Short Guide Series for Practitioners

Social Norms and Corruption
An Overview

What is the Corruption, Justice and Legitimacy Program?

CJL is a research-to-practice initiative committed to **improving the effectiveness of anti-corruption programming in contexts of endemic corruption**. Housed at The Fletcher School, the program has developed a **systems-based approach to corruption analysis** that empowers practitioners to see the interconnected nature of **drivers and enablers** of corruption. After testing the approach in several fragile states, CJL realized that more effective responses would also require more insight into the **conflict, peacebuilding and corruption nexus** along with greater guidance on how to **integrate social norms** into programming.

Corruption, Justice and Legitimacy Program

What is a short guide?

Our work - "Understanding Social Norms: A Reference Guide for Policy and Practice" – distilled the vast amount of material on social norm change into an accessible document for practitioners working on governance and corruption related issues. The short guide **boils down the complexity of social norms** into the essential components that every practitioner working on **accountability, corruption or integrity** must know before they start to develop programs to address social norms that drive corrupt behaviors.
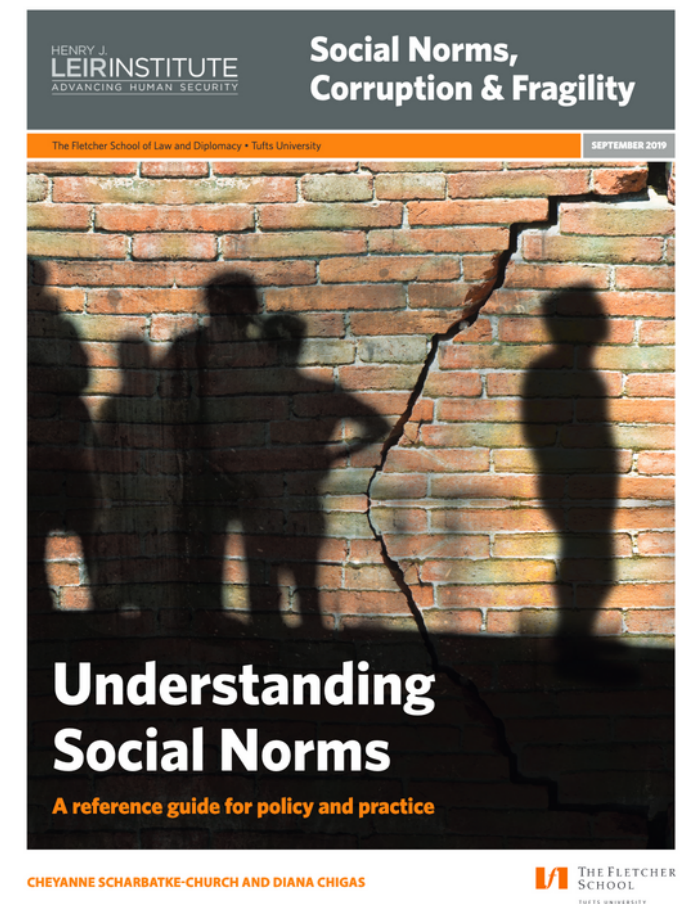
Why did we think traditional approaches to corruption analysis are insufficient?

Traditional forms of corruption analysis are **too narrow** in their approach for places of endemic corruption; missing critical factors that explain *why* collective corrupt practices are occurring. Corruption needs to be analyzed as a **complex system**, not as the product of a single, most important cause or the sum of many parts that can be addressed independently. When corruption is analyzed as a complex system, it becomes possible to identify when social norms are playing a key role in individuals' choices and thus acting as an important driver of corrupt patterns of behavior.

Why should practitioners working on governance and corruption related issues read this guide?

