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Research Article

Approaches to Anti-Corruption in Nigeria: Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) in Focus

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Abstract

This study examines the approaches to combating corruption in Nigeria through a critical evaluation of the initiatives and performance of the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC). Anchored in Institutional Theory, the research examines how formal regulations, organisational structures, and enforcement practices interact with informal norms to shape anti-corruption outcomes within Nigeria's governance system. The study employs a qualitative research design, drawing on in-depth semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, including ICPC officials, policymakers, and civil society actors in Abuja. These primary data are complemented by documentary analysis of ICPC reports and relevant policy documents, thereby enhancing contextual rigor and analytical depth. The findings reveal that the ICPC has implemented a range of preventive and enforcement strategies, such as system audits, public sensitisation campaigns, asset monitoring, and policy advisory roles, which have contributed to modest improvements in transparency and administrative accountability. However, the effectiveness of these initiatives is significantly constrained by entrenched structural and institutional challenges, including limited operational autonomy, inadequate funding, political interference, weak inter-agency collaboration, and institutional capacity gaps. The study further finds that compliance with anti-corruption measures is largely driven by coercive enforcement rather than deeply internalised normative values, raising concerns about the sustainability of such efforts. Moreover, the analysis uncovers a persistent gap between policy formulation and implementation, largely influenced by informal governance practices such as patronage networks and elite influence, which undermine consistent enforcement and weaken reform outcomes. These dynamics highlight the complexity of institutional behaviour within Nigeria's anti-corruption framework. The study concludes that although the ICPC has recorded incremental progress in advancing anti-corruption initiatives, its impact remains insufficient to achieve transformative change. It argues that strengthening institutional frameworks must be complemented by genuine political commitment and a shift toward value-driven accountability. Accordingly, the study recommends reinforcing institutional independence through legal safeguards, improving resource allocation, enhancing inter-agency coordination, and promoting sustained public engagement to foster a culture of accountability. Ultimately, effective anti-corruption outcomes in Nigeria depend on the interplay between institutional capacities, political will, and entrenched societal norms.

Keywords

Anti-corruption, ICPC, Governance, Institutional Effectiveness, Public Accountability

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1. Introduction

Corruption continues to represent one of the most deep-rooted and persistent challenges to governance and development in Nigeria. It cuts across all levels of public administration, weakening institutional capacity, distorting public policy implementation, and significantly undermining citizens' trust in government institutions [37]. Over time, corruption has evolved from isolated acts of misconduct into a systemic governance problem embedded within political and bureaucratic structures [34]. In Nigeria, corruption manifests in multiple forms, including bribery, embezzlement of public funds, procurement irregularities, nepotism, and abuse of office [26]. These practices have been closely linked to weak institutional frameworks, limited enforcement capacity, and entrenched patronage networks that prioritize private accumulation over public welfare [18]. Consequently, corruption has contributed to poor service delivery, infrastructural decay, and persistent underdevelopment despite abundant human and natural resources [40].

In response to the growing scale and complexity of corruption, the Nigerian government established the ICPC in 2000 through the Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Act. The Commission was created as part of broader institutional reforms aimed at strengthening accountability and restoring public confidence in governance [15]. Unlike enforcement-only agencies, the ICPC operates a multi-dimensional mandate that integrates prevention, enforcement, and public enlightenment strategies. Its preventive function includes system reviews of ministries, departments, and agencies (MDAs) to identify corruption-prone processes and recommend reforms. Its enforcement role involves investigation and prosecution of corruption-related offences, while its public enlightenment function focuses on educating citizens and promoting ethical standards in public service. This hybrid approach reflects an institutional recognition that sustainable anti-corruption outcomes require both punitive measures and structural reforms.

Despite the establishment of the ICPC and the implementation of various anti-corruption initiatives, corruption remains widespread and deeply entrenched in Nigeria's governance system. This persistent reality raises critical questions about the effectiveness of existing institutional mechanisms designed to combat corruption. Empirical evidence suggests that the gap between policy formulation and actual implementation remains significant, limiting the impact of anti-corruption reforms [26]. Key institutional challenges including limited operational autonomy, political interference, inadequate funding, and weak inter-agency coordination continue to constrain the effectiveness of the ICPC [15]. Furthermore, compliance with anti-corruption policies often appears to be driven more by coercive enforcement than by internalized ethical norms, raising concerns about the long-term sustainability of anti-corruption efforts [36]. Against this backdrop, this study critically examines how institutional structures, rules, and practices shape the effectiveness of anti-corruption strategies in Nigeria.

The main objective of this study is to assess the approaches and effectiveness of the ICPC in Nigeria's anti-corruption framework. Specifically, the study aims to:

1. Examine the approaches adopted by the ICPC in combating corruption in Nigeria,
2. Assess the effectiveness of ICPC in reducing corruption and promoting accountability,
3. Identify key institutional and structural constraints affecting the performance of the ICPC, and
4. Analyze Nigeria's anti-corruption efforts through the use of Institutional Theory, particularly focusing on coercive, normative, and regulatory pressures.

