frontiers in Political Science

TYPE Hypothesis and Theory
PUBLISHED 14 September 2026
DOI 10.3389/fpos.2026.1869966

Check for updates

OPEN ACCESS

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RECEIVED 30 April 2026
REVISED 30 July 2026
ACCEPTED 10 August 2026
PUBLISHED 14 September 2026

CITATION
Villacis B (2026) Governing expertise through anti-corruption: how governance mechanisms authorize expertise and ratify power.
Front. Polit. Sci. 8:1869966.
doi: 10.3389/fpos.2026.1869966

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Governing expertise through anti-corruption: how governance mechanisms authorize expertise and ratify power

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This article examines anti-corruption as a strategic case for understanding the governance of expertise in contemporary policymaking. It asks how anti-corruption governance turns some forms of relevant knowledge into institutionally recognized authority while leaving others peripheral. The article argues that this process is shaped by governance mechanisms that are formally technical but socially selective. Drawing on research on expertise, policy advice, quantification, and anti-corruption governance, it distinguishes between substantive expertise, understood as knowledge about corruption's forms, measurement limits, organizational constraints, institutional embeddedness, and enforcement trade-offs, and authorized expertise, understood as knowledge that is treated as credible, actionable, and legitimate in powerful policy arenas. The analysis shows how four mechanisms structure this process: indicator-centered problem definition, advisory systems and template governance, organizational insulation, and audit-and-repair politics. Together, these mechanisms shape how corruption is defined, which experts gain authority, and what kinds of reforms come to appear credible. Building on prior work on transnational anti-corruption expertise, the article situates these mechanisms within a field in which recognition tends to cluster around three recurrent poles: academic prestige, measurement authority and proximity to international financial institutions (IFIs), and media visibility. As a result, forms of expertise that travel well through metrics, standardized policy scripts, insulated advisory settings, and evaluative repertoires of progress are more likely to become authoritative, while locally grounded or politically inconvenient forms of knowledge are more easily marginalized. The article contributes to debates on expertise and democratic governance by showing that anti-corruption governance does not simply use expert knowledge to improve policy. It also organizes which experts are heard, which forms of knowledge count, and how authority is distributed in policymaking.

KEYWORDS
anti-corruption governance, sociology of expertise, expertise authorization, governance by indicators, transnational governance, policy advisory systems, anti-corruption expertise, technocracy as performance

1 Introduction

Each year, corruption rankings, integrity assessments, compliance reviews, audit reports, reform roadmaps, and progress scorecards circulate across governments, international organizations, donor communities, newsrooms, advocacy networks, and domestic reform coalitions. These devices do more than describe corruption. They help define what corruption is, who is authorized to speak about it, what counts as credible evidence, and which responses appear to qualify as serious reform. Anti-corruption has thus become one of the most expert-saturated domains of contemporary governance: a field in which technical authority is routinely invoked to diagnose institutional failure, prescribe reform, and certify progress.

This proliferation of expert devices also brings a deeper asymmetry into view. Anti-corruption governance is populated by actors who may all possess relevant knowledge about corruption: judges, auditors, bureaucrats, journalists, civil society actors, donor consultants, economists, compliance professionals, and policy advisers. Yet their knowledge does not travel with equal ease through governmental, donor, media, and transnational policy arenas. Some claims become portable, fundable, visible, and politically actionable because they fit recognized formats of evidence and reform. Others remain localized, weakly audible, or difficult to translate into institutional language, even when they are substantively important for understanding how corruption operates in practice. The puzzle, then, is how anti-corruption governance enables some forms of relevant knowledge to become institutionally recognized authority, while leaving others at the margins.

This article argues that the passage from relevant knowledge to recognized authority is mediated by governance mechanisms that are formally technical but socially selective. More specifically, anti-corruption governance authorizes expertise through four mechanisms: indicator-centered problem definition, advisory systems and template governance, organizational insulation, and audit-and-repair politics. These mechanisms do not simply improve the flow of knowledge into policy. They organize the conditions under which knowledge becomes visible, legible, credible, actionable, and publicly defensible. They help shape which definitions of corruption travel, which reforms appear credible, which actors become recognized as experts, and which forms of knowledge remain more difficult to institutionalize.

The article builds on, rather than displaces, prior scholarship. Existing work has shown how corruption became a global policy problem through international organizations, development institutions, legal reforms, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), rankings, and reform entrepreneurs. Research on indicators and quantification has shown that metrics do not merely measure the world, but also make complex realities comparable, governable, and publicly consequential. Work on expertise, policy advice, and transnational professional authority has shown that expert knowledge is socially produced, politically used, and institutionally organized. Anti-corruption scholarship has also documented the expansion of global standards, integrity frameworks, compliance systems, and reform tools while identifying the limits of dominant institutional models. What remains less clearly specified is how these processes work together to authorize particular forms of anti-corruption expertise.

The contribution of the article lies in bringing these processes into a single mechanism-oriented account. It does not claim that indicators, advisory templates, specialized agencies, or audits are new phenomena. Rather, it shows how these institutional formats, often analyzed separately, work together as mechanisms that authorize and stabilize a particular configuration of anti-corruption knowledge. To conceptualize this process, the article distinguishes between substantive expertise and authorized expertise. Substantive expertise refers to knowledge about corruption's forms, measurement limits, organizational constraints, institutional embeddedness, enforcement trade-offs, and context-specific political dynamics. Authorized expertise refers to knowledge that is institutionally recognized as legitimate, credible, actionable, and consequential by powerful organizations and decision-making arenas. The movement from one to the other is neither automatic nor simply meritocratic. It depends on governance infrastructures that selectively format knowledge for institutional use.

These mechanisms do not operate on a flat field. Anti-corruption expertise circulates within a transnational field structured by uneven patterns of recognition. The article identifies three recurrent poles around which expert authority tends to cluster: academic prestige, measurement authority and IFI proximity, and media visibility. These poles are not fixed groups or mutually exclusive categories. They are pathways through which some expert profiles become more recognizable than others. Academic prestige gives claims scholarly credibility and claims to generalizability. Measurement authority and IFI proximity make claims appear technically credible, comparable, and administratively usable. Media visibility makes claims publicly salient and reputationally consequential. The mechanisms analyzed in this article make these pathways more consequential by rewarding knowledge that can be scored, translated into reform scripts, housed in recognized organizations, and certified through evaluative repertoires of progress.

Anti-corruption is a strategic site for this argument because corruption is difficult to observe directly, reform success is complex to verify conclusively, and institutional progress is often assessed through indirect signs such as rankings, audits, compliance reports, peer reviews, public scandals, and reputational signals. Whether a policy has reduced corruption, displaced it, made it more visible, or merely changed how it is reported often depends on causal assumptions, institutional narratives, and contested interpretations. Under these conditions, expertise does not merely supply information. It helps stabilize the categories through which corruption is defined, the instruments through which reform is recognized, and the audiences before whom progress must be demonstrated.

The article is grounded in a broader empirical research program on the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), transnational anti-corruption expertise, and the infrastructures through which anti-corruption knowledge circulates. The materials include interviews, archival analysis, participant observation, and prosopographical analysis. They support a theory-building argument, not a statistical test of all anti-corruption governance. For instance, the empirical sections present traces rather than exhaustive case studies, showing how the mechanisms appear across indicator use, reform documents, workshops, advisory settings, organizational practices, donor-facing evaluation, and patterns of expert recognition. The claim is one of analytic generalization.

The article contributes to anti-corruption studies, the sociology of expertise, and policy process research by shifting attention from whether specific reforms work to how reforms, tools, and experts become credible in the first place. It shows that expert authority is not simply a property of credentials, technical competence, or professional reputation. It is produced relationally through institutional formats that connect knowledge to audiences, organizations, and policy problems. Anti-corruption governance is therefore not only a struggle over rules, institutions, or enforcement. It is also a struggle over the authority to know.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 situates the argument in debates on expertise, knowledge use, policy learning, transnational governance, indicators, and anti-corruption. Section 3 develops the distinction between substantive and authorized expertise. Section 4 explains why anti-corruption is a strategic site and introduces the three poles of recognition. Section 5 describes the empirical foundations. Sections 6 through 9 analyze the four mechanisms. Section 10 discusses their implications, alternatives, and scope conditions. The conclusion reflects on broader implications for expertise and democratic governance.

2 Expertise, knowledge use, and anti-corruption governance

This article builds on four bodies of scholarship that are often discussed separately: the sociology of expertise, policy process research on knowledge use and learning, transnational governance studies, and anti-corruption scholarship. Bringing these literatures together makes it possible to ask not only how anti-corruption policies are designed, diffused, or evaluated, but how particular forms of knowledge become credible, usable, and institutionally consequential in the first place. The argument does not treat the authority of anti-corruption expertise as a simple reflection of technical superiority. It treats it as a relational status produced through institutions, formats, audiences, and policy settings.

The sociology of expertise shows that expert authority is not reducible to superior knowledge or formal credentials. Expertise depends on the audiences, institutions, classifications, and networks through which knowledge is recognized as credible and actionable (Eyal, 2013; Eyal, 2019). Work on expertise also emphasizes that authority is often produced through boundaries that distinguish expert knowledge from lay, local, experiential, or political knowledge (Evans, 2008). In transnational governance, this boundary work is especially consequential because expertise travels through professional networks, international organizations, advisory venues, rankings, standards, and reform scripts that shape the forms in which knowledge can be recognized.