Corrupt behaviors that are driven by social norms are **very difficult to sustainably change if** the social norm is left unaddressed. Social norms as a brake to sustainable behavior change has been demonstrated by research in fields pertaining to gender equality, gender-based violence, and international public health.
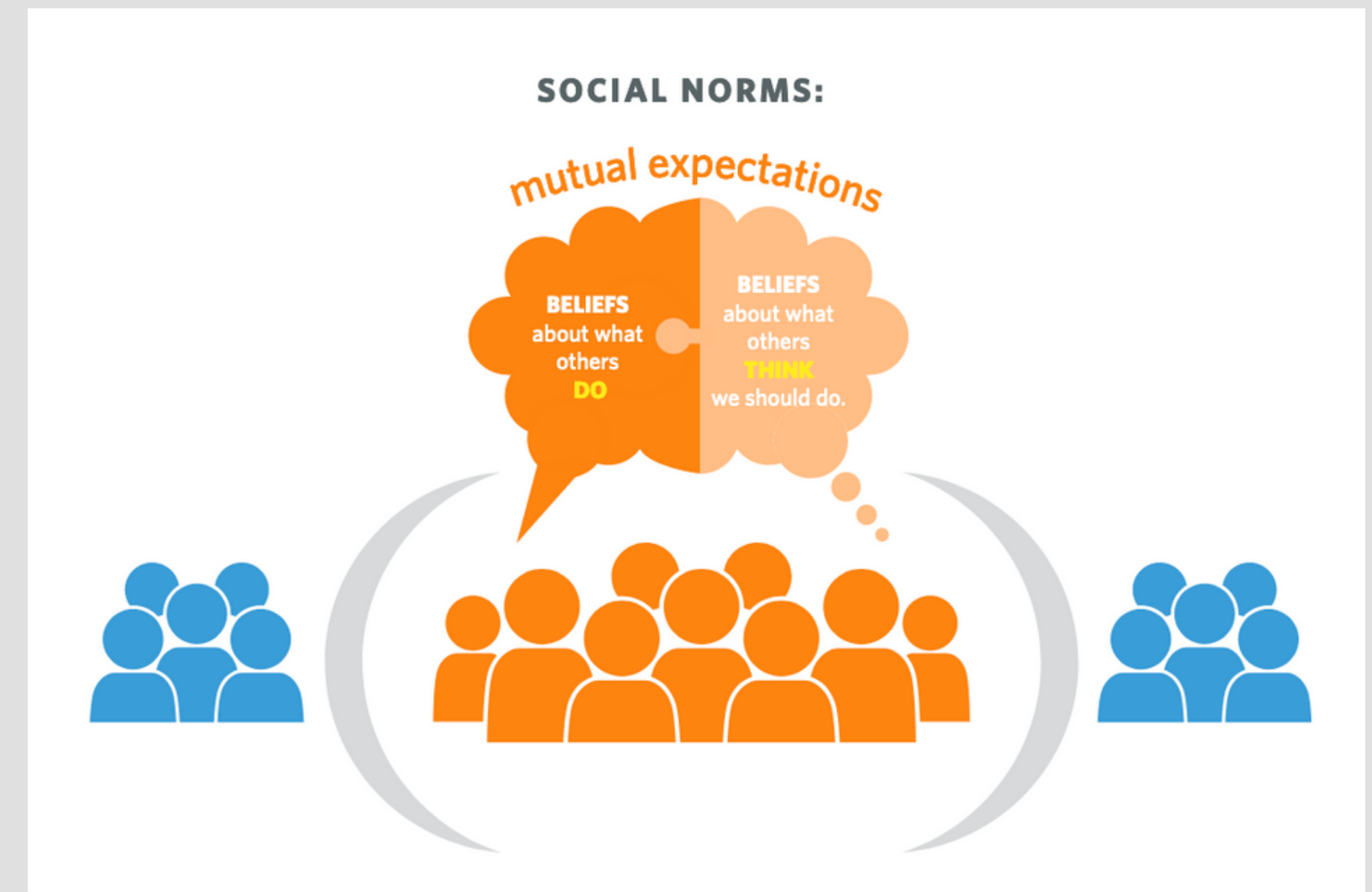
What are Social Norms?

Social norms are the unwritten rules about the right way to behave within a group. These rules take the form of mutual expectations about what is appropriate and typical behavior for that group in a particular context.