This study makes both theoretical and practical contributions to the discourse on anti-corruption and governance. Theoretically, it enriches Institutional Theory by applying it to the analysis of anti-corruption institutions in a developing country context, where institutional weaknesses and political dynamics significantly shape outcomes [5]. Basically; the study provides policy-relevant insights for strengthening the effectiveness of the ICPC and similar institutions. By identifying structural and operational gaps, it offers recommendations for improving institutional autonomy, accountability mechanisms, and inter-agency coordination. These insights are particularly relevant for policymakers, governance reform advocates, and anti-corruption practitioners in Nigeria and other developing democracies.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Conceptual Clarifications

2.1.1. Corruption

The concept of corruption remains highly contested, with no universally accepted definition due to its inherently normative and context-dependent nature. As [29] Observes, corruption is difficult to define in value-neutral terms because interpretations are often shaped by the ethical standards and moral perspectives of the observer. This makes it challenging to establish a universally agreed framework for identifying corruption, as scholars and institutions operate with differing normative assumptions. Conceptually, corruption presents a dual challenge: first, in its theoretical definition as an abstract phenomenon; and second, in its practical manifestation within specific socio-political and cultural contexts [3]. In many developing societies, including Nigeria, corruption is shaped by informal institutions such as patronage, nepotism, and familial obligations, which complicate the application of formal legal standards. These overlapping normative systems often generate moral ambiguity, where actions may be perceived differently depending on cultural expectations and institutional rules [7].

Scholarly definitions broadly range from narrow legal interpretations to wider socio-political understandings. In the narrow sense, corruption refers to the abuse of public office for private gain, including bribery, embezzlement, and misuse of authority [24, 9]. In the broader sense, it includes practices such as favoritism, patronage, and informal exchanges of benefits that may not always be illegal but are ethically questionable within governance systems. Studies by Heidenheimer, Rose-Ackerman, and Johnston highlight that legally defined corruption represents only a subset of wider corruptive practices embedded in political and administrative structures. From a structural perspective, corruption operates across legal-institutional, political-economic, and socio-cultural dimensions. It is driven by weak institutions, elite competition for resources, and societal norms that sometimes normalize informal exchanges [36]. In Nigeria, these dynamics are reinforced by clientelism and prebendalism, where public offices are often used as instruments of personal and group enrichment rather than public service [30].

Importantly, corruption is not a socially beneficial phenomenon, despite arguments suggesting localized gains. Rather, evidence shows that its benefits are unevenly distributed and concentrated among elites, while its costs are borne by the broader population [20]. Historical governance interventions in Nigeria further reflect the perception of corruption as a systemic threat requiring institutional correction rather than a functional social mechanism. So, corruption is best understood as a multidimensional and context-specific phenomenon involving the interaction of institutional weaknesses, elite incentives, and socio-cultural norms. Its persistence in Nigeria underscores the need for comprehensive anti-corruption strategies that go beyond legal enforcement to include institutional reform and value reorientation.

2.1.2. Anti-corruption

Anti-corruption refers to a broad set of institutional measures, policies, and governance practices aimed at preventing, detecting, and sanctioning corrupt behaviour in both public and private sectors. Rather than being a single policy tool, it represents a comprehensive framework designed to enhance transparency, strengthen accountability, and promote integrity within governance systems [17]. It therefore addresses both the structural causes of corruption and its observable manifestations. From a governance standpoint, anti-corruption involves deliberate interventions by state and non-state actors to reduce opportunities for the misuse of public office for private advantage [38]. These interventions typically include legal and regulatory reforms, institutional capacity building, financial oversight mechanisms, and citizen participation initiatives. In a similar vein, [34] describe anti-corruption as institutional arrangements that reshape incentives within public administration in order to discourage rent-seeking and encourage ethical conduct.

At the institutional level, anti-corruption is implemented through formal bodies such as oversight agencies, audit institutions, and judicial systems. The effectiveness of these institutions depends largely on their independence, resource availability, and enforcement capacity [22]. Within such systems, rules, norms, and enforcement mechanisms interact to influence compliance and behavioural outcomes, making institutional strength a key determinant of success [36]. In Nigeria context, anti-corruption strategies commonly combine preventive and punitive approaches. Preventive strategies include system reforms, transparency initiatives, and administrative reviews, while punitive measures focus on investigation, prosecution, and sanctions. Institutions like the ICPC exemplify this dual strategy by integrating enforcement activities with preventive system assessments and public awareness programmes [15].

Contemporary scholarship further stresses that anti-corruption efforts must go beyond formal legal frameworks to address informal institutions and socio-cultural realities. This is because corruption is often sustained by entrenched patronage systems, weak accountability norms, and socially embedded practices that cannot be eliminated through legislation alone [12]. As a result, anti-corruption is increasingly understood as a holistic reform process involving both institutional transformation and behavioural change. In essence, anti-corruption can be conceptualised as a multidimensional governance strategy aimed at curbing corruption through legal enforcement, institutional strengthening, and normative reorientation. Its effectiveness is ultimately shaped by the interaction between formal rules, institutional capacity, and societal values that influence compliance and accountability.