Policy process research makes a related point from a different angle. Knowledge does not move into policy as neutral information that decision makers then apply. It is used strategically, symbolically, instrumentally, and politically (Boswell, 2009). Policy learning depends on institutional settings, problem definitions, actor coalitions, policy paradigms, and the conditions under which evidence becomes usable (Dunlop and Radaelli, 2013; Dunlop and Radaelli, 2018; Wilder, 2017). Research on policy advice similarly shows that advisory systems select and format expertise under constraints of institutional demand, political authority, and administrative usability (Capano et al., 2023; Craft et al., 2024). This literature is especially important for anti-corruption because corruption is rarely visible as a simple administrative fact. It must be inferred, diagnosed, translated into reform options, and made actionable within policy processes.

A third stream of literature examines transnational expertise and professional authority. Scholars have shown how global professional fields are structured by unequal distributions of symbolic capital, disciplinary prestige, methodological authority, and organizational location (Fourcade, 2006; Seabrooke and Henriksen, 2017). Standards and classifications further shape what can travel across institutional settings (Timmermans and Epstein, 2010). This means that the international circulation of expertise is never only about diffusion. It is also about recognition. Some expert profiles become more portable than others because they are attached to institutions, methods, credentials, or formats that powerful organizations already recognize.

This article also draws on work on epistemic inequality. Bourdieu's account of symbolic capital and field structure helps explain how recognition is unevenly distributed across social spaces (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Bourdieu, 1998; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2013). Fricker's work on epistemic injustice similarly shows that speakers can be discredited not because their claims are weak, but because their social location affects how credibility is assessed (Fricker, 2007; Fricker, 2017). These perspectives help explain why actors may possess deep substantive knowledge of corruption while remaining peripheral to the venues where anti-corruption knowledge becomes actionable.

Scholarship on indicators and quantification provides another foundation for the argument. Indicators do not merely measure the world. They reproduce conventions of equivalence, make complex realities comparable, and generate forms of reactivity among those who are measured (Porter, 1995; Desrosières, 1998; Espeland and Sauder, 2007; Davis et al., 2012; Merry et al., 2015). In anti-corruption governance, this literature helps explain why rankings and indicators are not just technical tools. They are formats through which corruption becomes visible to governments, donors, media audiences, investors, and reform coalitions. They also help constitute what counts as valid knowledge and which actors are empowered to produce, interpret, or mobilize it.

Anti-corruption scholarship has already shown that corruption became a global policy problem through a broad set of actors, institutions, and reform languages. Earlier work examined the moralization of corruption in development discourse, the role of international organizations, the emergence of a global anti-corruption industry, and the power of transparency, integrity, and good governance agendas (Polzer, 2001; Bukovansky, 2006; Ivanov, 2007; Sampson, 2010; Snyman, 2022). This article does not claim that anti-corruption studies ignored expertise, discourse, indicators, or transnational authority. Rather, it builds on that literature to theorize the selective authorization of anti-corruption expertise. The question is not only how anti-corruption became global, but how particular forms of knowledge within that consensus became more authoritative than others.

The contribution, then, is synthetic and mechanism-oriented. The article connects literatures on expertise, knowledge use, policy learning, transnational governance, indicators, and anti-corruption around a specific theoretical problem: how substantive expertise becomes authorized expertise. It does not present the four mechanisms as new empirical phenomena detached from prior scholarship. Instead, it shows how processes identified across separate literatures work together to authorize and stabilize a particular configuration of anti-corruption knowledge. The four mechanisms specify this process in institutional terms. Indicator-centered problem definition privileges knowledge that can make corruption comparable. Advisory systems and template governance privilege knowledge that can be translated into reform scripts. Organizational insulation privileges knowledge that can operate inside bounded institutional sites. Audit-and-repair politics privileges knowledge that can produce evidence of responsiveness, compliance, and progress.

The result is an account of anti-corruption expertise as a field of selective recognition rather than a neutral marketplace of ideas. Its added value lies in distinguishing substantive expertise from authorized expertise, integrating four authorization mechanisms into a single framework, and grounding that framework in interviews, archives, participant observation, and prosopographical analysis.

3 From substantive expertise to authorized expertise

The preceding discussion situates expertise as socially produced, politically used, and institutionally organized. This section develops the conceptual distinction that structures the article's argument: the distinction between substantive expertise and authorized expertise. The distinction does not rest on the claim that some actors "really know" while others merely perform knowledge, nor does it imply that authority and knowledge are unrelated. Rather, it captures a recurrent feature of anti-corruption governance: possessing relevant knowledge about corruption does not automatically translate into the institutional capacity to define problems, prescribe solutions, or shape legitimate policy agendas.

By substantive expertise, I refer to knowledge about corruption's forms, measurement limits, organizational constraints, enforcement trade-offs, and context-specific political dynamics. This includes knowledge about bureaucratic routines, institutional capacity, selective enforcement, and the limits of indicators. It includes situated, organizational, professional, and experiential knowledge about how corruption is interpreted and governed in practice (Evans, 2008; Haraway, 1988; Mitchell, 2002).

By authorized expertise, I refer to forms of expertise that are institutionally recognized as legitimate, credible, and actionable by powerful organizations and decision-making arenas. Authorized expertise is not simply knowledge that exists. It is knowledge that has been socially and institutionally validated in ways that allow it to travel upward into policy decisions, outward into public legitimacy, and across transnational governance circuits. It is the kind of expertise that can define what counts as corruption, what counts as evidence, which reforms are considered "serious," and which actors are treated as competent interlocutors. In this sense, authorized expertise is a relational and political status. It depends not only on what one knows, but on who recognizes that knowledge, through which institutions, and for what purposes (Boswell, 2009; Eyal, 2013; Fourcade, 2006).

The distinction matters because the anti-corruption field contains many actors with relevant forms of substantive knowledge, but not all of them enjoy equal authority. Judges, auditors, bureaucrats, journalists, civil society actors, donor consultants, economists, and policy professionals may all know something important about corruption. Yet their knowledge does not circulate symmetrically. Some forms of expertise remain localized, practical, or politically inconvenient. Others become portable, fundable, and policy-relevant. This asymmetry cannot be explained by knowledge alone. It depends on the social and institutional processes through which expertise becomes authorized.

This article therefore treats the relationship between substantive and authorized expertise as neither automatic nor meritocratic. The conversion of one into the other is mediated by what I call governance mechanisms. These mechanisms do not simply regulate policy outcomes. They organize the pathways through which some kinds of expertise become visible, legible, credible, and actionable while others remain marginal. The central claim of the article is that anti-corruption governance depends less on the neutral incorporation of the "best available knowledge" than on the selective authorization of particular forms of expertise through institutional devices such as indicators, advisory systems, organizational insulation, and audit politics.

This formulation builds on but also extends existing scholarship. Boswell (2009) showed that expert knowledge is often used not only instrumentally but also to substantiate preferences and signal competence. Mitchell (2002) demonstrated that expertise becomes politically powerful when embedded in techno-political arrangements that render choices technical and necessary. Eyal (2013, 2019) emphasized that expertise should be understood sociologically as a status produced through recognition under conditions of uncertainty. The present article builds on these insights by foregrounding a narrower question: how specific governance infrastructures convert some forms of anti-corruption knowledge into institutionally authorized expertise.

The distinction is especially useful in anti-corruption because this field sits at the intersection of moral politics, bureaucratic reform, democratic legitimacy, and transnational evaluation. Anti-corruption interventions are embedded in reputational pressures, donor expectations, international rankings, policy templates, legal reforms, media spectacles, and struggles over institutional control. Under these conditions, expertise becomes politically consequential not merely because it illuminates corruption, but because it helps stabilize one definition of the problem over others. This is why anti-corruption is not just an expert-saturated field; it is a field in which the authorization of expertise is itself a central political process. As prior research has shown, the anti-corruption field is structured around three poles of power: globally prestigious academic credentials, measurement authority and IFI proximity, and media visibility (Villacis, 2023).

Seen from this perspective, authorized expertise should not be understood as a superior form of substantive knowledge. It is better understood as a socially selective outcome. Some experts become authorized because their knowledge is compatible with portable metrics, donor expectations, institutional languages of reform, or public reputational circuits. Others may possess rich, experience-based understanding of corruption but remain weakly authorized because their knowledge does not fit dominant formats of visibility, comparability, or policy translation. This is especially important for actors from the Global South, whose expertise may be deeply grounded in administrative practice or political experience but less readily recognized by transnational institutions structured by asymmetries of symbolic capital and methodological prestige (Fourcade, 2006; Seabrooke and Henriksen, 2017; Villacis, 2023).

This conceptual distinction also clarifies the article's argument about technocracy as performance. The article does not claim that anti-corruption governance is devoid of knowledge or that experts are merely cynical instruments of power. Rather, expert authority is produced through institutional performances of measurability, actionability, insulation, and repair. Expertise does not disappear; it is reorganized through formats that make some claims easier to recognize than others and help legitimate choices already narrowed by organizational hierarchies, reputational incentives, and transnational authority.

The rest of the article develops this claim through four governance mechanisms. Indicators privilege knowledge that can travel through

numbers, rankings, and comparative metrics. Advisory systems and template governance concentrate legitimacy in actors who can translate politics into recognized reform scripts. Organizational insulation locates expertise within visible but bounded decision spaces. Audit-and-repair politics rewards knowledge that can demonstrate progress, legibility, and compliance. Across all four mechanisms, governance does not merely use expertise; it sorts and authorizes it.

4 Anti-corruption as a strategic site of expertise governance

Anti-corruption offers a strategic site for studying the governance of expertise because several tensions of contemporary policymaking converge within it: moral urgency, technical uncertainty, institutional reform, democratic legitimacy, and transnational evaluation. Corruption is routinely presented as a threat to development, impartiality, rule of law, legitimacy, and public trust (Mauro, 1995; Anderson and Tverdova, 2003; Rothstein and Uslaner, 2005; Rothstein and Teorell, 2008). Yet anti-corruption interventions are often advanced through technical instruments such as indicators, diagnostics, compliance systems, peer reviews, integrity plans, audit procedures, and advisory bodies (OECD, 2020; Davis et al., 2012; de Sousa et al., 2009). Anti-corruption is therefore not only a policy agenda. It is also an epistemic infrastructure through which conventions about what counts as corruption are made visible, comparable, and governable (Bukovansky, 2006; Sampson, 2010; Snyman, 2022).