Mutual expectations are made up of beliefs that are often implicit and developed based on:

a) **what we see or believe others do**; and,

b) **what we think others expect us to do**.

To be mutual, the expectations must flow both ways between individuals who matter to each other.

SOCIAL NORMS:

mutual expectations

BELIEFS about what others DO

BELIEFS about what others THINK we should do.

How are social norms different from attitudes, behaviors, and morals?

	What is it?	**How is it different from a social norm?**
Attitudes	A person's beliefs or judgments (e.g., favor/disfavor) about something or someone	Attitudes are personal judgments or evaluations; they may be influenced by, but do not depend on, expectations about others. Attitudes may or may not align with social expectations.
Morals	Deeply held inner convictions that help people decide what is right or wrong	Morals exist and are potentially relevant in all situations at all times, while social norms depend on the context or who else is present.
Behaviors	What people actually do	Behaviors are actions, not beliefs, and are influenced by a variety of factors, including social norms, but also attitudes, circumstances, values, abilities, etc.
Customs	Common patterns of behavior people engage in; normal behavior	People conform to a behavior because it meets their needs, or because it is convenient. It is not because of social expectations, nor solely because they see others doing it.
Culture	Behavior patterns, social institutions, attitudes, norms, values, language, etc., that are characteristic of a given group or community and are socially transmitted	Culture encompasses much more than social norms. Social norms are a dimension of culture, but not equivalent to it.

Why is it important to analyze the role social norms play in systems of corruption?

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People's behavioral choices are influenced by many interacting factors, both enablers and drivers. Insufficient policies and structures around accountability and transparency provide opportunities for people to commit corrupt acts, but **social norms provide a reason or motivation to engage in** (or at least not refrain from) the behavior. Social norms can be so strong in some environments that an individual will act contrary to their own attitudes or cease to practice initial positive behavioral changes supported by an intervention.

Why is it especially critical to integrate social norms in anti-corruption programming in fragile and conflict affected states?

Social norms in fragile and conflict affected states are more influential than in stable ones because a person's relationship and networks with like-minded people are **key to her or his ability to survive and navigate life**. This reality places a primacy on cultivating and maintaining relationships within one's group or social network.

Why do social norms that drive corrupt behavior exist in the first place?

Social norms serve the purpose of meeting an **individual's innate need to fit in**, strengthen a **sense of identity**, and offer some **predictability of behavior**. For groups, social norms can **facilitate coordination and promote social cohesion**. While norm-driven activities may not serve the public good, for those adhering to the norms in places of endemic corruption, they always have a purpose. Social norms that drive corrupt behavior provide solutions to problems people face.

How do social norms influence an individual to engage in corrupt behavior?

In **fragile states**, many situations require people to rely on others to achieve a common purpose due to the state's weakness. When government institutions cannot be relied upon to deliver services or security, it is necessary to become embedded in groups that can deliver these results — be it **physical safety, jobs, financial support, status and advancement, or access to opportunities**. These groups exert pressure through social rewards and punishments, obliging members to follow group norms if they wish to maintain membership.

Do all norms that drive corruption have the same amount of influence?

Social norms **do not all exert the same amount of influence** on an individual's behavioral choices. Simple observation shows us that some behaviors are more consistently followed than others because **norms vary in strength**. The stronger the norm, the more likely it is that group members will comply because they feel obliged to, and the harder it will likely be to change behavior (e.g., "I have no choice but to do..."). Conversely, weaker norms are less important drivers of behavior and may be less significant as obstacles to behavior change, as they are commonly accepted but optional (e.g., "I should probably...").

What are the potential consequences of not integrating social norms in anti-corruption programming?

Failure to integrate social norms in anti-corruption programming may result in:

a) diminishing the likelihood of achieving **sustainable results**;

b) **undermining the effectiveness** of anti-corruption efforts;

c) **exacerbating corruption**;

d) **endangering people's lives**; and

e) **exacerbating conflict**.

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