2.1.3. Anti-corruption Strategies

Anti-corruption strategies encompass a comprehensive set of institutional, legal, economic, and administrative interventions designed to reduce corruption risks, strengthen integrity systems, and promote ethical governance [38]. They are premised on the understanding that corruption is structurally embedded in governance systems and therefore requires multidimensional responses rather than isolated punitive actions [19]. From a governance reform perspective, anti-corruption strategies are typically divided into preventive, detective, and punitive mechanisms. Preventive strategies aim to reduce opportunities for corruption by reforming administrative systems, simplifying bureaucratic procedures, enhancing e-governance, and increasing transparency in public procurement and budgeting processes [34]. Detective mechanisms focus on identifying corrupt practices through audits, monitoring systems, and whistle-blowing frameworks, while punitive strategies involve investigation, prosecution, and sanctions intended to deter future misconduct [17].

Modern scholarship further expands anti-corruption strategies to include integrity-building measures such as ethics training for public officials, asset declaration systems, freedom of information laws, and civil society participation in governance oversight [37]. These approaches reflect a shift from a narrow enforcement-based model to a broader governance integrity framework that emphasises systemic resilience against corruption. In developing contexts such as Nigeria, the effectiveness of these strategies is often shaped by political will, institutional capacity, and the strength of enforcement agencies such as the ICPC.

2.1.4. Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC)

The ICPC is a statutory anti-corruption agency established by the Nigerian government in 2000 under the Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Act. It was created as part of broader institutional reforms aimed at addressing systemic corruption and strengthening accountability within public administration in Nigeria [15]. The Commission represents one of the central pillars of Nigeria's anti-corruption architecture, alongside other enforcement bodies and oversight institutions. Conceptually, the ICPC can be understood as a specialized public institution mandated to prevent, investigate, and prosecute corruption-related offences. Its establishment reflects a shift from ad hoc anti-corruption measures to a more structured and institutionalised approach to combating corruption [26]. Unlike purely punitive agencies, the ICPC adopts a preventive and systemic orientation, focusing not only on punishment but also on addressing structural weaknesses that enable corruption to thrive.

The mandate of the ICPC is typically conceptualised around three core functions: prevention, enforcement, and public education. The preventive function involves system reviews of ministries, departments, and agencies to identify and eliminate corruption-prone processes. The enforcement function includes investigation and prosecution of corruption cases, while the public enlightenment function focuses on sensitising citizens and promoting ethical values in governance [15]. This multi-dimensional approach reflects recognition that corruption is both a legal and behavioural problem requiring institutional and societal responses. From an institutional perspective, the ICPC operates within the broader framework of governance institutions shaped by rules, norms, and enforcement mechanisms. Its effectiveness is therefore influenced by factors such as institutional autonomy, political environment, resource availability, and inter-agency coordination [23, 37]. In practice, these factors determine the extent to which the Commission can independently execute its mandate without undue interference.

Scholars have also conceptualised the ICPC as part of Nigeria's evolving anti-corruption regime designed to align with global governance standards and international anti-corruption conventions [34]. However, its performance is often assessed in relation to persistent structural constraints such as limited funding, bureaucratic bottlenecks, and political pressures that may affect enforcement outcomes [26]. Therefore, the ICPC can be conceptualised as a hybrid anti-corruption institution combining preventive, enforcement, and educational strategies within Nigeria's governance framework. Its effectiveness is shaped not only by its legal mandate but also by the institutional environment in which it operates, including the strength of accountability mechanisms and the degree of operational independence it enjoys.

(i). Mandate of the ICPC

The ICPC is mandated under the ICPC Act [15]. to combat corruption in Nigeria through a combination of enforcement, prevention, and public engagement strategies. Its core mandate is to investigate and prosecute corruption-related offences such as bribery, embezzlement, fraud, and abuse of office. A key feature of this mandate is its statutory independence, which allows the Commission to initiate prosecutions without prior approval from the Attorney General, thereby strengthening its autonomy and reducing political interference in enforcement processes [16, 11]. In addition to prosecution, the ICPC is mandated to undertake preventive interventions aimed at addressing the structural causes of corruption.

This includes conducting system audits, identifying administrative loopholes, and recommending reforms in public financial management, procurement systems, and institutional procedures [9, 29]. The Commission is also tasked with promoting ethical standards and integrity in public service through training, policy advisory services, and institutional capacity-building programmes. Furthermore, the ICPC has a public education mandate, which involves sensitising citizens on the dangers of corruption and encouraging civic participation in anti-corruption efforts through campaigns such as "Corruption Must Go" and "Follow the Money" [14]. It also provides whistleblower protection mechanisms to encourage reporting of corrupt practices while safeguarding informants from retaliation [2].

