

# COVID-19 and the Public Service Ethics Quagmire: A Procurement-Corruption Interface

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## Abstract

When emergencies arise, corruption levels rise even higher. It is a global phenomenon that the swift nature of disaster response becomes susceptible to ethics violations and non-compliance with procurement processes. This also means that opportunities arise for a wide range of procedure deviations that are likely to involve ethics malpractices. The COVID-19 pandemic is the latest global disaster that has brought procurement corruption to the fore. This has certainly been the case in South Africa since March 2020. This article presents four incidents (scenarios) where ethics malpractices linked to procurement were found and reported on; then it goes on to analyse these incidents. A qualitative approach is used to analyse the scenarios. The main objective of this analysis is to add practical evidence to prevailing literature on public service ethics linked to procurement. The scenarios are analysed and situated in the context of some of the dominant ethics theories. This is done to arrive at the article's main question: Why are ethics important in times of disaster? The article ultimately presents some scholarly reflections emanating from the analysis of the four scenarios. The prevailing opinion is that the interface between procurement and corruption remains fragile and necessitates continued efforts towards more tangible approaches in the fight against corruption. then presents some reflections on this question in the context of building a capable developmental state.

**Keywords:** Procurement, Corruption, Ethics, COVID-19

“Corruption is a cancer that erodes public trust in government.” – Minister Jackson Mthembu, 2020

## Introduction

Unethical conduct is by no means unfamiliar to most governments globally. The difference, however, lies in the ability of a government to deal effectively with unethical conduct (manifested in corruption, maladministration and improper use of public resources, etc).



While corruption and other forms of unethical behaviour may be common in any public service, the outbreak of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) presented new challenges to various governments across the globe. Foremost among these challenges, of course, has been the (in)ability to manage the spread of the virus. This urgent need to manage the virus warranted macroeconomic financial measures by both governments and industry. Any state of emergency is a fertile breeding ground for corruption, anywhere in the world. The inevitability of corruption in emergencies is not unusual. In fact, Schultz and Soreide (2008) opine that “emergency procurement is prone to corruption”. Kinuthia, Odundo and Nyagah (2018) agree, stating that emergency procurement typically lays the groundwork for potential corruption. This is the case in South Africa, too, particularly for the public service. It is no secret that South Africa has a problem with compromised public service ethics and some scholars agree that the government lacks the capacity to manage ethics (Lues, 2007; Sebola, 2018; Baloyi, 2020; Van Vuuren, 2020). Furthermore, the ethics debate seems to be gaining momentum globally, as perceived by Hallunovi, Osmani and Bashi (2014). This remains true to date in South Africa, as the country battles a seeming scourge in unethical behaviour in the public service. The early days of Cyril Ramaphosa’s presidential tenure seemed to offer the public hope that large-scale corruption in government would subside. His reference to the “nine wasted years” of the previous administration certainly raised the hopes of those who constantly denounced corruption (Haffajee, 2019). However, the events during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic proved that a leopard cannot change its spots. Roughly five months into the pandemic, the President had to address the nation following a massive public outcry against the rampant corruption related to misappropriation of relief funds, procurement irregularities and the blatant disregard of ethical standards being displayed by public officials. This article analyses some of the reported incidents of unethical behaviour by public officials during the COVID-19 period. This analysis is augmented by a literature review of public service ethics and the growing importance thereof. The main research aim underpinning this article is to show that ethics violations leading to corrupt activities are still prevalent in the public service, especially during a period of disaster. To address this aim, the article presents three main sections dealing with, inter alia, literature on the importance of ethics, especially during emergencies; a discussion on the scenarios linked to ethics violations during Covid-19; and a discussion on how these scenarios can be situated within the major ethics theories related to decision making.

