; the positive counterpart to red flags, tracked through the same monitoring effort rather than a separate one.

Both red flags and progress markers depend on having something concrete to watch. Drug prices are one example of an indicator on the risk side: if prices stay stable despite intensified enforcement, this suggests supply is unaffected and traffickers are likely using counter-strategies. Unexplained wealth among public officials or politically exposed persons is another red flag. On the progress side, indicators might include measurable increases in whistleblowing, voluntary compliance or public trust survey results following a reform.

4.3 Step 3: Scanning the horizon for trends, new risks and opportunities

Corruption and criminal strategies do not evolve in isolation: they are shaped by broader political, economic, legal, technological and societal change. The Rotterdam and Kapitan Andreevo case studies illustrate this. High levels of digitalisation combined with current geopolitical tensions leave the port of Rotterdam exposed to a growing risk of cyber-attacks (Austin et al. 2025). Bulgaria's accession to the EU – a major shift in its regulatory and economic environment – reshaped the corruption and smuggling mechanisms used at the Kapitan Andreevo border checkpoint (Petrova 2023; Costa et al. 2026).

In both cases, criminal networks also drew on existing social connections and know-how to adapt their methods to a changed environment (Yuen Yuen Ang 2025; Lubrano 2023).

Trend analysis and horizon scanning are the two techniques best suited to anticipating these macro-level effects. Trend analysis can help assesses how major developments in politics, the economy, law, technology or society are likely to shape the emergence of new forms of corruption, or new channels of exchange and communication between co-offenders. Horizon scanning complements this by monitoring emerging threats and events – through reviewing threat reports, research, news and expert engagement – to flag developments (geopolitical shifts, the erosion of international rule-of-law norms, conflict, economic pressure) that widen or close the space for reform.

Both methods support future scenario building: projections of how corruption strategies might evolve and adapt in response to macro-level change (geopolitical shifts, the erosion of international rule-of-law norms, conflict, economic pressure), and of where windows of opportunity for reform may open or close. Applying the Delphi method can be useful here, too. Watching future developments alongside current ones makes anti-corruption policies and interventions more resilient.

Together, steps 2 and 3 give anti-corruption work a different orientation: away from asking how corruption operated in the past, towards exploring how it may evolve next. This does not mean predicting the future with certainty – it means exploring plausible developments and their implications, so that new measures can be designed with an eye to the unintended consequences, adaptive behaviours and new risks they might generate.

4.4 Overarching findings

Applying a complexity lens to anti-corruption work means treating corruption as an emergent property of a system, not an isolated problem to be fixed. Step 1 supplies the foundation: mapping the actors, incentives and contextual drivers that sustain corruption. Step 2 builds on this by anticipating how these actors are likely to respond to a given anti-corruption measure – considering potential backlash and unintended consequences to guard against, as well as positive behaviour changes to reinforce. Here, we can apply cross-impact analysis and a shared set

of red flags and progress markers to monitor change as it happens. Step 3 widens the lens further, using trend analysis and horizon scanning to track how macro-level political, economic, legal, technological and societal shifts might create new corruption risks or new openings for reform.

None of this amounts to prediction. Corruption thrives in conditions of irreducible uncertainty, and a degree of unpredictability will always remain. What foresight and anticipatory governance offer is not certainty but a more systematic way of thinking about uncertainty, adaptation and change.

These ideas can be applied at any scale – from informal team brainstorming to map a system's actors, to structured stakeholder research supporting a full red-flag and progress-marker monitoring system, to large-scale analysis of high-risk processes such as public procurement. The approach adopted should be tailored to match the context, including the available capacity, time and resources.