Anti-corruption operates between domestic political conflict and transnational validation. Domestically, reforms affect bureaucratic discretion, procurement, public finance, judicial authority, administrative careers, and the visibility of elite misconduct. Transnationally, those reforms are evaluated through rankings, donor frameworks, investment-risk logics, compliance standards, and best-practice models. This dual pressure makes anti-corruption especially useful for observing how expertise becomes authorized not only because it is substantively compelling, but because it can travel across institutional, donor, media, and reform arenas (Andersson and Heywood, 2009; Davis et al., 2012; Merry et al., 2015).

The Corruption Perceptions Index illustrates this broader dynamic, but it should not be treated as its only cause. Earlier scholarship has shown that corruption became a global policy problem through international organizations, development institutions, legal reforms, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), rankings, and reform entrepreneurs (Polzer, 2001; Bukovansky, 2006; Ivanov, 2007; Sampson, 2010; Snyman, 2022). Indicators such as the CPI intensified this process by making corruption portable, rankable, publicly communicable, and comparable across countries. They also connected corruption to reputational pressures, reform agendas, donor expectations, and financial assessments (Andersson and Heywood, 2009; Davis et al., 2012; Merry et al., 2015; Villacis, 2023). The CPI therefore condensed and amplified a broader transformation: corruption became an object that could be interpreted by experts, standardized through measurement, compared across countries, and tied to reputational, donor, and financial assessments.

This transformation contributed to the formation of an expert-saturated field of anti-corruption governance. Field is used here in Bourdieu's relational sense: a structured space of positions in which actors struggle over valued forms of capital and over the authority to define legitimate classifications, problems, and forms of competence (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). This framing helps to understand anti-corruption experts not as a flat community of knowledge holders, but as a relational space organized by uneven distributions of professional authority, symbolic capital, methodological credibility, institutional location, and transnational recognition (Bourdieu, 1998; Fourcade, 2006; Seabrooke and Henriksen, 2017). In anti-corruption, authority is especially uneven because expert knowledge circulates through unequal infrastructures: elite universities, international organizations, donor networks, indicators, consulting circuits, NGOs, media platforms, and domestic state institutions.

The empirical basis for identifying the field's internal structure is summarized in the next section. For the purposes of the present argument, the central finding is that expert recognition in the transnational anti-corruption field clusters around three recurrent poles of power: academic prestige, measurement authority linked to international financial institutions and policy diagnostics, and media visibility (Villacis, 2023). These poles should not be understood as fixed groups or mutually exclusive categories, nor are they produced by the four mechanisms analyzed later. They are recurrent concentrations of recognition that make some expert profiles more recognizable than others. The mechanisms describe how these uneven patterns become consequential in governance without determining outcomes in advance (see Table 1).

The three-pole model helps explain why the conversion of substantive expertise into authorized expertise is unequal. Academic prestige can make certain claims appear rigorous, generalizable, and theoretically elevated. Measurement authority and IFI proximity can make certain claims appear technically credible, comparable, and administratively usable. Media visibility can make certain claims publicly salient and reputationally consequential. These forms of capital do not guarantee accuracy, nor do they exhaust the forms of knowledge present in anti-corruption governance. They mark dominant pathways of recognition. Actors located farther from these pathways may still possess substantial knowledge about corruption's organizational, legal, political, or administrative dynamics, but their knowledge is less likely to travel through the formats that powerful institutions recognize as authoritative.

This point avoids a simplistic opposition between global and local expertise. Locally grounded knowledge is not automatically more democratic, accurate, or emancipatory; it can also be partial, elite-controlled, partisan, or shaped by exclusionary networks (Bardhan and Mookherjee, 2000; Platteau, 2004; Mansuri and Rao, 2013). Conversely, transnational expertise is not necessarily empty or illegitimate. Indicators, legal standards, compliance systems, and expert reviews can make hidden practices visible, facilitate coordination, support comparison, and protect some reform agendas from arbitrary political interference (Haas, 1992; Davis et al., 2012; OECD, 2020; de Sousa, 2010). The relevant question is therefore not which form of knowledge is superior. It is which forms become institutionally consequential, through what pathways, and with what effects on the distribution of authority.

Anti-corruption is therefore a strategic case because it makes the authorization of expertise unusually visible. Corruption is difficult to observe directly, and reform success is difficult to verify conclusively. Whether a policy has reduced corruption, displaced it, made it more visible, or changed how it is reported often depends on indirect indicators, causal assumptions, institutional narratives, and contested interpretations. Institutional progress is frequently assessed through

TABLE 1 Poles of power in the anti-corruption field.

Pole of power	Mode of capital	Typical expert profiles	Empirical indicators	Main pathway of authorization
Academic prestige	Symbolic and disciplinary capital	Academics and researchers, especially those linked to prestigious universities, recognized research institutions, or transnational expert networks	Ph.D. training, tenure, publications, citations, institutional affiliation, awards, keynote invitations, elite educational trajectories, participation in expert networks	Authority through scholarly credibility, disciplinary recognition, claims to generalizability, and institutional prestige
Measurement authority and IFI proximity	Methodological and organizational capital	Measurement experts, economists, governance specialists, consultants, data producers, and policy professionals linked to international organizations, financial institutions, or donor environments	Indicator expertise, benchmarking experience, policy diagnostics, technical assistance, methodological credibility, employment or consulting ties with IFIs or donor organizations	Authority through technical credibility, comparability, administrative usability, and proximity to powerful policy venues
Media visibility	Reputational and public communicative capital	NGO leaders, public intellectuals, journalists, high-profile advocates, and experts who translate technical claims into public narratives	Media appearances, public reports, op-eds, newspaper citations, visibility in scandals, public reputation, agenda-setting capacity	Authority through public circulation, reputational force, and the capacity to convert expert claims into political salience

Author's elaboration based on the prosopographical analysis of 400 anti-corruption experts and the broader empirical research program described in Section 5. The poles are relational concentrations of recognition, not fixed actor types. Individual experts may occupy positions near more than one pole.

rankings, audits, compliance reports, peer reviews, public scandals, and reputational signals. Under these conditions, expertise helps stabilize the categories through which corruption is defined, the instruments through which reform is recognized, and the audiences before whom progress must be demonstrated.

5 Empirical foundations, scope, and data strategy

This article develops a theory-building argument grounded in a broader empirical research program on the social life of the Corruption Perceptions Index, the formation of anti-corruption expertise, and the transnational circulation of anti-corruption knowledge (Villacis, 2023). The empirical materials are used to reconstruct how expert arguments, policy formats, organizational settings, and professional trajectories help convert some forms of knowledge into authorized expertise. The purpose is to specify the conditions under which these mechanisms become visible, plausible, and institutionally consequential, rather than to estimate their frequency or average causal effect.

The broader project combined archival analysis, interviews, participant observation, prosopographical mapping, geometric data analysis (GDA), and regression analysis. This article draws selectively on the qualitative, documentary, observational, and relational components most directly related to expertise authorization. Interviews reconstruct how actors identify, justify, contest, translate, and recognize anti-corruption expertise. Archival and documentary materials trace how indicators, reform templates, methodological standards, organizational scripts, audit practices, and policy categories become stabilized. Participant observation examines how expert authority is performed in policy workshops, donor-facing spaces, and organizational settings. Prosopography and geometric data analysis map the social and professional structure of the field. Supplementary Appendix A provides additional methodological detail.

Fieldwork was designed to examine selected sites within the transnational circulation of anti-corruption knowledge. Germany and the United States were included as sites closely associated with the production and consolidation of anti-corruption agendas, indicator infrastructures, and transnational reform networks, while Brazil and Ecuador were selected as Global South sites where these agendas were received, translated, contested, and operationalized under different political conditions (Villacis, 2023). The country selection therefore combines sites of production and consolidation with sites of reception, adaptation, and contestation. It does not claim to represent all national anti-corruption experiences. Instead, it enables examination of selected pathways through which transnational anti-corruption knowledge moves across production, translation, and implementation arenas.

The interview strategy followed a purposive and relational logic. It was not designed as a probability sample and does not support quantitative estimates of the views of all anti-corruption actors. Interviewees were selected because they occupied analytically relevant positions in the production, promotion, critique, translation, or use of anti-corruption indicators and reforms. Rather than treating the four mechanisms as predefined categories, the interviews helped reconstruct how actors described the conditions under which anti-corruption knowledge became credible, usable, and institutionally consequential. Through iterative comparison with documents,

observations, and prosopographical materials, indicators, policy templates, organizational settings, and evaluative practices became visible as recurrent sites of expertise authorization.

The empirical materials include 73 interviews conducted between fall 2018 and summer 2019 in Germany, Brazil, Ecuador, and the United States; archival and documentary materials from Transparency International, the World Bank, the United Nations, and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA); seven events of participant observation; and a prosopographical dataset of 400 transnational anti-corruption experts. Interviewees included experts, scholars, civil society actors, international organization and donor-linked professionals, government officials, NGO practitioners, political actors, and methodological critics or users of corruption indicators. These categories are reported in aggregate form to protect confidentiality. Interviewees are identified by country, broad sector, role, and year.