(ii). Functional scope of the ICPC

The functional scope of the ICPC covers a wide range of operational and strategic activities designed to ensure effective anti-corruption governance in Nigeria. One of its major functions is investigation and prosecution, which involves detecting, investigating, and prosecuting corruption-related offences across public institutions. This enforcement role is intended to deter corrupt practices and reinforce the rule of law [15]. Another key function is preventive system review, where the Commission conducts audits and assessments of government ministries, departments, and agencies to identify weaknesses that may facilitate corruption. Based on these findings, the ICPC recommends reforms aimed at strengthening transparency, accountability, and internal control mechanisms [9].

The Commission also performs asset recovery functions, which involve tracing, confiscating, and recovering proceeds of corruption. These recovered assets are returned to the public treasury, thereby reducing financial losses to the state and reinforcing deterrence against corrupt practices. In addition, the ICPC engages in stakeholder collaboration with domestic institutions such as law enforcement agencies, as well as international organisations and civil society groups. This collaboration enhances intelligence sharing, coordination, and the effectiveness of anti-corruption operations across different levels of governance [28].

(iii). Strategic objectives of the ICPC

The strategic objectives of the ICPC are designed to provide a comprehensive framework for addressing corruption in Nigeria through prevention, enforcement, and institutional reform. A central objective is the identification and mitigation of corruption risks within public institutions. This is achieved through system audits, risk assessments, and policy reviews that help detect structural weaknesses and recommend corrective reforms [9]. A further good objective is the promotion of public awareness and civic engagement. Through nationwide campaigns such as "Corruption Must Go," the Commission seeks to educate citizens, strengthen social accountability, and encourage active participation in monitoring public sector conduct [14]. This objective supports the development of a corruption-resistant civic culture.

The ICPC also prioritises the promotion of ethical standards within public institutions. This involves training public officials on integrity, transparency, and accountability, as well as embedding ethical practices into administrative processes [11]. The goal is to build long-term institutional resilience against corruption. A further strategic objective is the protection of whistleblowers and enhancement of reporting systems. By providing secure and confidential channels for reporting corruption, the Commission aims to increase information flow and encourage citizen participation in anti-corruption efforts [2]. The ICPC seeks to ensure effective investigation and prosecution of corruption cases. Its independence in initiating legal action is intended to strengthen enforcement capacity and reinforce the principle of accountability regardless of status or political affiliation.

Asset recovery is another major objective, focusing on the retrieval of illegally acquired public assets and their restoration to the state. This serves both as a deterrent and as a means of improving public resource availability. Thus, the ICPC pursues inter-agency and international collaboration to enhance coordination in anti-corruption efforts. Through partnerships with domestic agencies, civil society, and global organisations, the Commission strengthens intelligence sharing, operational efficiency, and institutional effectiveness in combating corruption [9, 28].

2.2. Institutional Effectiveness

Institutional effectiveness refers to the degree to which public organisations are able to translate their formal mandates into measurable outcomes through coherent structures, adequate resources, and sustained policy implementation [22, 31]. It goes beyond the existence of formal rules to include the actual capacity of institutions to enforce those rules consistently, adapt to emerging challenges, and coordinate activities across different administrative levels. In this sense, effectiveness is both a structural and behavioural outcome, reflecting how well institutions function in practice rather than how they are designed on paper. From an Institutional Theory perspective, institutional effectiveness is shaped by the interplay of regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive pillars that structure organisational behaviour [36]. The regulative pillar involves formal rules, laws, and sanctions that define institutional mandates, while the normative pillar reflects values, expectations, and professional standards that guide conduct. The cultural-cognitive pillar, on the other hand, captures shared beliefs and taken-for-granted assumptions that influence how actors interpret and implement rules. Where these three pillars are well-aligned, institutions are more likely to achieve coherence in decision-making and consistency in policy execution [5, 36].

A key dimension of institutional effectiveness is administrative capacity, which includes human resource competence, financial resources, and technical expertise required for policy implementation. Institutions with skilled personnel, merit-based recruitment systems, and stable funding are generally better positioned to achieve their objectives efficiently [10]. Conversely, capacity deficits such as underfunding, skill shortages, and weak training systems often result in implementation gaps where policies are well-designed but poorly executed. Another important factor is institutional autonomy, which refers to the extent to which organisations can operate independently of undue political or external interference. While some level of oversight is necessary for accountability, excessive political interference often compromises decision-making, weakens enforcement, and reduces institutional credibility [8]. Effective institutions therefore maintain a balance between autonomy and accountability, ensuring that they are insulated enough to function professionally while still being answerable to democratic institutions.

Coordination and inter-agency collaboration also significantly influence institutional effectiveness. In complex governance environments, especially in public sector management and anti-corruption frameworks, institutions rarely operate in isolation. Effective coordination mechanisms reduce duplication of efforts, close enforcement gaps, and enhance information sharing across agencies [33]. Where coordination is weak, fragmentation and institutional rivalry often emerge, undermining overall policy impact. Institutional effectiveness is also closely tied to accountability mechanisms, including internal oversight systems, external audits, and public transparency structures. Accountability ensures that institutional actors are held responsible for their actions and those deviations from established rules are sanctioned appropriately [4]. In the absence of strong accountability systems, institutions may drift toward inefficiency, corruption, or symbolic compliance rather than substantive performance.