## Why Ethics in Government Matter

Prabhakar (2011) defines ethics as knowing the difference between right and wrong, then going on to do the right thing. Similarly, but for deliberately, Trevino and Neslon (2011) define ethics as a set of principles, norms and standards that govern or guide the conduct of an individual or organisation. These definitions suggest that in order for someone to be regarded as an ethical person, they have to display attributes or behaviour that is



consistent with what is universally accepted to be right. Furthermore, these definitions are clear enough to suggest that someone who does not display the characteristics mentioned, may be deemed as unethical. Mle (n.d) asks the question: Can an unethical, unprofessional public servant be trusted to deliver services? At face value, this question appears to be an easy one to answer. However, growing trends of unethical conduct in the South African public service makes this question increasingly complex. While a high standard of professional ethics is the prescribed hallmark for all public servants, it remains a distant reality in South Africa. Before succumbing to unscholarly statements, this article agrees with Auriacombe (2002) that the concept of ethics has no universally accepted meaning and, therefore, is subject to multiple interpretations. Inasmuch as the concept of ethics is accepted as complex, this article understands ethics to be the function of human conduct that could be either wrong or right, measured against applicable rules, but also supplemented by some normative human values such as integrity, care and respect.

Sebola (2014) observes that it is a global phenomenon that unethical conduct by politicians and associated public servants typically affects the ability of government to conduct its business effectively. This is true for various reasons. Firstly, government, as the “hand” of the state, exists to cater for the well-being of citizens through various welfare programmes. Secondly, the behaviour of civil servants can disrupt government’s ability to perform its core business (Hallunovi et al, 2014; Baloyi, 2020). Thirdly, service delivery will be inhibited if government resources are misappropriated. Fourthly, in the case of South Africa, the pursuit of a successful developmental state can be jeopardised. Lastly, government is “for the people” and should operate in defence of the dignity of the people. Wheeler (2010) reiterates that the public’s trust in government is “strongly influenced” by the general perception of ethical standards displayed by that government. Makgale (2020) agrees that unethical manifestations, such as corruption, tend to weaken the public’s trust in government. Moreover, global pandemics – such as the recent Coronavirus – tend to create a mammoth task for most governments, but also expose them to failing trust by the public (Ingraham, 2020). According to the author of this article, such trust is why ethical behaviour by public servants is important. In line with this idea, and perhaps to provide a perspective on the earlier question by Mle (n.d) in the introductory line of this section, “no”, an unethical public servant is unlikely to be trusted to deliver services honestly. This perspective can be applied to government as well. A government with gross unethical practices, showing little or no regard for consequence management, cannot be trusted to fulfil any developmental agenda.

## **Ethics in Managing Disaster**

The World Health Organization (WHO) observes that crises such as epidemics, pandemics and disasters are susceptible to the emergence of ethical issues for various stakeholders involved in crisis response, such as policy-makers (WHO, 2015). A similar perspective was



shared by Aung, Abdul Rahman, Nurumal and Ain Ahayalimudin (2017), namely that disasters pose unique and unusual challenges and, therefore, place people in unfamiliar situations where they may be susceptible to ethics violations. In addition to these perspectives, Geale (2012) agrees that disasters require professional ethics to be applied so that relief measures can be implemented successfully. The above impressions of ethics requirements in disaster management are largely related to health crises. This article, however, applies the same impressions to the ethics requirements in providing relief on a macro-level in any disaster.

A disaster requires multidimensional efforts from various role-players to facilitate emergency relief for the benefit of those affected. Oftentimes, this presents unusual situations, as has been the case for most governments and policy-makers during the Coronavirus pandemic. Aung et al (2017) contend that resource acquisition and allocation in times of disaster is often a complex, albeit crucial, exercise. Their views on resource acquisition are the premise for this article in that disasters often necessitate emergency procurement. Emergency procurement can be understood as the acquisition of vital goods or services through a relatively rapid process to address an emergency (Hurst, Sharpe & Yeager, 2017). A common understanding in any disaster is that there is an immediate need for relief. The implication is that funds must be sourced in various ways from different stakeholders to contribute towards the relief programmes that may be put in place. Relief programmes, then, involve emergency procurement.

The South African case for ethics in disaster management is a sensitive issue in that the ethics debate has been ever-present and constitutes a major concern for government leaders, business executives and the public. In fact, a disaster ought to highlight the ethics-management capacities of government, if these exist. In the context of South Africa, the government's struggles with ethics-related violations by public servants is widely documented. In 2010, the office of the Public Service Commission (PSC) had already highlighted the concern about corruption, claiming that there was a need to build integrity in the public service, lest the state's ability to deliver services was disturbed (PSC, 2010). Madumo (2012) is even more deliberate in that corruption is visible across the three spheres of government in South Africa, particularly at local government level. This is a concern, as local government is the sphere closest to the people and, therefore, entrusted with the task of meeting citizens' needs. In 2014, the Gini index, which measures economic inequalities globally, had already ranked South Africa as the most unequal country in the world in its estimates of global inequalities (World Bank, 2014). The explanation for inequality in this context is that corruption in disaster management only exacerbates the harsh realities. When resources meant to provide relief to the public are misappropriated and looted nonchalantly, the most vulnerable members of society are affected, both immediately and in the long term. While the Gini coefficient is a socioeconomic barometer that looks primarily at income, economic activeness and poverty levels, this article



considers corruption as a distant contributor to government ineptness, thus affecting efforts to reduce the Gini coefficient.