The archival and documentary corpus included public reports, methodological notes, governance papers, indicator documentation, audits, policy manuals, anti-corruption strategies, compliance handbooks, national and international reform reports, critiques of corruption indicators, and documents assessing the methodology and organizational work of anti-corruption NGOs. These materials were read as organizational artifacts that reveal how institutions define problems, justify preferred solutions, present methodological authority, narrate reform progress, and stabilize particular forms of expertise. Participant observation complemented this material by providing access to settings in which expertise was performed in real time, including NGO workshops, executive meetings, national anti-corruption workshops, and donor-facing spaces where projects, grants, and reform initiatives were presented or discussed.

The prosopographical dataset organized comparable information on 400 transnational anti-corruption experts, including educational trajectories, professional positions, institutional affiliations, methodological orientations, public visibility, and policy networks. It was analyzed through geometric data analysis, particularly multiple correspondence analysis (MCA), to examine proximity and distance among expert profiles and identify field positions associated with recognition. Inclusion was based on recurrent visibility in the production, interpretation, critique, or circulation of anti-corruption knowledge. Recognition was operationalized through observable indicators of field-relevant capital: academic prestige; measurement authority and IFI proximity, including indicator expertise and links to international organizations or financial institutions; and media visibility. Recognition refers not to intrinsic quality or methodological superiority, but to observable forms of visibility, credibility, and institutional valuation.

The analysis relied on triangulation across materials. Interviews were treated as situated accounts that reveal how actors justify, contest, and interpret expertise from particular institutional positions. Archival and documentary materials were treated as organizational claims requiring contextualization. Participant observation was used to observe how expert authority was performed in strategic settings and to compare those performances with interview narratives and documentary scripts. A claim was considered analytically stronger when it appeared across more than one type of material, for example when an interview account about donor-facing indicator use corresponded with project documents, public reports, reform templates, or observed policy interactions.

Several limitations follow from this design. The article does not claim that the four mechanisms explain every instance of anti-corruption expertise authorization, nor that the four field sites represent all possible configurations of anti-corruption governance. The mechanisms are not presented as entirely new phenomena detached from prior scholarship. Rather, the article uses the empirical materials described here to specify how processes identified in existing accounts of the anti-corruption consensus, indicators, policy templates, organizational reform, and audit-based accountability work together as

TABLE 2 Empirical materials, selection logic, and analytic use in the present article.

Empirical material	Scope and selection logic	Analytic use in this article
In-depth interviews	73 interviews in Germany, the United States, Brazil, and Ecuador. Interviewees were selected purposively and through snowball referrals because of their involvement in producing, promoting, critiquing, translating, or using anti-corruption indicators and reforms.	Reconstruct how actors identify, justify, contest, translate, and recognize anti-corruption expertise, and how they narrate the conversion of substantive expertise into authorized expertise across policy, donor, civil society, governmental, and expert settings.
Archival and documentary materials	Materials from Transparency International, the World Bank, the United Nations, and the CIA, complemented by reports, methodological documents, audits, policy manuals, indicator critiques, compliance handbooks, and national or international anti-corruption strategies.	Trace how indicators, templates, methodological standards, organizational scripts, audit practices, and reform categories become stabilized in documents and institutional routines, formatting anti-corruption knowledge as comparable, actionable, credible, and reportable.
Participant observation	Seven events involving anti-corruption experts, public officials, policy professionals, donors, and civil society actors, including workshops, executive meetings, national anti-corruption events, and donor-facing spaces.	Observe how expert authority is performed in real time and how indicators, templates, organizational affiliations, presentation formats, and evaluation language are mobilized before specific audiences.
Prosopographical dataset and GDA/MCA	Dataset of 400 transnational anti-corruption experts selected because of recurrent visibility in the production, interpretation, critique, or circulation of anti-corruption knowledge, analyzed through geometric data analysis, particularly multiple correspondence analysis.	Map expert trajectories, field positions, and forms of recognition, supporting the three-pole model by identifying clusters associated with academic prestige, measurement authority and IFI proximity, and media visibility.

Author's elaboration based on the empirical materials collected for the broader research program. Interviewees and organizational settings are reported in aggregate terms to preserve confidentiality.

mechanisms of expertise authorization. The argument supports analytic rather than statistical generalization (see Table 2).

6 Mechanism 1: indicator-centered problem definition

The first mechanism through which anti-corruption governance authorizes expertise is indicator-centered problem definition. In anti-corruption politics, indicators do not merely describe corruption; they shape what corruption is taken to be, how it becomes visible, and which responses appear rational, urgent, or credible. This matters because corruption is not an immediately observable object in the same way as inflation rates or tax revenues. It is a socially and politically contested category that must be defined, stabilized, and rendered legible before it can be governed. Indicators perform precisely this work by transforming corruption into a portable, comparable, and seemingly objective policy problem.

This mechanism builds on a broader literature showing that indicators are not passive mirrors of social reality. They are technologies of simplification and commensuration that transform complex and contested phenomena into standardized forms (Scott, 1998; Desrosières, 2015; Espeland and Sauder, 2007; Espeland and Stevens, 2008; Merry et al., 2015). Once embedded in governance, indicators acquire agenda-setting power because they rank, compare, and assign reputational value (Lascoumes and Le Galès, 2007; Beaumont and Sending, 2026). Some dimensions of a problem become measurable, public, and politically salient, while others recede into the background as residual, anecdotal, or methodologically inconvenient.

This dynamic is especially consequential in anti-corruption. As prior research has shown, the CPI played a decisive role in transforming corruption into a globally legible policy issue by ranking countries according to perceived levels of corruption and circulating those rankings widely across political, policy, academic, and media spaces (Villacis, 2023). The CPI did not simply offer a measure. It helped consolidate a way of seeing corruption as a comparable trait of states, one that could be monitored annually, discussed publicly, linked to financial credibility, and used to justify reform. In that sense, the indicator functioned not only as a measurement tool but as a mechanism of problem definition.

The empirical materials show how this mechanism operated through indicator use. In the archival reconstruction and interviews surrounding the CPI, actors did not describe the index only as a source of information, but as a device that organized how corruption could be compared, narrated, and acted upon. CPI producers and users repeatedly valued the availability of a historical series because it made corruption usable for descriptive analysis, comparison, and inferential work. By the time the CPI became institutionalized within Transparency International, its production had moved from an experimental exercise to a specialized research process accompanied by feedback routines for disseminating and interpreting the ranking. In this sense, the indicator did not travel only as a score. It traveled with interpretive routines, audiences, and expectations about what a serious corruption diagnosis should look like.

A critical interview from Brazil shows how this mechanism looked from the standpoint of actors closer to implementation. An interviewee with long experience in judicial and civil-society anti-corruption work acknowledged that the CPI "helped to make visible the problem of corruption," but also argued that it brought "assistance that we did not ask for," especially from actors with little public-sector experience who converted different administrative problems into evidence of systemic corruption (Interview, anti-corruption expert, civil society and judicial background, Brazil, 2019). The interview is not meant to stand for all local actors. Rather, it illustrates a recurrent tension visible across the materials: indicators can make corruption public, comparable, and actionable, while also authorizing external diagnoses that travel more easily than situated administrative knowledge.

Once corruption is rendered through indicators, governance priorities are reorganized around what can be measured, compared, and publicly communicated across transnational arenas. This has two effects. First, it privileges forms of corruption that are visible through aggregate metrics, perception-based assessments, or standardized indicators. Second, it redirects institutional attention toward reforms that are legible within indicator ecosystems, even when those reforms are weak proxies for underlying accountability. The question subtly shifts from "what forms of corruption matter most in this setting?" to "what reforms are most likely to improve visible scores, signal seriousness, or align with recognized benchmarks?" Indicator-centered governance thus channels reform into preformatted categories of visibility, comparison, and performance.

This is one reason why indicator-centered problem definition is closely linked to the article's distinction between substantive expertise and authorized expertise. Indicators do not reward all forms of anti-corruption knowledge equally. They privilege expertise that can translate corruption into standardized variables, comparable units, and legible diagnostics. This helps explain why the measurement authority and IFI proximity pole occupies such a powerful position in the anti-corruption field. Experts located near this pole, especially economists, measurement specialists, and policy professionals with proximity to international financial institutions, are well positioned to author, interpret, defend, and circulate indicator-based definitions of corruption. Their expertise becomes authorized not simply because they know more about corruption in any substantive sense, but because their knowledge is compatible with the devices through which anti-corruption governance operates.

The prosopographical materials connect this documentary and interview evidence to the structure of expert recognition. The geometric data analysis of anti-corruption experts identifies a methodological and organizational pole associated with measurement authority, economics, and proximity to international financial institutions. This pattern does not imply that measurement-oriented experts are necessarily more accurate, nor that qualitative or locally grounded experts are necessarily more democratic. It shows that indicator-centered governance is institutionally aligned with expert profiles already positioned to produce, interpret, and defend numerical representations of corruption. Academic prestige can reinforce this process when recognized research institutions, expert communities, and claims to methodological rigor validate quantified representations and make them easier to circulate across policy arenas.

This mechanism therefore does more than create information. It sorts expert actors according to their capacity to make corruption measurable in publicly authoritative ways. Experts whose knowledge is rooted in administrative experience, local institutional familiarity, or qualitative engagement with the political embeddedness of corruption may possess rich substantive expertise, yet remain weakly authorized if their knowledge cannot be translated into portable metrics or

benchmark-friendly diagnostics. This asymmetry is particularly consequential for the Global South, where anti-corruption governance has often been shaped by externally validated indicators, donor priorities, and reform scripts produced elsewhere. In these contexts, locally grounded knowledge may be highly relevant to understanding how corruption operates in practice, but it is less likely to be recognized as authoritative if it does not conform to the methodological and institutional formats privileged by transnational governance.