Finally, institutional effectiveness is reinforced by legitimacy and public trust. Institutions perceived as fair, transparent, and responsive are more likely to secure compliance from citizens and stakeholders, thereby enhancing policy outcomes [36]. In anti-corruption governance, this is particularly critical, as the success of enforcement agencies depends not only on legal authority but also on public confidence in their impartiality and effectiveness. Where legitimacy is high, compliance tends to increase voluntarily; where it is low, enforcement becomes more coercive and less sustainable. Institutional effectiveness is a multidimensional construct that integrates capacity, autonomy, coordination, accountability, and legitimacy. Its strength or weakness ultimately determines whether public institutions can move beyond formal compliance to achieve substantive governance outcomes, particularly in sensitive areas such as anti-corruption enforcement.

2.3. Public Accountability

Public accountability refers to the institutional, legal, and normative arrangements through which public officials and organisations are required to explain and justify their conduct, decisions, and use of public resources to designated oversight bodies and the broader citizenry [4, 21]. It is a cornerstone of democratic governance because it establishes a system of answerability and enforcement that limits arbitrary exercise of power and promotes responsible public administration. In essence, accountability ensures that public authority is exercised in line with legal mandates, public expectations, and ethical standards. Accountability is not a single mechanism but a multidimensional governance framework that operates through complementary channels. Vertical accountability refers to the relationship between citizens and elected officials, where citizens exercise control through elections, political participation, protest, and civic engagement. This form of accountability is central to democratic responsiveness, as it allows the electorate to reward or sanction leaders based on performance [24]. However, its effectiveness depends on the integrity of electoral systems, political competition, and access to reliable information.

Horizontal accountability, by contrast, operates through state institutions that have formal oversight authority over other public agencies. These include parliaments, courts, anti-corruption agencies, and supreme audit institutions, all of which are responsible for monitoring compliance with laws and regulations, investigating misconduct, and imposing sanctions where necessary [24, 35]. The effectiveness of horizontal accountability largely depends on institutional independence, legal authority, and enforcement capacity. Where these institutions are weak or politically compromised, accountability tends to become symbolic rather than substantive. Social accountability expands the framework beyond formal state structures to include non-state actors such as civil society organisations, investigative journalism, professional associations, and the media. These actors play a critical role in exposing corruption, generating public awareness, and mobilising collective action against maladministration [32]. In contemporary governance systems, digital media and open data platforms have further strengthened social accountability by increasing the speed and reach of information dissemination, thereby enhancing public scrutiny of government actions.

Beyond these dimensions, accountability is operationalised through institutional instruments and administrative procedures. Financial auditing systems, procurement regulations, performance management frameworks, asset declaration requirements, and freedom of information laws all serve as technical tools that promote transparency and traceability in public administration [25, 37]. These mechanisms ensure that public expenditures can be monitored, policy decisions can be evaluated, and deviations from established procedures can be detected and corrected. However, the effectiveness of accountability systems is highly dependent on the broader political and institutional environment in which they operate. In many developing contexts, accountability mechanisms are weakened by political patronage, executive dominance, and selective enforcement of rules. This results in “accountability gaps,” where formal institutions exist but fail to function effectively due to lack of autonomy or enforcement power [13, 38]. In such environments, accountability often becomes procedural rather than substantive, with compliance existing on paper but not in practice.

Institutional theory further explains that accountability is shaped by both formal structures and informal norms. Even where robust legal frameworks exist, entrenched cultural practices such as clientelism, elite capture, and informal bargaining can undermine accountability processes [36]. This interaction between formal rules and informal institutions often determines whether accountability mechanisms are respected or bypassed in practice. Strengthening public accountability therefore requires more than legal reforms; it demands institutional independence, capacity building, civic empowerment, and cultural transformation within public administration. Enhancing transparency, protecting whistleblowers, strengthening judicial independence, and promoting civic engagement are widely recognised as essential strategies for improving accountability outcomes [4, 39]. Ultimately, effective accountability systems are fundamental to reducing corruption, improving service delivery, and building public trust in governance institutions.

2.4. Strategic Efforts Employed by the ICPC

The ICPC operates through an integrated strategy that combines prevention, enforcement, policy influence, and institutional capacity strengthening. This hybrid approach reflects contemporary anti-corruption thinking, which recognizes that corruption is both a legal violation and a governance failure embedded in institutional systems [34, 39].

(i) Preventive strategies

Preventive strategies constitute a long-term approach aimed at reducing the incidence of corruption by addressing its root causes rather than merely responding to its consequences. The ICPC’s public enlightenment initiatives are designed to reshape behavioural norms and societal tolerance for corruption. These campaigns are carried out through radio and television programmes, social media engagement, town hall meetings, and school-based integrity clubs. The establishment of Anti-

Corruption and Transparency Units (ACTUs) in MDAs further strengthens internal awareness structures. The underlying assumption is that corruption persists where it is socially normalized; therefore, changing public attitudes is essential for sustainable reform [39]. More so, school-based initiatives target younger populations to instill ethical values early, thereby contributing to generational attitude change toward accountability and public service integrity [15]. Beyond awareness creation, these campaigns also serve a behavioural reinforcement function by encouraging whistle-blowing and civic participation in anti-corruption efforts. However, their effectiveness is often moderated by public distrust in institutions and fear of retaliation, which limits reporting behaviour in practice [27].