Against this background, this article asks the question: Why are ethics important in times of disaster? Amundsen and De Andrade (2009) opine that ethics, in the ideology debate, rarely present a concern. They do, however, become a natural concern when the roles of politicians and civil servants are under discussion. They further mention that disaster typically warrants political executives to lead the relief programme by providing directives to civil servants. This links directly to Amundsen and De Andrade's views that ethics become a matter of concern when these stakeholders are involved. This article agrees in that, ethics become important in that they can affect various aspects of how a programme is delivered, including the following:

- **Correctness of methods.** Have the plans of the relief programmes been implemented correctly, as per regulatory prescriptions?
- **Efficiency of methods.** Have the actions that have been taken served the right purpose in achieving relief?
- **Fitness and propriety.** Are the actions taken purpose-directed or fit for the overall purpose?

The above points can help to determine whether ethical violations exist in the implementation of relief programmes amid disasters. Both politicians and civil servants have a collective responsibility to ensure that all their activities are conducted with integrity (PSC, 2010). Consequently, to lessen the strain of disasters on public resources and on people, a government that addresses societal needs with accountability and in compliance with ethics-related regulations can achieve more than a government that discounts the importance of ethics (Baloyi, 2020). Because ethics are concerned with elements of rightness, wrongness, proper conduct and, sometimes, even moral considerations, the above points are relevant. When programmes are not implemented correctly, there is a legislative implication; when they are not executed properly, there is an efficiency concern; and when programmes are carried out simply for the sake of completion and not in line with identified purposes, it hampers the efforts to manage the disaster. In nursing or medical sciences, the term "ethics of care" is typically used to describe standards that should be adhered to when dealing with patients, such as fairness, informed consent, privacy and general care (WHO, 2015). The term "ethics of care" can also be loosely attributed to the public service, as all public servants need to have some level of caring consideration for the people they serve. The Batho Pele principles are a solid example of a government initiative that advocates that public servants exercise due diligence and care. Consequently, ethics become very important in the practice of care in public administration.



## Methodological Brief

This article selected incidents of ethics malpractices (hereinafter called “scenarios”) that were reported by various media houses and were applicable to the procurement-corruption interface in the public service. All these scenarios took place during the State of Disaster and had some connection with procurement. The scenarios were analysed against the backdrop of available literature on ethics and corruption in the public service. An explanatory approach was used to explore, through qualitative and literature analysis, how the scenarios could be situated within the ethics theories discussed.

## Analysis of the Scenarios

On 15 March 2020, President Cyril Ramaphosa declared a National State of Disaster in South Africa as part of government’s initial plans to manage the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of this declaration, among others, was to enable government to roll out its operational plans to deal with the pandemic. In this article, the author considers various reported incidents of ethics violations, as manifested in corruption, maladministration, misappropriation and embezzlement of COVID-19 relief resources administered by the state. While some of the incidents discussed below were still under investigation at the time of writing this article, the rationale for their inclusion here is to examine the civic, academic and legislative considerations regarding potential ethics violations resulting from emergency procurement.

Scenario 1 - Presidential Spokesperson and Gauteng Health MEC allegations of involvement Allegations of involvement of Presidential Spokesperson and Gauteng Health MEC in personal protective equipment (PPE) tender scandal.

The Presidential Spokesperson’s husband won a tender/contract worth R125m to supply the Gauteng Department of Health with PPE. The spokesperson has been reported to have a close relationship with the Gauteng Health MEC and his wife. Both the spokesperson and the MEC are members of the ruling party’s provincial executive (IOL news editors, 29 July 2020).

This scenario implicates two public officials serving in high-ranking offices. These are offices that can be regarded as those that enjoy “close proximity to power”.

NOTE: The R125m was subsequently not disbursed.