The significance of this mechanism is therefore epistemic, organizational, and geopolitical. Indicator-centered governance privileges forms of expertise already aligned with transnational circuits of validation. What is presented as neutral measurement can reproduce a deeper asymmetry: the capacity of actors and institutions in or near the Global North to define what corruption is, how it should be measured, and which reforms count as credible responses. Indicators are powerful not because they eliminate politics, but because they obscure selectivity while turning it into authoritative policy common sense (Desrosières, 2015; Espeland and Stevens, 2008).

Seen this way, indicator-centered problem definition establishes the terms of legibility through which corruption becomes an object of policy. It privileges measurement-oriented and academically legitimated profiles most compatible with those terms, and channels reform agendas toward what can be measured, displayed, and compared. The next mechanism builds on this dynamic by showing how advisory systems and template governance translate these indicator-friendly problem definitions into recognized repertoires of policy action.

7 Mechanism 2: advisory systems and template governance

The second mechanism through which anti-corruption governance authorizes expertise is advisory systems and template governance. If indicators help define corruption as a visible and comparable problem, advisory systems translate that problem definition into actionable repertoires of reform. They do so by organizing who is allowed to advise, what kinds of solutions appear credible, and which formats of knowledge are considered implementable. In this sense, advisory systems do not merely channel expertise into policymaking. They structure the institutional conditions under which some expert claims become policy-relevant while others remain peripheral.

This mechanism is especially important because anti-corruption reform often travels through recognizable policy instruments: asset declaration systems, whistleblower protections, integrity plans, procurement reforms, compliance units, transparency portals, conflict-of-interest rules, complaint channels, training systems, and monitoring frameworks. Comparative and policy-oriented literature has repeatedly catalogued such instruments as recurring components of reform packages and integrity systems (Mungiu-Pippidi and Dadašov, 2016; OECD, 2020, 2025). Their authority comes not only from presumed effectiveness, but also from their circulation as signs of serious and internationally validated reform.

The empirical materials trace this mechanism in the documentary corpus. The gap between formally specified reform designs and their implementation has long been recognized in policy studies and remains salient in anti-corruption reform (Pressman and Wildavsky, 1973; Labik Amanquandor, 2026). Anti-corruption strategies, reform roadmaps, policy manuals, public integrity frameworks, compliance handbooks, donor-facing program materials, and national anti-corruption plans were read as organizational artifacts that show how diagnosis is translated into recognizable scripts of action. Across these materials, reform commonly appeared through a recurring grammar: identify a risk or institutional gap, select a recognized intervention, assign responsibility, sequence implementation, attach indicators or deliverables, and create a reporting procedure. This pattern does not mean that all documents were identical, or that local adaptation was absent. It means that reform became credible when it could be written in a form that powerful audiences already knew how to read.

Participant observation reinforced this interpretation. In NGO workshops, national anti-corruption workshops, executive meetings, and donor-facing project spaces, expertise was not presented only as knowledge about corruption. It was also performed as the capacity to transform broad commitments into concrete reform activities. Observed discussions frequently moved from general claims about integrity, transparency, or institutional weakness toward more actionable categories: project components, workstreams, implementation steps, indicators, training modules, counterparts, expected outputs, and reporting obligations. These settings made visible how templates operate in practice. They did not simply provide ready-made solutions. They created a format in which some claims became easier to fund, implement, justify, and evaluate.

Interviews pointed to the same translation work. Actors located in civil society, governmental, donor-linked, and expert settings often described credibility not only in terms of knowing corruption, but in terms of being able to turn that knowledge into recommendations, proposals, tools, trainings, institutional designs, or reform sequences. In these accounts, expertise became usable when it could move across audiences: from diagnosis to recommendation, from recommendation to project, from project to implementation plan, and from implementation plan to evidence of progress. The recurring point was not that actors blindly accepted templates. Many adapted, questioned, or criticized them. Rather, institutional authority often accumulated around actors who could make corruption governable through recognized advisory formats.

The notion of template governance helps capture this pattern. By template governance, I refer to the standardization of anti-corruption solutions into recognizable policy packages that travel across jurisdictions and institutional settings. Templates do not necessarily eliminate adaptation, but they narrow the range of what can plausibly be proposed. They reduce uncertainty by making certain interventions appear already tested, validated, and legible to governments, donors, and international organizations. What is at stake is not only administrative convenience. It is a mode of authorization. Experts become influential to the extent that they can translate political conflict, organizational complexity, and local ambiguity into forms compatible with pre-structured policy templates.

This selective translation is one of the central ways in which substantive expertise becomes authorized expertise. Many actors may possess important knowledge about corruption's local forms, informal networks, administrative bottlenecks, political finance, bureaucratic dependency, or selective enforcement dynamics. Yet their knowledge may not travel far unless it can be rendered in the language of advisory systems: actionable recommendations, policy menus, compliance matrices, institutional checklists, implementation roadmaps, reform benchmarks, and monitoring frameworks. Advisory systems therefore favor experts who can translate complexity into recognized

intervention formats. What becomes authorized is not simply deep understanding of corruption, but the capacity to package that understanding in forms legible within policy circuits.

The prosopographical materials connect this mechanism to the structure of the anti-corruption field. The dataset included experts with recurrent visibility in academic publications, policy reports, technical assistance, advisory work, NGO or international organization activity, public-sector reform experience, media visibility, and transnational expert networks (Villacis, 2023). Recognition was not operationalized as intrinsic truth or methodological superiority, but as observable visibility, credibility, and institutional valuation. From this perspective, advisory systems matter because they identify a specific pathway of recognition: experts become visible not only by producing knowledge, but by occupying roles through which knowledge can be translated into reports, technical assistance, reform missions, institutional advice, and donor-facing policy work.

This helps explain why advisory systems and template governance are connected to the three-pole field structure described earlier. The mechanism favors actors located near the academic prestige pole when academic credentials signal generalizable knowledge, methodological rigor, and institutional credibility. It also favors actors near the measurement authority and IFI proximity pole, especially when standardized solutions are tied to diagnostics, performance metrics, risk assessments, benchmarking, and technical assistance. Experts close to these poles are well positioned to move between diagnosis and prescription. They can define a problem in indicator-friendly terms and then translate it into standardized policy action.

The mechanism is also visible in the growing centrality of compliance templates. Internal controls, due diligence protocols, codes of conduct, reporting channels, conflict-of-interest rules, procurement safeguards, and audit trails have been codified in international handbooks, guidance documents, and anti-bribery frameworks associated with organizations such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), and the World Bank (OECD, UNODC, and World Bank, 2013; OECD, 2025). Within the logic of authorized expertise, these templates help convert reform into a visible grammar of institutional seriousness.

This mechanism should not be read as a claim that templates are useless or inherently illegitimate. Templates can reduce uncertainty, organize reform priorities, facilitate donor coordination, and create spaces in which specialized knowledge enters policymaking. The problem is not an absence of knowledge. The issue is that templates make some forms of knowledge more usable than others, privileging claims that can become recommendations, tools, institutional designs, and implementation plans while weakening claims that challenge the template itself.

The selective character of this mechanism becomes especially visible in Global South settings, where anti-corruption reform is often advanced through donor-supported diagnostics, internationally circulated best practices, and portable templates developed elsewhere. Under these conditions, advisory systems may privilege external legibility over local intelligibility. Yet the empirical materials caution against a simple opposition between global templates and local resistance. Observed national workshops and interviews showed that templates are often interpreted, adapted, and contested rather than merely imposed. Local actors can use template language strategically to secure resources, protect reform initiatives, or translate domestic priorities into a vocabulary recognizable to donors and international organizations. The asymmetry remains: the more a claim can resemble a recognized reform script, the more likely it is to become institutionally consequential.

This is why advisory systems and template governance are central to technocracy as performance. They make reform appear actionable. A political problem becomes a policy menu. An institutional struggle becomes a roadmap. A contested diagnosis becomes a checklist. Expertise is not absent from this process. On the contrary, substantial expertise is often required to make templates operational. But the expertise most likely to be authorized is the expertise that can translate corruption into formats that powerful organizations can adopt, fund, monitor, and publicly defend.

Seen this way, advisory systems and template governance constitute the second major mechanism through which anti-corruption governance converts substantive expertise into authorized expertise. They privilege actors who can move between problem diagnosis and policy prescription, translate complexity into recognizable reform scripts, and make institutional change appear feasible, fundable, and administratively legible. The next mechanism builds on this dynamic by showing how expertise, once translated into actionable reform formats, is located within specialized organizational settings that can protect, contain, and publicly display anti-corruption authority.

8 Mechanism 3: organizational insulation

The third mechanism through which anti-corruption governance authorizes expertise is organizational insulation. If indicator-centered problem definition makes corruption visible as a measurable object, and advisory systems translate that object into reform templates, organizational insulation locates anti-corruption expertise within specialized institutional spaces. These spaces include anti-corruption agencies, integrity units, compliance offices, expert commissions, donor-supported reform teams, transnational NGO programs, technical assistance units, and advisory bodies. Their importance lies not only in what they do, but in how they organize the relationship between expertise, politics, and institutional authority (Koga et al., 2023).

Organizational insulation should not be understood as inherently problematic. In many settings, some degree of insulation may protect investigations, oversight functions, civil service procedures, audit processes, or integrity reforms from direct partisan interference. Anti-corruption work often requires institutional protection, especially when it targets powerful actors or politically sensitive practices. The problem is therefore not insulation as such. The problem is that insulation can authorize some forms of expertise while limiting others. By placing anti-corruption work in specialized and bounded settings, organizations can make expertise appear impartial, technical, and administratively manageable, while also narrowing the range of actors and forms of knowledge that are allowed to shape reform.