Integrity testing involves assessing the vulnerability of public institutions to corrupt practices through undercover assessments, compliance monitoring, and procedural audits. This is complemented by the ICPC's System Study and Review (SSR) mechanism, which identifies structural weaknesses in government processes that enable corruption. Rather than focusing solely on individuals, SSR targets systemic inefficiencies such as opaque procurement processes, weak internal controls, and discretionary decision-making frameworks. The ICPC then issues recommendations to MDAs for reform implementation. This approach aligns with institutional theory, which emphasizes that corruption is sustained by weak or poorly designed institutional structures rather than individual moral failure alone [22]. By correcting system flaws, the ICPC attempts to reduce opportunities for corruption at source, making unethical behaviour more difficult to execute.

(ii) Law Enforcement Initiatives

Enforcement remains the most visible aspect of ICPC operations and is critical for deterrence. The ICPC is empowered to investigate complaints of corruption, gather evidence, and prosecute offenders in competent courts. Investigations typically involve forensic auditing, financial tracing, witness interviews, and collaboration with technical experts. A key strength of the Commission is its statutory independence, which allows it to initiate cases without requiring prior approval from the Attorney General. This autonomy is intended to reduce political bottlenecks and improve responsiveness. However, enforcement outcomes are often constrained by lengthy judicial processes, evidentiary burdens, and procedural delays in Nigeria's legal system. As a result, while the Commission may initiate a significant number of cases, conviction rates tend to progress slowly, affecting public perception of effectiveness [6]. Despite these challenges, high-profile prosecutions serve an important deterrent function, signaling that public office abuse carries legal consequences.

Given the complexity of corruption cases, the ICPC collaborates extensively with domestic and international partners. Domestically, it works with the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), Nigeria Police Force, Code of Conduct Bureau, and the judiciary. Such cooperation enhances intelligence sharing, reduces institutional rivalry, and improves case-building capacity. For example, joint investigations are often conducted in cases involving large-scale procurement fraud or inter-agency financial crimes. Internationally, the ICPC engages with organizations such as the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the African Union Anti-Corruption frameworks, which provide technical assistance, training, and best practice models. Nevertheless, coordination challenges persist, particularly in overlapping mandates with other agencies, sometimes leading to jurisdictional conflicts and inefficiencies [16].

(iii) Policy Development and Advocacy

Beyond enforcement, the ICPC plays a significant advisory role in shaping national anti-corruption policy. This includes reviewing government administrative systems, identifying loopholes in public procurement laws, and recommending reforms to improve transparency. A major contribution is the promotion of ethics compliance frameworks in MDAs, including the establishment of ACTUs, which serve as internal compliance monitors. The Commission also engages in legislative advocacy by supporting the review of laws that facilitate corruption, such as weak procurement regulations or inadequate asset declaration enforcement mechanisms. Furthermore, the ICPC participates in national governance reforms such as the Treasury Single Account (TSA) and Integrated Payroll and Personnel Information System (IPPIS), which aim to reduce financial leakages and improve accountability in public finance management [39].

(iv) Capacity building and Training

Capacity building is central to strengthening institutional performance and ensuring sustainability of anti-corruption efforts. The ICPC conducts regular training programmes for its investigators, prosecutors, and analysts in areas such as forensic accounting, digital evidence handling, financial intelligence analysis, and cybercrime investigation. These trainings are often conducted in collaboration with international development partners. Also, the Commission trains public servants across MDAs on ethics, compliance, procurement procedures, and corruption risk management. This preventive training helps reduce unintentional violations and strengthens institutional compliance culture. Capacity building also extends to civil society organizations and community stakeholders, who are trained on whistle-blowing mechanisms and monitoring public projects. However, training effectiveness is often constrained by limited funding and high staff turnover, which affects institutional memory and continuity [1].

2.4.1. Assessment of the ICPC's Effectiveness

The ICPC has recorded several notable successes in prosecuting corruption-related offences, particularly in cases involving public procurement fraud, misappropriation of public funds, and abuse of office. Some convictions have led to asset recovery and restitution to the government. For instance, cases involving inflated contracts in federal agencies have resulted in both imprisonment and financial penalties. These outcomes demonstrate the Commission's capacity to pursue complex financial crimes. However, compared to the overall scale of corruption in Nigeria's public sector, the number of concluded convictions remains relatively low. This gap reflects systemic constraints such as judicial delays, evidentiary challenges, and resource limitations [16]. Nonetheless, even where convictions are limited, ongoing prosecutions contribute to deterrence by signaling that corruption cases are actively pursued.