It must be mentioned from the outset that both members mentioned in this scenario, upon revelations of their alleged involvement in tender irregularities, were placed on suspension from their duties, pending investigations by the African National Congress’s Integrity Committee. After considering investigative reports from both the ANC and the Special

Investigating Unit (SIU), the provincial executive resolved to disregard wilful involvement of the two parties in corrupt activities. The inclusion of this scenario points to two considerations:

1. *Conflicts of interest* remain a challenge for the public service.
2. *Ethics violations* are often misunderstood by some officials and politicians.

Regarding the first point, the scenario clearly shows the prevalence of conflicts of interest in government and how these pose major risks for ethics management. The debate on what constitutes a conflict of interest is ever-present in most workshops and training sessions on public service ethics, yet it remains a challenge. Based on the first scenario, it appears that public servants and politicians continually operate on the wrong side of the law because of matters related to conflicts of interest. The office of the Public Service Commission's (PSC) pronouncements on ethics in the public services highlighted the problem of conflicts of interest as early as 2010. They reported that 2 319 public servants had interests in companies that conducted business with the state (PSC, 2010). Their 2019 annual report indicates that for the year 2018, the PSC was scrutinising around 10 253 cases of financial disclosure linked to conflicts of interest (PSC, 2019).

Mlambo (2021) reports that by February 2021, the SIU had been investigating over 2 300 COVID-19 procurement contracts worth almost R10bn, including those linked to the scenarios in this article. The above statistics on conflicts of interest and procurement contracts indicate that the South African government remains ill-equipped to manage conflicts of interest. Regarding the second point, it appears that what constitutes an ethics violation by a public servant may be misunderstood, especially by those who hold relatively high public offices. It is a common occurrence that a justification or explanation will arise when revelations of ethics violations emerge. This points to the inability or unwillingness to detect that an act may be in contravention of some moral or ethics codes of the public service. In terms of the public service, this article understands an ethics violation as any contravention of the set ethics practices, including – but not limited to – policy non-compliance.

#### Scenario 2 – Eastern Cape Department of Health 'scooter ambulance' procurement

The Department of Health in the Eastern Cape awarded a tender/contract to a company that provided them with scooters that the MEC reported would be used as ambulances to transport patients from rural areas to the nearest health facilities. One hundred scooters were procured at a price of R94 000 per unit and R6 000 for maintenance, totalling just over R10m. The Minister of Health later discouraged the procurement of these scooters as they did not meet the basic requirements for patient transport.  
(IOL News, July 09, 2020)



The second scenario is a typical case of misappropriation or misdirected resource allocation to the value of R10m by the EC Department of Health. While the propriety of their usage has been a matter of concern, the scooters have not been used for their intended purpose. Earlier in this article, the author reflected on the efficiency of methods used when taking certain actions and whether such actions would ultimately serve the right purpose. The case of the scooters involves various matters, including the following:

1. *Humanitarian considerations* of transporting patients on a scooter (Some members of society argued against the procurement of scooters as ‘ambulances’).
2. *Leadership uncertainty* regarding ethical and rational decision-making.
3. *Financial considerations*, such as the misappropriation of R10m towards a lost cause, during a period when the MEC for Health had reported that the EC DOH was bankrupt (IOL News; July 09, 2020).

The above three points are important for various reasons. Firstly, procurement, even in an emergency, needs to be practised within the bounds of regulations. Secondly, the possibility of a provincial administration’s not considering all aspects of a programme of that magnitude points to ethical and leadership apathy. Lastly, this action defies the consistent warnings from the Auditor-General of South Africa to all spheres of government that they should refrain from fruitless, wasteful and irregular expenditure of public finances (Magubane, 2022).

This scenario highlights the need for ethical leadership and the quality of ethics in any organisation. Kaptein, Huberts, Avelino and Lasthuizen (2005) emphasise the importance of managers in being aware of the quality of ethics within their organisations. In terms of this scenario, the author of this article argues that the leadership of the EC DOH was unaware of the ethics climate and, as a result, did not exercise “due diligence and care” in the procurement of those scooters

Scenario 3 – Delayed rollout of laptops to qualifying NSFAS students because of “interferences” in the procurement process

The Portfolio Committee on Higher Education reported that students were eagerly awaiting the delivery of these laptops, which – to date – remain undelivered as a result of unnecessary delays in the finalisation of the procurement processes by NSFAS.