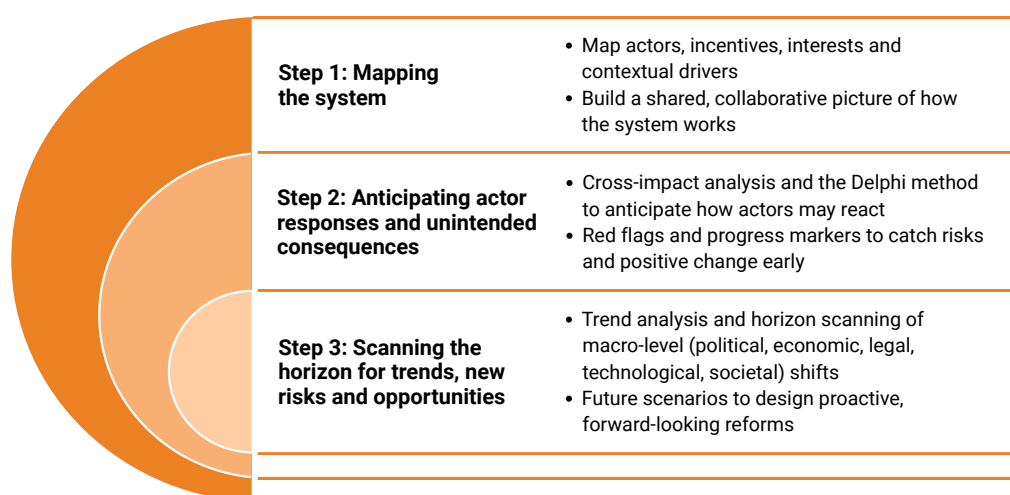


Figure 4: Applying foresight and anticipatory governance to strengthen the development and implementation of anti-corruption efforts.

5 Conclusion and recommendations

Corruption is not simply a *complicated* problem that can be *solved* by identifying and fixing the underlying cause. This paper argues that corruption is a *complex* problem that we can attempt to tackle and *manage* using specific approaches.

Corruption emerges from complex systems and evolves. Beneath isolated corruption incidents or behaviours, there are broader economic, social and political drivers that fuel corruption risks. Corrupt behaviours are often functional and networked, relying on informal networks where members trust each other and share social norms and informal practices. This makes them strong, nimble, resilient and adaptive. Corruption strategies are not static, but adapt and evolve in response to new detection and enforcement measures. Big-picture shifts at national, regional or global levels also inform the emergence of new strategies for corruption and crime. This has real implications for efforts to fight corruption.

Recognising that corruption is a complex problem helps us to understand that change is not linear and that corrupt behaviour can be resistant to change. Anti-corruption reforms can also generate backlash or simply displace corruption risks elsewhere. This is where foresight and anticipatory governance come into play. These approaches are geared towards addressing complex problems, and the insights gained can be used to strengthen the design and implementation of forward-looking and adaptive anti-corruption interventions.

The value of this framework lies less in the sophistication of any single foresight tool or method than in the questions it prompts practitioners to ask before an intervention is designed: Who benefits from the status quo? How might affected actors adapt? What early signals, whether warning signs or signs of progress, should we be watching for? Building the answers to these questions into the design, monitoring and evaluation of anti-corruption work allows it to move from a reactive to a proactive footing.

This move becomes even more important as corruption grows increasingly intertwined with organised crime, geopolitical instability and rapid technological change. Foresight and anticipatory governance do not make corruption predictable, but they permit policymakers and reform implementers to remain aware of and alert to future developments and make better context-specific judgements as conditions evolve.

Based on the evidence and insights presented in this Working Paper, the following five recommendations can help anti-corruption practitioners, policymakers, donors and programme implementers plan, design and implement anti-corruption interventions that differ from standard practice (Hudson et al. 2025; Ang 2025):

Recommendation 1: Shift the focus of anti-corruption intervention design and implementation from linear to adaptive forms. This involves acknowledging that uncertainty and non-linear change are inherent features of complex systems. The effectiveness of anti-corruption interventions can be enhanced by incorporating feedback loops and conducting regular reviews of assumptions, alongside explicit strategies for anticipating backlash or the displacement of corruption risk elsewhere. Rather than attempting the essentially impossible task of predicting the future, the goal is to develop approaches that are resilient and responsive when outcomes differ from the plan.

Recommendation 2: Adopt a complexity lens from the outset of an anti-corruption intervention – starting with mapping the system. This means avoiding the view of corruption as a technical problem with a single cause and instead treating it as emerging from a complex system of actors, incentives and contextual drivers. Designing an anti-corruption intervention should begin with mapping these actors, their informal networks and the political, economic, legal, technological and societal factors shaping the environment in which corruption occurs. Even basic system mapping can reveal entry points and drivers that might otherwise be overlooked, preventing oversimplified theories of change.

Recommendation 3: Incorporate foresight and anticipatory thinking into the design of anti-corruption interventions.