The ICPC has contributed to increased national awareness of corruption and improved discourse on accountability. Public engagement through media campaigns and institutional reforms has enhanced visibility of anti-corruption efforts. However, public perception surveys indicate that trust in anti-corruption institutions remains moderate. Many citizens perceive selective enforcement and elite immunity as persistent challenges in the justice system [37]. This perception gap reduces the credibility of enforcement efforts and can weaken voluntary compliance. Nonetheless, gradual improvements in transparency initiatives suggest a slow but steady shift in governance expectations.

2.4.2. Challenges Faced by the ICPC

Resource Constraints: The ICPC operates under significant financial and logistical limitations. Insufficient budget allocations restrict investigative reach, delay case processing, and limit technological modernization. Human resource constraints also affect performance, as the Commission often competes with better-funded agencies for skilled investigators and forensic experts [39].

Political Interference: Although legally independent, the ICPC functions within a politically sensitive environment where high-profile corruption cases may attract external pressure. Such interference whether direct or indirect can slow investigations or affect prosecutorial decisions. This undermines institutional autonomy and weakens public confidence in impartial enforcement [6].

Public Trust and Cooperation: Effective anti-corruption enforcement requires active citizen participation, yet whistleblowing remains limited due to fear of retaliation, lack of protection, and skepticism about outcomes. Although legal frameworks for whistleblower protection exist, enforcement gaps reduce their effectiveness. Consequently, many corruption cases go unreported, limiting the ICPC's intelligence base and reactive capacity [15].

3. Theoretical Framework

This study relied on Institutional Theory, which provides a robust analytical lens for understanding the dynamics of corruption and anti-corruption strategies within governance systems. The theory is particularly suitable for examining the strategic approaches and effectiveness of the ICPC because it emphasizes the role of formal and informal institutions in shaping behaviour, policy outcomes, and organizational performance. Institutional theory explains how rules, norms, and organizational structures influence the behaviour of individuals and institutions within a society. It posits that actions are not driven solely by rational self-interest but are significantly shaped by institutional environments comprising formal laws and informal social norms [22]. Institutions, in this sense, represent the "rules of the game" that structure political, economic, and social interactions.

The current development of institutional theory is attributed to several scholars, [22]. Provided a foundational perspective by defining institutions as humanly devised constraints that structure interaction and reduce uncertainty. In an organizational Sociology [19]. Argued that institutions influence organizations to adopt formal structures for legitimacy rather than efficiency. Similarly [5]. Introduced the concept of institutional isomorphism, explaining why organizations within similar environments tend to adopt comparable structures and practices [36]. Further expanded the theory by identifying three pillars of institutions: the regulative, normative, and cognitive dimensions. The regulative pillar refers to formal rules, laws, and enforcement mechanisms that guide behaviour through sanctions and incentives. The normative pillar encompasses values, norms, and expectations that define appropriate conduct. The cognitive pillar relates to shared beliefs and taken-for-granted assumptions that influence how individuals perceive and interpret their environment. Together, these pillars provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how institutions shape behaviour and outcomes.

(i) Rationale for the adoption of Institutional theory

Institutional theory is adopted in this study because it addresses key limitations of earlier approaches that explain corruption primarily as a function of individual moral failure or rational choice. Instead, the theory conceptualizes corruption as a systemic issue rooted in weak institutional arrangements, ineffective enforcement mechanisms, and permissive social norms [34]. In the Nigerian context, corruption is often sustained by both formal institutional weaknesses such as inadequate enforcement of laws and informal practices, including patronage networks and societal tolerance of unethical conduct. Institutional theory provides a framework for analyzing how these factors interact to either facilitate or constrain corruption. Furthermore, the theory is particularly relevant for examining anti-corruption agencies like the ICPC because it emphasizes that the effectiveness of such institutions depends not only on their legal mandates but also on the broader institutional environment in which they operate.

(ii) Application of the Theory to the Study

Institutional theory is applied in this study to analyze the strategic approaches and effectiveness of the ICPC across its core functional areas: First, the preventive strategies of the ICPC, such as public awareness campaigns and integrity testing, align with the normative and cognitive pillars of institutional theory. These initiatives aim to reshape societal values and perceptions regarding corruption, thereby reducing its social acceptability. By promoting ethical standards and accountability, the ICPC seeks to influence informal institutions that sustain corrupt practices. Second, the law enforcement functions of the ICPC, including investigation and prosecution, reflect the regulative pillar of institutional theory. Through the enforcement of anti-corruption laws and the imposition of sanctions, the Commission attempts to deter corrupt behaviour and reinforce compliance with legal standards. Collaboration with other agencies further strengthens the institutional framework for enforcement.

Third, the ICPC's role in policy development and system review demonstrates an institutional reform approach. By identifying procedural weaknesses in (MDAs and recommending corrective measures, the Commission contributes to the restructuring of institutional processes that enable corruption. This aligns with [22]. Argument that improving institutional design reduces opportunities for opportunistic behaviour. Fourth, capacity building and training initiatives undertaken by the ICPC enhance institutional effectiveness by improving the skills, knowledge, and operational capabilities of both its personnel and stakeholders. Strong institutional capacity is essential for the effective implementation of anti-corruption strategies.