The empirical materials trace this mechanism through organizational practice. Interviews with actors in government, oversight institutions, civil society organizations, international organizations, and expert settings repeatedly described anti-corruption work as taking place in specialized venues: commissions, integrity offices,

technical teams, advisory groups, project units, monitoring bodies, or external assistance programs. These venues were often valued because they could concentrate expertise, protect reform from routine political bargaining, and create a recognized point of responsibility. Yet the same materials also showed that specialization came with boundaries. Expertise had to be presented in formats compatible with the organization's mandate, project cycle, reporting obligations, legal jurisdiction, or advisory role. Organizational location therefore shaped not only where expertise was heard, but how it had to speak.

Participant observation reinforced this point. Executive meetings, working workshops, national anti-corruption workshops, and donor-facing spaces showed that expert authority was performed through organizational formats that disciplined interaction. Actors did not simply debate corruption in abstract terms. They discussed priorities, reputational risks, project designs, institutional responsibilities, implementation barriers, and the formats through which reform could be presented to funders, governments, or public audiences. These settings made visible how insulation operates in practice. They created spaces in which expertise could be protected and concentrated, but also spaces in which knowledge was filtered through organizational priorities, reputational concerns, funding structures, and the need to produce institutionally acceptable outputs.

The documentary materials show a similar pattern. Institutional reports, strategic documents, annual reports, public integrity frameworks, compliance manuals, organizational histories, policy papers, and reform plans commonly present anti-corruption authority as the outcome of specialized capacity. They describe reform through references to dedicated units, formal mandates, technical procedures, internal controls, advisory functions, training systems, implementation teams, or monitoring responsibilities. These documents do not merely report organizational activity. They help construct the organization as a credible container of expertise. They signal that anti-corruption work is not dispersed, improvised, or purely political, but housed in a recognizable institutional form.

Organizational form matters because it changes the status of expert knowledge. Knowledge that enters through a recognized agency, advisory commission, donor program, technical unit, or compliance office is more likely to be treated as legitimate than knowledge circulating outside such venues. This does not mean that the knowledge is more accurate. It means that organizational location gives it institutional weight. Organizational insulation therefore converts expertise into authority by giving knowledge a protected institutional address.

The prosopographical materials add a second layer of evidence. The analysis of anti-corruption experts shows that recognition is not evenly distributed across all forms of professional experience. Experts with academic prestige, measurement authority and IFI proximity, or media visibility are more likely to occupy recognizable positions in the field of transnational anti-corruption expertise. By contrast, actors whose knowledge is rooted primarily in public-sector experience, domestic administration, bureaucratic implementation, or local enforcement often appear farther from the dominant poles of recognition (Villacis, 2023). This pattern does not imply that bureaucratic or locally grounded actors lack expertise. It suggests that organizational insulation tends to authorize expertise that is already compatible with institutional forms of transnational recognition.

This is central to the article's argument. Substantive expertise may come from working inside procurement systems, courts, audit institutions, municipal administrations, police agencies, oversight bodies, or public-sector reform processes. Such expertise can be essential for understanding how corruption operates in practice, how rules are evaded, how enforcement becomes selective, how informal authority shapes formal procedure, or why reform fails despite formal adoption. Yet this knowledge does not automatically become authorized expertise. It becomes authoritative only when it can enter organizational settings that can recognize, translate, and present it as credible policy knowledge.

Organizational insulation therefore creates a selective passage between substantive expertise and authorized expertise. Legal, managerial, economic, compliance-oriented, and measurement-based expertise can often be attached to specialized offices, technical missions, institutional diagnoses, reform plans, or advisory processes. Other forms of knowledge travel less easily. Experiential knowledge about informal bargaining, local political constraints, bureaucratic survival, implementation fatigue, institutional distrust, or selective enforcement may be difficult to place inside an insulated organizational format without losing its political force. The result is not the disappearance of such knowledge, but its partial marginalization within decision-making arenas.

This is especially visible because anti-corruption reform often oscillates between two demands: it must appear politically independent while remaining institutionally connected enough to change law, administration, oversight, procurement, enforcement, or public management. Organizational insulation addresses this tension by creating spaces near enough to power to matter, but separate enough from politics to appear credible. This is why anti-corruption agencies, expert commissions, technical assistance teams, and integrity units often symbolize seriousness, neutrality, and specialized capacity.

Yet the same arrangement can narrow democratic contestation. When anti-corruption expertise is housed in insulated venues, disputes about corruption may be reframed as matters of institutional design, administrative capacity, technical implementation, or professional judgment. Political disagreement does not disappear, but it is translated into organizational language. Questions about who benefits from enforcement, whose practices are scrutinized, which sectors are protected, or how anti-corruption agendas intersect with partisan struggle may become harder to raise inside spaces designed to present reform as technical and impartial (Gordon, 2009; Hirschl, 2008; Grangeia and Thijm, 2025).

The Global South dimension is important here. In many countries, anti-corruption agencies, integrity offices, donor-funded reform programs, and technical assistance missions operate within broader asymmetries of resources, legitimacy, and international validation. Domestic actors may understand how corruption is embedded in local political settlements, administrative routines, or informal networks, but their knowledge may be less valued when reform authority is concentrated in organizations accountable to donor timelines, reputational metrics, or transnational policy scripts. At the same time, domestic actors can use

insulated organizations to protect reform, secure resources, and increase visibility.

Seen this way, organizational insulation constitutes the third major mechanism through which anti-corruption governance converts substantive expertise into authorized expertise. It privileges knowledge that can be housed in specialized, protected, and administratively legible spaces, while making other forms of situated or politically disruptive knowledge harder to recognize. The next mechanism shows how these institutional arrangements are evaluated, repaired, and publicly ratified through audits, monitoring frameworks, scorecards, dashboards, and progress reports.

9 Mechanism 4: audit-and-repair politics

The fourth mechanism through which anti-corruption governance authorizes expertise is audit-and-repair politics. If indicators define corruption, advisory systems translate diagnosis into reform templates, and organizational insulation locates expertise in specialized settings, audit-and-repair politics ratifies reform by turning action into visible evidence of responsiveness, progress, and correction. Anti-corruption reform rarely produces definitive proof that corruption has been reduced. It therefore depends heavily on evaluative traces: audits, monitoring matrices, dashboards, scorecards, peer reviews, compliance reviews, implementation reports, follow-up plans, and progress narratives. These devices do not only assess reform after the fact. They shape what counts as evidence that reform is happening.

This mechanism builds on scholarship showing that audits, rankings, indicators, standards, and evaluation systems do more than monitor institutions. They reshape institutional behavior by privileging what can be documented, compared, and reported (Power, 1997; Espeland and Sauder, 2007; Timmermans and Epstein, 2010; Shore and Wright, 2015; Desrosières, 2015). In anti-corruption governance, this dynamic is especially consequential because progress is difficult to verify conclusively. New laws, reforms, training sessions, integrity plans, reporting systems, and dashboards may indicate action, but they do not necessarily show that corruption has declined or that accountability has deepened. This distinction between observable outputs and substantive outcomes is consistent with broader research on the assessment of organizational performance (Aguilera et al., 2024).

The empirical materials make this mechanism visible across interviews, documents, and observed policy settings. Anti-corruption reports, compliance reviews, audits, monitoring frameworks, donor reports, organizational strategies, and reform documents repeatedly framed reform as a cycle of assessment, implementation, evaluation, correction, and follow-up. These materials did not simply describe institutional change. They produced a grammar through which change could be made visible: identify deficiencies, formulate recommendations, assign responsibilities, establish indicators, document implementation, report progress, and propose further adjustment. This grammar is central to expertise authorization because it privileges actors who can produce and interpret evaluative evidence.

Interviews with donor-facing and anti-corruption actors reinforced this pattern. One interviewee involved in transnational anti-corruption work explained that donors often want "results, visibility, impact," and also require a "crystal-clear evaluation" of activities, even when the effects of anti-corruption work are difficult to isolate or measure directly (Interview, anti-corruption NGO staff, Germany, 2019). The point is not only that donors demand accountability. It is that the demand for accountability produces formats of expertise. Actors gain authority when they can show that reform has generated outputs, that outputs can be monitored, and that monitoring can be translated into credible evidence of progress.

A second interview, from Ecuador, captured the same logic from the perspective of sustainability and institutional follow-up. The interviewee emphasized the need for "sustainability efforts" and for reform processes that could continue beyond initial interventions (Interview, anti-corruption actor, Ecuador, 2019). The concern points to a central feature of audit-and-repair politics: reform is not judged only by whether it solves corruption, but by whether it generates a visible sequence of continued action. Follow-up, repetition, reporting, and correction become signs that institutions are learning and responding. In this sense, repair is not a secondary stage after failure. It is part of how reform authority is produced.

Participant observation also showed how evaluative language structures anti-corruption work. In workshops, executive meetings, national reform spaces, and donor-facing settings, discussions regularly turned toward indicators, deliverables, implementation problems, evidence of impact, project visibility, evaluation criteria, and future funding. These were not merely administrative details. They shaped how actors presented their work as credible. A reform initiative became easier to defend when it could be attached to measurable outputs, documented activities, institutional responsibilities, and future corrective steps. Audit-and-repair politics therefore authorizes expertise by rewarding actors who can transform ambiguous institutional change into reportable evidence.

This mechanism is closely connected to the distinction between substantive expertise and authorized expertise. Substantive expertise may include knowledge about why reforms fail, why enforcement becomes selective, how political actors evade accountability, why institutions resist change, or why formal compliance does not alter informal practice. Such knowledge may be essential for understanding corruption. Yet it does not automatically become authoritative unless it can be incorporated into evaluative formats. Authorized expertise, in this mechanism, is expertise that can produce assessments, identify gaps, design indicators, document progress, and prescribe corrective action. The result is a selective form of recognition: knowledge becomes more consequential when it can be turned into audit trails, monitoring frameworks, dashboards, action plans, or progress reports.