“Of great concern are the allegations made to the committee that there is interference in the procurement processes. **Attempts are being made to manipulate the procurement process** and, to finally get it aborted because certain service providers are not recommended following supply chain management processes of NSFAS” – Portfolio Committee.

(IOL News, 24 August 2020)



This scenario also occurred during the period of the National State of Disaster and it is included in this article because of its specific relationship with procurement interference. Interference in administrative matters typically exists for several reasons, such as popularity seeking; authority impressions; poor service delivery; and to serve malicious personal interests (Mfuru, Sarwatt & Kanire, 2018). This scenario is also presented for its relevance to the debate on “macro ethics”, that is, the ethical worth of decision-making that affects the well-being of other people. Ordinarily, it would be prudent for decision-makers to consider the realities of a pandemic, where prevailing hardships limit students’ access to higher education.

#### Scenario 4 – Looting of food parcels meant for social relief for the poor amid the COVID-19 pandemic

There have been widespread reports of municipal councillors re-channelling food aid meant for vulnerable groups, either to themselves or to those they know. This hampered the government’s efforts to provide much-needed relief to those in need during the early stages of the COVID-19 outbreak in South Africa. Most of these councillors have been investigated and suspended, both as councillors and as members of the parties that they represent.

(City Press, 2020)

This scenario is an indication of ethical and cultural decay in the exercise of public duty. In fact, Gildenhuis (2004:25) laments that no city or town is immune to challenges such as immorality. Aristotle, a well-known philosopher, speaks of virtue ethics, saying that people are generally good or charitable by nature. Mea and Sims (2018) agree in stating that “humans are naturally repelled by evil and inspired by goodness, logic and beauty”. However, acts such as those perpetrated in the above scenario oppose this idea. Wheeler (2010) asks if ethical conduct must be intentional to arrive at an understanding of whether applying moral principles is the basis for ethics. To unpack this scenario, this article asks the inverse of the question, namely, is unethical conduct intentional? The following discussion on applicable theories in judging the ethical worth of actions presents some perspectives on the latter question.

### Theoretical Reflection

The ethics conversation continues to enjoy global relevance, especially in the face of increasing governance challenges. The continuing conversation, arising from scenarios such as those described above warrants a further look at the relevant theories underpinning ethical decision-making. While there is a variety of such theories, this article will contextualise the above scenarios within the deontological, utilitarian and virtue ethics theories.



## Deontology

The deontological theory is founded on the ideas of philosophers such as Immanuel Kant, who emphasised that an action's ethical worth must be judged based on principle and duty, rather than on the consequence (Gray and Schein, 2012). Deontology centres on the act and not the result. Tzafestas (2016) aptly summarises Kant's deontological theory by drawing the connection between Kant's "*categorical imperative*" and "*Aquinas' natural law*". The "*categorical imperative*", on the one hand, proposes that when an action is taken, it should be undertaken with consideration of whether that act can be applied universally. On the other hand, "*Aquinas' natural law*" is based on the pursuit of good and the avoidance of evil by human beings. Other impressions of deontology, such as that of Van Staveren (2007), reinforce the centrality of morality in universal rules. Gray and Schein (2012) reiterate this core tenet of the deontological theory, which discounts the importance of the consequence, placing a high premium on the act itself. A case can then be built for the importance of the deontological theory in the context of the scenarios presented above, particularly scenario 1, where no lasting punitive measures have been instituted. However, the debate on the acts and moral standing of the two public figures mentioned in this scenario necessitates a discussion on awareness of duty, that is, participating in activities where you know that you are potentially contravening policy. Ethics violations can sometimes be wilful, that is, intentional. Each scenario presented above has some element of wilful disregard of policy and procedure, as well as the universalisability of the actions taken.