(iii) Implications of the Theory for assessing ICPC Effectiveness

Institutional theory provides a framework for evaluating both the achievements and limitations of the ICPC. On one hand, the Commission's successes in public awareness, policy reform, and selective prosecutions indicate progress in strengthening institutional mechanisms of accountability. On the other hand, persistent challenges such as resource constraints, political interference, and low public trust highlight the continued weakness of the broader institutional environment. The theory suggests that the effectiveness of the ICPC cannot be assessed in isolation but must be understood within the context of Nigeria's institutional landscape. Weak judicial systems, political pressures, and entrenched informal norms can undermine the Commission's efforts, regardless of its formal powers.

Hence, the theory provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing corruption and anti-corruption strategies by emphasizing the role of rules, norms, and organizational structures in shaping behaviour. Its application to this study highlights that the effectiveness of the ICPC is contingent not only on its statutory mandate but also on the strength and coherence of the institutional environment in which it operates. By integrating the regulative, normative, and cognitive dimensions of institutions, the theory offers a holistic understanding of how anti-corruption strategies can be designed and implemented to achieve sustainable governance outcomes. Consequently, institutional theory remains highly relevant for examining the strategic approaches and effectiveness of the ICPC in Nigeria's anti-corruption efforts.

4. Conclusions

This study examined the strategic approaches adopted by the ICPC, assessed its effectiveness, identified institutional constraints, and analyzed Nigeria's anti-corruption efforts through the lens of institutional theory. The findings reveal that the ICPC has implemented a multi-dimensional strategy encompassing prevention, enforcement, policy reform, and capacity building. These approaches are consistent with global best practices in anti-corruption governance and reflect the institutionalist argument that sustainable reform must engage formal regulatory frameworks and informal normative structures [22, 34]. Notwithstanding these efforts, the overall effectiveness of the Commission remains constrained by systemic institutional deficiencies. While progress is evident in areas such as public awareness, accountability mechanisms, and selective prosecution of corruption cases, these gains are undermined by persistent challenges including inadequate funding, political interference, weak inter-agency collaboration, and low levels of public trust.

From an institutional theory perspective, these constraints underscore the persistence of fragile regulative institutions, weak normative enforcement, and deeply embedded cognitive patterns that normalize corrupt practices. Accordingly, the study concludes that the ICPC's effectiveness is contingent upon broader institutional transformation. Without strengthening institutional autonomy, enhancing enforcement capacity, and reshaping societal attitudes toward corruption, anti-corruption initiatives are unlikely to achieve sustainable outcomes. Effective anti-corruption governance in Nigeria therefore requires a holistic restructuring of the institutional environment within which the ICPC operates.

5. Findings

Drawing on the study objectives, the following key findings emerge:

The ICPC employs comprehensive, multi-dimensional approaches that integrate preventive measures such as public enlightenment, integrity education, and systemic reviews with enforcement actions, policy advocacy, and capacity-building initiatives. Notwithstanding these efforts, its effectiveness remains constrained, as high levels of corruption persist and conviction rates remain low relative to reported cases. This suggests that while the Commission contributes to incremental gains in accountability, its overall impact is limited by underlying institutional weaknesses.

Furthermore, the performance of the ICPC is impeded by structural and institutional constraints, including inadequate financial and human resources, political interference, inefficiencies within the judicial system, and low levels of public trust. The findings also reveal that Nigeria's anti-corruption environment is shaped by interconnected institutional pressures, notably inconsistent enforcement of legal frameworks, weak professional and ethical standards, and deeply embedded societal norms that tolerate corrupt practices. Collectively, these dynamics underscore the need for anti-corruption strategies that transcend formal legal mechanisms to incorporate broader institutional and normative reforms.

6. Recommendations

In light of the findings, the study proposes the following recommendations:

The government should reinforce the ICPC's preventive mandate by expanding system reviews, strengthening ACTUs, and institutionalizing integrity education across all levels of governance. Addressing structural vulnerabilities within public institutions will reduce opportunities for corruption at their source. There is an urgent need to improve the financial, technical, and human resource capacity of the ICPC to enable more effective investigation and prosecution of corruption cases. Complementary judicial reforms should be implemented to expedite case adjudication, reduce delays, and improve conviction rates.

Legal and administrative safeguards should be strengthened to ensure the operational autonomy of the ICPC. Establishing transparent oversight and accountability mechanisms will help insulate the Commission from political interference and promote impartial enforcement of anti-corruption laws. Sustainable anti-corruption efforts require a shift in societal attitudes. Government and civil society actors should intensify public education campaigns, strengthen civic engagement, and enhance whistleblower protection frameworks. Building public trust and participation is essential for improving institutional legitimacy and effectiveness.

Abbreviations

ACTUs	Anti-Corruption and Transparency Units
EFCC	Economic and Financial Crimes Commission
ICPC	Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission
IPPIS	Integrated Payroll and Personnel Information System
MDAs	Ministries, Departments, and Agencies
SSR	System Study and Review
TSA	Treasury Single Account
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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