Audit-and-repair politics also connects to the three poles of recognition. It reinforces measurement authority and IFI proximity because evaluation systems depend on metrics, benchmarks, monitoring tools, risk assessments, and policy diagnostics. It also reinforces media visibility because audits, reports, rankings, dashboards, and scorecards provide public materials through which reform can be communicated and reputational pressure generated. Academic prestige can enter when evaluative systems are justified through methodological rigor, impact assessment, or claims to evidence-based reform. The three poles can converge around the production of credible, visible, and reportable reform.

The mechanism should not be misunderstood as a claim that audits or evaluation systems are merely symbolic. They can expose

failures, create records, pressure institutions, organize follow-up, and provide tools for accountability. In weak institutional environments, evaluative systems may give reformers leverage against denial, inertia, or concealment. The problem is not evaluation itself. The problem is that evaluation can become a substitute for deeper political accountability when reportable activity is treated as evidence of substantive transformation, even when underlying power relations remain intact.

This ambivalence is central to technocracy as performance. Anti-corruption governance performs seriousness by showing that problems are assessed, recommendations implemented, gaps repaired, and progress reported. These performances can involve real institutional work. They can also ratify power by making responsiveness visible without necessarily changing who controls resources, enforcement, discretion, or accountability. The authority of expertise therefore depends not only on whether experts know how corruption operates, but on whether they can make reform appear evaluable and repairable.

The Global South dimension again matters. Donor-supported reforms often require reports, indicators, progress narratives, and evaluation matrices that make reform legible to external audiences. Domestic actors may use these requirements to obtain resources, protect initiatives, or pressure governments. At the same time, donor-facing evaluation can privilege what is visible to external funders over what is institutionally transformative in local settings, especially when locally grounded knowledge does not produce a clear indicator, deliverable, or corrective action.

Seen this way, audit-and-repair politics constitutes the fourth major mechanism through which anti-corruption governance converts substantive expertise into authorized expertise. It privileges experts who can make reform visible in evaluative formats, reinforces measurement-oriented and publicly legible forms of knowledge, and transforms administrative traces of action into signs of institutional progress. The four mechanisms are analytically distinct but empirically connected. Table 3 summarizes the main empirical traces through which each mechanism was identified across interviews, documents, participant observation, and prosopographical materials. It does not exhaust the corpus, but makes visible the types of evidence used to connect each mechanism to recurrent patterns in the material.

10 Discussion: mechanisms, alternatives, and scope conditions

Sections 6 through 9 presented the empirical traces through which four mechanisms of expertise authorization operate in

TABLE 3 Empirical traces of the four authorization mechanisms.

Mechanism	Empirical materials used	Recurring empirical traces	Analytic implication
Indicator-centered problem definition	CPI archival reconstruction; interviews with CPI producers, users, critics, and domestic anti-corruption actors; indicator documentation; prosopographical analysis of expert recognition	Corruption translated into rankings, scores, historical series, reputational comparisons, and benchmark-friendly diagnoses; interview evidence that the CPI made corruption visible while also authorizing external diagnoses	Indicators make corruption legible as a comparable policy object and privilege experts able to produce, interpret, and defend measurement-based diagnoses
Advisory systems and template governance	Anti-corruption strategies; reform roadmaps; policy manuals; compliance handbooks; donor-facing program materials; interviews with civil society, government, expert, and donor-linked actors; participant observation in workshops and project spaces	Reform translated into recommendations, checklists, institutional designs, project components, implementation steps, training modules, indicators, and reporting obligations	Templates convert broad anti-corruption claims into actionable and fundable policy scripts, privileging experts fluent in advisory formats
Organizational insulation	Interviews with government, oversight, civil society, expert, and international organization actors; institutional reports; strategic documents; observation of executive meetings, working workshops, and donor-facing spaces; prosopographical evidence on expert trajectories	Anti-corruption work housed in commissions, integrity offices, technical teams, advisory bodies, project units, monitoring bodies, and specialized agencies; public-sector knowledge often less closely aligned with dominant poles of recognition	Insulated organizational settings protect and concentrate expertise, but also filter knowledge through mandates, reputational concerns, funding structures, and recognized institutional formats
Audit-and-repair politics	Interviews with donor-facing and anti-corruption actors; audit materials; progress reports; monitoring matrices; dashboards; scorecards; peer reviews; compliance reviews; participant observation of evaluation-oriented settings	Reform narrated through assessment cycles, implementation reviews, progress indicators, feedback loops, action plans, and visible outputs; donor-facing emphasis on results, visibility, impact, and evaluable progress	Evaluation systems ratify reform by converting uncertain institutional change into visible evidence of responsiveness, progress, and repair

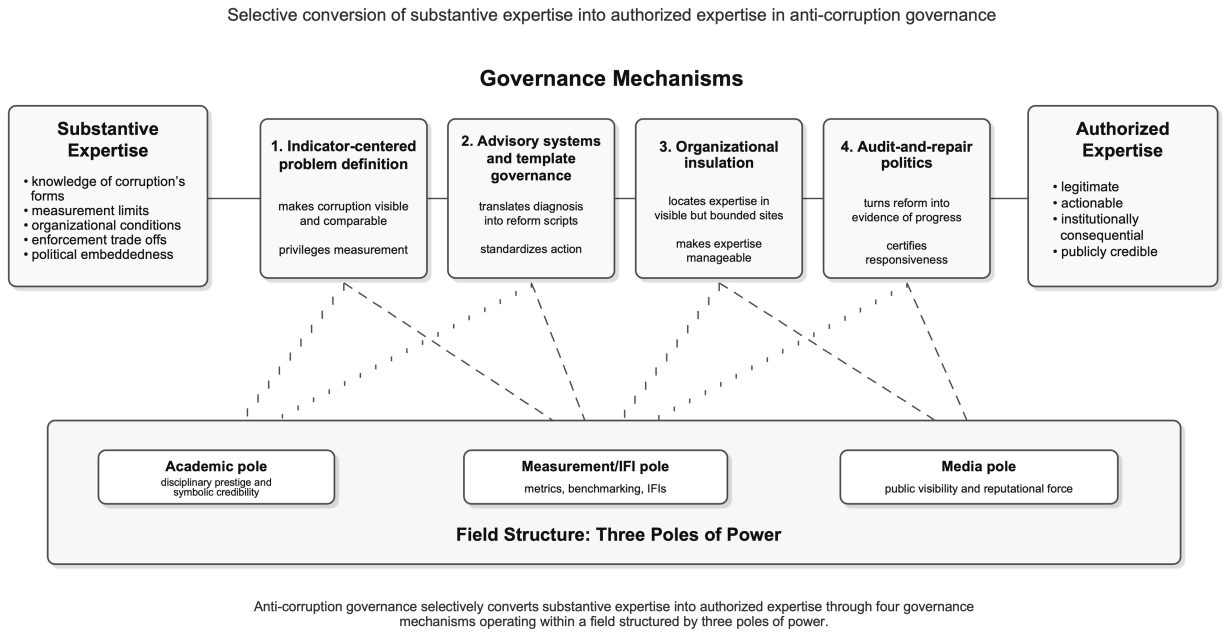

FIGURE 1
From substantive expertise to authorized expertise. Selective conversion of substantive expertise into authorized expertise in anti-corruption governance. Anti-corruption governance selectively converts substantive expertise into authorized expertise through four governance mechanisms operating within a field structured by three poles of power.

anti-corruption governance. This section synthesizes what the mechanisms show when considered together, clarifies how the argument relates to existing scholarship, and specifies the scope conditions of the article. The central claim is that anti-corruption governance does not simply rely on expertise after a policy problem has already been defined. It helps organize the institutional conditions under which some forms of expertise become credible, portable, actionable, and publicly authoritative.

The four mechanisms are analytically distinct but empirically connected. Indicator-centered problem definition makes corruption visible as a measurable and comparable policy object. Advisory systems and template governance translate that diagnosis into recognizable repertoires of reform. Organizational insulation locates expertise in specialized institutional spaces that can protect, contain, and display anti-corruption authority. Audit-and-repair politics ratifies reform by turning action into visible evidence of responsiveness, progress, and correction. Together, these mechanisms help explain how substantive expertise becomes authorized expertise. They do not necessarily identify the most accurate, democratic, or contextually appropriate knowledge. They identify the forms of knowledge most compatible with the institutional formats through which anti-corruption governance operates.

Figure 1 summarizes this process. It should not be read as a chronological model in which each mechanism always follows the previous one in a fixed sequence. In practice, the mechanisms overlap and reinforce one another. Indicators can shape advisory templates; advisory templates can require particular forms of monitoring; monitoring systems can feed back into indicators; insulated organizations can mediate all three processes. The figure therefore presents a relational model of expertise authorization rather than a linear causal chain.

Table 4 summarizes the same argument in analytic terms. While Table 3 identified the empirical traces of each mechanism, Table 4 clarifies how each mechanism converts substantive expertise into authorized expertise and how it relates to the three recurrent poles of recognition in the transnational anti-corruption field.

The article reaffirms, but also specifies, existing work on anti-corruption indicators and transnational governance. Prior scholarship has shown that such indicators do not merely measure corruption, but help constitute it as a globally comparable policy problem (Andersson and Heywood, 2009; Arndt and Oman, 2006; Davis et al., 2012; De Maria, 2008; Merry et al., 2015). The analysis developed here shifts attention from the authority of indicators alone to the broader process through which indicators authorize particular experts and forms of expertise. The point is not only that indicators shape what governments see. It is also that they help determine who can speak credibly about what is seen.