## Utilitarianism

The core of utilitarian thought directly opposes deontology. Utilitarianism holds that morality of actions is determined by the consequences of such actions (Conway & Gawronski, 2013). Utilitarianism judges the morality of an action based on the "maximum net expected utility" (Tzafestas, 2016). So, while deontology will focus on the action itself, utilitarianism places a high premium on the consequence of the act. This theory hinges on the works of John Stuart Mill, who highlighted that actions can be moral only if they are in the best interests of everyone, that is, promoting the "*greatest good*". The ideal of "*greatest good*" is, of course, debatable on various levels, as there may not be consensus on what it entails. This article holds that public service and public servants, however, as individuals and institutions of government, the ideal of the "*greatest good*" is applicable. The state, through government, exists to provide a life of natural perfection for its citizens. That implies making decisions that will promote the best long-term interests of everyone. Like deontology, utilitarian thought is applicable to the scenarios presented in this article. Could we judge the scenarios based on what consequences they have or how the consequences may affect people? A case can certainly be built around utilitarian judgement of the scenarios, particularly in respect of scenarios 2, 3 and 4. In the case of scenario 2, with the in the Eastern Cape, the utilitarian consideration of "*greatest good*" to the public can be debated, as is with scenario 3, where it appears that the interference of



political executives in the roll out of educational material was in the best interest of the beneficiaries. A similar argument can be made for scenario 3, where economically abled councillors looted food parcels meant for those who were not able to provide for themselves. Such actions are inconsistent with the “greater good” of ethical decision making advocated by utilitarian thought.

### **Virtue theory**

The virtue ethics theory was coined by Aristotle and it focuses on the character of people. It is concerned with human beings’ building a desirable personality through the exhibition of traits such as prudence, compassion, justice and courage (Tzafestas, 2016). Based on this theory, character is developed over time and informs a person’s moral decision-making. A virtuous person, accordingly, is someone who applies, for instance, Plato’s cardinal virtues of wisdom, courage, temperance and justice. An interesting question to ponder is, can a virtuous person intentionally commit an unethical practice? Based on this view on virtue, a range of questions could arise linked to the scenarios, including: can we speak of a caring politician if corruption is always inextricably linked to them; how does a public servant steal from those they are intended to serve; how do elected office bearers intentionally disregard the dignity of the electorate? These are some of the questions that ideally should not be asked, if the tenets of virtue ethics were followed by political executives, civil servants and society at large.

### **Ethics Reflections for the Developmental State**

The National Development Plan (NDP) is centred on building a capable developmental state. The NDP acknowledges certain realities linked to building a capable state. The most notable, for the purposes of this article, is the realisation that a capable state cannot be “legislated or waved into existence” (NPC, 2012:54). Building a capable state requires strong leadership, stable and sound policies, appropriate systems and a professional public service. One of the main areas that the NDP acknowledges as a building block of a capable state is the fight against corruption, as corruption “frustrates” the operational effectiveness of society (NPC, 2012:56).

In the introduction of this paper, the views of Schultz and Soreide (2008); Odundo and Nyagah (2018) on procurement and corruption were shared. These views highlight the dubious relationship between procurement and opportunities for corruption. While this is not a challenge that is unique to South Africa, nor only to the public service, Baloyi (2020) points out that the ongoing scourge of corruption in the South African public services warrants serious consideration. Such a consideration, he argues, must include non-legislative reflections to augment the existing legislative measures to promote ethical conduct. Building on this view and reflecting on *whether ethics matter in times of disaster*, this article affirms the following:



- ***Compromised ethics = compromised development***

Development is not a single event. It requires sustained purposive efforts and initiatives linked to specific goals and challenges. Such goals, this article holds, cannot be achieved optimally while co-existing with a culture of compromised ethics practices. The developmental agenda, which has been a government objective since the inception of the Reconstruction and Development Programme in 1994, has clearly not achieved its goals, and this can be attributed to the rising levels of ethics malpractices affecting the public service.

- ***Compromised ethics = compromised state capacity***

To execute the developmental agenda effectively, capacity is non-negotiable. Capacity is referred to here in terms of governance, application of law/policies, social control, economic reform, and education etc. It is highly likely that there is practical evidence across government, business and social structures to show that unethical practices hinder the capacity to develop. We could even argue that the one thing that ethics malpractice has in common with tax and inflation is its propensity to rise annually under ordinary circumstances. An annual rise in ethics violations cannot be good for building capacity. It could be argued that ethics malpractices steal from the resources that could be channelled towards building state capacity in the different spheres.