- a) Use **cross-impact analysis and the Delphi method** to stress-test new anti-corruption measures before implementation. Critical questions here should include: Who might be harmed or threatened by this reform? How could they adapt their behaviours and strategies in response? What unintended consequences and unexpected risks could result? Involving diverse stakeholders – frontline practitioners, local communities, subject-matter experts – in structured foresight exercises can reveal blind spots and enhance the effectiveness of anti-corruption intervention design.
- b) Develop **red flag and progress marker systems** and monitor their output. Red flags – indicating adaptive circumvention or emerging risk – and progress markers – indicating a reform taking hold, such as rising whistleblowing or shifts in organisational culture – should be tracked through the same monitoring effort. Technological solutions, including advanced risk assessment, predictive analytics or OSINT tools, can help detect both kinds of signal early. Integrating them into monitoring and evaluation frameworks allows anti-corruption interventions to detect and respond to emerging changes in real time rather than after harm has occurred.
- c) Use **trend analysis and horizon scanning** to track macro-level shifts – geopolitical, technological, economic, legal and societal – that may create new corruption risks or open new windows of opportunity. Corruption and criminal behaviours do not evolve in isolation: they respond to and exploit these broader structural changes. Anti-corruption strategies that account for these shifts will be more resilient and better positioned to identify emerging opportunities for reform.

Recommendation 4: Fine-tune the scale of foresight and anticipatory governance work according to the context, the knowledge of those involved and the resources available. Foresight and anticipatory governance can be applied at any scale, from informal team-level brainstorming to map system actors, to structured stakeholder research supporting a full red-flag and progress-marker monitoring system, to large-scale analysis of high-risk processes such as public procurement. As capacities, resources and time are often limited, encourage the pragmatic and proportionate application of the approaches, ensuring that the scale matches the context.

Recommendation 5: Consider how AI tools and other technological solutions can support foresight and anticipatory governance objectives, while recognising their limitations. These technologies are not an end in themselves. AI can accelerate labour-intensive foresight work, such as scanning large volumes of information for signals of corruption risk, generating and stress-testing scenarios, modelling actor behaviour or organising cross-impact matrices and trend data. Practitioners should explore ways to integrate AI tools into their analytical workflows while acknowledging the continued importance of expert judgement and contextual knowledge that no tool can replace.

Annex: Foresight and anticipatory governance approaches

Foresight and anticipatory governance approaches		
Source	Scope	Features
Fuerth (2009)	Components of anticipatory governance	▪ A foresight system to anticipate possible futures. ▪ A networked system to integrate foresight exercises and policymaking cycles. ▪ A feedback system to measure performance. ▪ An open-minded institutional culture to help policymakers and practitioners drive this integration.
Minkinen (2019)	Components of anticipatory governance	▪ Foresight, planning, action and feedback.
Flyverbom and Garsten (2021)	Foresight approaches	▪ Indicative snapshots: statistical reports and data visualisations of the present to provide an indication of future trends. ▪ Prognostic correlations: data-driven, targeted profiling for use in communication, advertising and political campaigns, which aim to shape and reshape the future. ▪ Projected transformations: defining projections of current and future developments. ▪ Phantasmagorical fiction: predictions from futurists, consultants and think tanks to imagine possible futures.
Muiderman et al. (2023)	Steps in foresight and anticipatory governance	▪ First step: assessing the probability of futures as basis to inform policy planning and future risk mitigation strategies. The next step is based on planning activities and solutions to address those scenarios that have higher probability rates. ▪ Assessing the plausibility of alternative models and scenarios (rather than their probability) is used to build preparedness for navigating uncertain futures. ▪ Imagining pluralistic futures with the aim to mobilise various societal actors and clusters to co-create the conditions for a specific future.

		▪ Exploring the performative power of future imaginaries to explore the policy implications and consequences they can have in the present in terms of preparing legislative activities or policymaking processes.
European Environment Agency (2023)	Horizon scanning	▪ Signal spotting, signal scanning, sense-making and communication.
Guemes-Castorena (2009)	Steps in trend analysis	▪ Identifying an initial definition of the mega-trend under analysis and unpacking its main components, domains and labels. ▪ Reviewing significant information and findings on the chosen mega-trend. ▪ Revising the initial definition and conducting an internal validation process. ▪ Identifying concrete opportunities for innovations and changes. ▪ Stakeholder consultation and validation. ▪ Evaluating the potential feasibility of the solution.
Chuenjitwongsa (2017)	Delphi forecasting using expert opinions	▪ A Delphi exercise is a systematic process comprising several steps: selecting the topic; defining the exercise procedure; designing the questionnaire; formulating the statements to which respondents are asked to react; and selecting the expert panel.
Discover Your Solutions (2024)	Cross-impact analysis	▪ Identifying a list of contextual variables that contribute to characterising the complexity of a specific issue, field or domain. ▪ Organising these into a matrix to determine how they interact with and impact each other. ▪ The box represents the paired comparison; noting down the probability of one variable influencing the other. This probability can be determined using mathematics or a simple plus or minus system. ▪ Analysing the cross-impact matrix and its results.

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