- ***Compromised ethics = compromised poverty alleviation efforts***

The United Nations former Millennium Development Goals (MDG) and, currently, its Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), along with the African Union's Agenda 2063, have one common denominator: the alleviation of extreme poverty in all its forms. While the nobility of this aspiration is beyond question, there seems to be very little consideration, especially on the African continent, for the relationship between public service corruption/ethics malpractice and poverty. Any effort towards poverty alleviation implies the injection of financial resources to the various programmes. Concomitantly, various corruption activities limit the capacity of governments to channel adequate resources to the programmes aimed at poverty alleviation. While this relationship may be indirect, it is still quite significant and hampers the goal. The NDP presents South Africa's comprehensive list of aspirations towards a capable state that will eventually deal with poverty through various programmes. These aspirations, too, will remain just aspirations if ethics violations remain a part of our culture.

While this article is mainly concerned with public service ethics, it cannot discount the role of the private sector where unethical conduct is concerned. In fact, a policy brief published by the Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME, 2021) reiterated



findings from a Corruption Watch survey stating that although incidents of corruption were highest in the public service at national and local level in 2018 and 2019, it was the private sector that showed the sharpest increase in corruption incidents over those two years. The private sector is an important role-player because it conducts business with the state, albeit at a macro level generally. It must, however, be appreciated that the private sector is not tasked with ensuring the well-being of the people; hence the spotlight rarely shines on organisations in that sector.

Procurement corruption has been especially evident over the past two years of Covid 19 in South Africa during the National State of Disaster. This corruption has taken place amid worsening economic conditions and rising levels of unemployment. Such factors have contributed to dwindling trust in government to ameliorate the living conditions of people. The DPME (2021) acknowledges that citizen trust must be influenced positively, and for that to happen, government must establish a stronger foundation to meet the expectations of citizens in creating a capable state.

### **Ethics Lessons Learnt from COVID-19 Corruption**

Firstly, the author of this article agrees with the remarks of Modipa and Motseki (2022: that the Coronavirus has afforded criminals the opportunity to enrich themselves through procurement corruption, albeit at the expense of the poor. Secondly, the fact that the state seems to be unable to detect and prevent ethics violations related to corruption augments the view by Baloyi (2020) that the public service ethics impasse has reached chronic levels. Thirdly, the magnitude of the setbacks caused by COVID-19 corruption is significant and entails a relegation of developmental efforts.

Based on the three impressions stated above, a few lessons can be drawn from the South African experience of COVID-19 corruption. The primary lesson being advanced here relates to **developmental dissonance**, that is, the lack of harmony in developmental efforts arising from increasing ethics violations and worsening socioeconomic conditions among citizens. The various COVID-19 response programmes by both government and the private sector, which were meant to stabilise the developmental agenda, have been hamstrung by procurement corruption and ethics violations during the administration of relief measures.

A second lesson relates to **misdirected political leadership**, where there has been little evidence of political executives taking a firm, purposive and intentional stance against what is an already known challenge of conflicts of interest and integrity violations in the public service. Moreover, the trend of political executives' being involved in corruption practices seems unstoppable; their involvement in scandals related to COVID-19 corruption has implications for the politics-administration dichotomy. Such involvement



also means that political executives may be lured by the possibility of abusing their power and influence. A third lesson that can be drawn from the COVID-19 corruption is related to **legislative and procedural practices** governing emergency procurement. The COVID-19 crisis is the first of its kind experienced by South Africa and, as such, it required enormous amounts of money to be used in executing relief measures. Therefore, a case could be made for streamlining emergency procurement practices and procedures for disasters of a national scale

## Conclusion

This article sought to present a reflection of whether “ethics matter in time of disaster”, that is, during emergencies and related procurement processes aimed at relief. Procurement is a crucial part of the spending cycle of government and it may be argued that effective management of the procurement process is equally important. However, the literature surveyed for this article shows that another important element in the procurement process is the prevalence of corruption and the opportunities for ethics violations. The interface between corruption and procurement was the premise for this article, which used four scenarios that involved some form of corruption to indicate how compromised ethics management can hinder effective procurement processes and thereby affect governance negatively. An explanatory approach was used to dissect the scenarios through the lens of available literature. This article also considered whether unethical conduct is intentional. Through the analysis of the four scenarios and against the backdrop of certain ethics theories, some reflections and lessons were provided that could shape debates over this question. What remains a reality, though, is the fact that the COVID-19 crisis has exposed the systemic shortcomings related to the management of ethics in emergency procurement and shows that the ethics problem may not be addressed adequately anytime soon.

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