The article also extends literature on policy advice, good governance, and the international anti-corruption consensus. Existing research has shown that anti-corruption reform often travels through global scripts, best-practice models, donor agendas, and governance templates (de Sousa et al., 2009; Hindess, 2008; Johnston and Fritzen, 2021; Sampson, 2010). The argument advanced here specifies how these templates sort expertise. Advisory systems reward knowledge that can be translated into recommendations, tools, institutional designs, implementation plans, and donor-facing outputs. They organize which forms of expertise become usable in the first place.

A further implication concerns organizational form and evaluative governance. Anti-corruption expertise is not authorized only through ideas, methods, or individual credentials. It is also authorized through institutional location and evaluative routines. Expertise gains weight when attached to agencies, commissions, units, projects, missions, reports, or advisory bodies recognized as legitimate. It gains further authority when reform can be monitored, reported, and repaired through audits, dashboards, scorecards, peer reviews, and progress reports. This helps explain why substantive knowledge

TABLE 4 Mechanisms of expertise authorization and field effects.

Mechanism	What it does	Expertise it tends to authorize	Knowledge it tends to weaken	Observable traces
Indicator-centered problem definition	Makes corruption visible as a comparable policy object	Measurement experts, economists, governance specialists, indicator producers, benchmarking professionals	Contextual, experiential, informal, and politically embedded knowledge that travels poorly through metrics	Rankings, scores, dashboards, cross-national comparisons, donor diagnostics, media references to index performance
Advisory systems and template governance	Translates diagnosis into recognizable repertoires of reform	Consultants, legal specialists, policy professionals, donor experts, officials fluent in reform scripts	Knowledge that challenges the template, questions donor priorities, or emphasizes informal power relations	Roadmaps, model laws, checklists, policy missions, technical assistance programs, implementation plans
Organizational insulation	Locates expertise inside visible but bounded institutional settings	Auditors, compliance professionals, agency officials, technical units, donor-facing reform teams	Publicly confrontational or politically disruptive knowledge that exceeds organizational mandates	Anti-corruption agencies, commissions, task forces, integrity units, advisory boards, reform secretariats
Audit-and-repair politics	Converts uncertain reform trajectories into signs of progress	Monitoring and evaluation specialists, compliance experts, data analysts, audit professionals, donor officials	Knowledge about deeper structures of impunity, elite protection, political finance, or bureaucratic dependence	Progress reports, peer reviews, implementation matrices, scorecards, audits, monitoring cycles

Author's theoretical synthesis based on the four mechanisms developed in Sections 6 through 9.

grounded in administrative experience or local political understanding can remain weakly authorized even when it is highly relevant.

Taken together, these mechanisms clarify the article's contribution. The article does not claim to discover entirely new processes. Indicators, templates, organizational specialization, and audit practices have all been studied in prior work. The contribution is synthetic and mechanism-oriented: it shows how these processes work together as an infrastructure of expertise authorization, creating conditions under which some forms of knowledge travel more easily, appear more credible, and become more consequential than others.

This argument also clarifies the role of the three poles of recognition: academic prestige, measurement authority and IFI proximity, and media visibility. These poles are recurrent concentrations of recognition within the anti-corruption field, not fixed groups of people. Indicator-centered problem definition strengthens measurement-oriented and academically validated expertise. Advisory systems reward actors who can move between academic, policy, and donor settings. Organizational insulation favors knowledge that can be housed in recognizable institutional forms. Audit-and-repair politics reinforces measurement authority and media visibility by making reform reportable and communicable.

The argument also needs to be read against alternative interpretations. These mechanisms can reflect practical coordination: indicators, templates, specialized organizations, and audits can reduce uncertainty, coordinate donors, protect reformers, and make institutional change manageable. They can also reflect professionalization, since anti-corruption reform often requires legal, organizational, investigative, compliance, and evaluative capacity. Audit-and-repair politics can improve accountability by exposing problems and creating records. The article does not deny these effects. The argument is that coordination, professionalization, and evaluation also have selective effects: the formats that make reform manageable shape which forms of expertise are recognized as credible.

These alternatives help refine the scope of the argument. The article does not claim that every anti-corruption setting operates through the same configuration of mechanisms. Nor does it claim that all local knowledge is marginalized, that all transnational expertise is detached, or that all measurement-oriented expertise is politically suspect. The argument is more limited. In transnational anti-corruption governance, especially where reform is mediated by indicators, donors, advisory systems, specialized organizations, and evaluative reporting, these four mechanisms tend to make some forms of expertise more institutionally recognizable than others.

The scope conditions are especially important in Global South settings, but the argument is not limited to them. The mechanisms are most visible where reform agendas are tied to external validation, donor reporting, international rankings, technical assistance, or reputational pressure. They may be less visible in settings with strong domestic statistical systems, robust public bureaucracies, powerful local research communities, independent accountability institutions, or political coalitions capable of reshaping external templates.

This discussion also clarifies what is meant by technocracy as performance. The phrase does not mean that expertise is false, empty, or merely decorative. It means that expert authority is produced through institutional performances of measurability, actionability, insulation, and repair. Anti-corruption governance performs seriousness by making corruption measurable, reform actionable, expertise institutionally housed, and progress evaluable. These performances can involve real expertise and institutional work. Their political significance lies in how they organize recognition: which experts are heard, which knowledge counts, and which reforms appear credible.

In sum, the article contributes to debates on expertise, indicators, and democratic governance by showing how anti-corruption governance organizes the conversion of substantive expertise into authorized expertise. The four mechanisms form a recurrent infrastructure through which corruption is made visible, reform actionable, expertise institutional, and progress reportable. This infrastructure helps explain why certain expert profiles and forms of knowledge become influential while others remain peripheral, even when substantively relevant to understanding corruption in practice.

11 Conclusion

This article has examined anti-corruption governance as a strategic site for understanding how expertise becomes authorized in contemporary policymaking. Its central argument is that anti-corruption governance does not merely use expert knowledge to improve policy. It also organizes the conditions under which some forms of knowledge become credible, actionable, portable, and publicly authoritative. The distinction between substantive expertise and authorized expertise captures this process. Substantive expertise refers to knowledge about corruption's forms, measurement limits, organizational constraints, institutional embeddedness, enforcement trade-offs, and political conditions. Authorized expertise refers to knowledge that powerful organizations and policy audiences treat as legitimate and consequential.

The article developed this argument through four mechanisms. Indicator-centered problem definition makes corruption visible as a measurable and comparable policy object. Advisory systems and template governance translate that diagnosis into recognized repertoires of reform. Organizational insulation locates expertise in institutional spaces that protect, contain, and display anti-corruption authority. Audit-and-repair politics ratifies reform by converting action into evidence of responsiveness, progress, and correction. The contribution is not to present these mechanisms as entirely new, but to show how they work together as recurrent processes through which anti-corruption governance authorizes some forms of expertise while making others harder to recognize.

The empirical materials support this mechanism-oriented argument by tracing how expertise is authorized across interviews, documents, participant observation, and prosopographical analysis. The findings show that anti-corruption knowledge becomes more likely to travel when expressed through rankings, policy templates, organizational mandates, evaluation systems, and public repertoires of progress. This does not mean that authorized expertise is necessarily false, nor that marginalized expertise is necessarily superior. Rather, authorization is selective. Knowledge that fits recognized institutional formats becomes easier to hear, circulate, fund, implement, and defend. Knowledge that is locally grounded, politically inconvenient, or difficult to standardize may remain substantively important while carrying less institutional authority.

This selective process helps explain why recognition in the transnational anti-corruption field tends to cluster around three recurrent poles: academic prestige, measurement authority and IFI proximity, and media visibility. These poles are not fixed groups or mutually exclusive categories. They are relational concentrations of authority. The four mechanisms help explain why they matter. Indicators privilege measurement-oriented and academically validated expertise. Advisory systems reward actors who can translate diagnosis into reform scripts. Organizational insulation favors knowledge that can be housed in specialized institutional settings. Audit-and-repair politics strengthens expertise that can make reform visible, reportable, and publicly communicable.

The argument matters for democratic governance as well. The problem is not expertise as such. Anti-corruption reform often requires specialized knowledge, technical skill, legal judgment, organizational capacity, and evaluative tools. The problem is how expertise becomes authorized and what kinds of knowledge are filtered out. When anti-corruption governance relies heavily on indicators, templates, insulated organizations, and audit-based demonstrations of progress, questions about power, selective enforcement, political finance, institutional dependency, bureaucratic vulnerability, and local accountability may become harder to articulate if they do not fit recognized reform formats.

This is the sense in which the article treats technocracy as performance. The term does not imply that expertise is empty, false, or merely decorative. It means that expert authority is produced through institutional performances of measurability, actionability, insulation, and repair. Anti-corruption governance performs seriousness by making corruption measurable, reform actionable, expertise institutionally housed, and progress evaluable. These performances can support real reform, but they can also ratify power by making some forms of knowledge appear more legitimate than others.

Future research can build on this argument by examining when these mechanisms are weakened, resisted, or redirected by domestic institutions, social movements, investigative journalism, courts, or locally grounded expert communities, and whether different institutional arrangements produce different forms of expert recognition.

The broader implication is that democratic debates about anti-corruption should not ask only whether expertise is technically valid or whether reform instruments are formally adopted. They should also ask who has the authority to define corruption, which forms of knowledge are treated as credible, and how institutional formats shape what counts as progress. Anti-corruption governance is therefore also a struggle over the authorization of knowledge and the distribution of authority in democratic life.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/Supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by the Office for Protection of Human Subjects (OPHS), UC Berkeley. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

BV: Writing – original draft, Formal analysis, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Visualization, Data curation, Conceptualization, Supervision, Investigation, Validation, Writing – review & editing, Funding acquisition.

Funding

The author(s) declared that financial support was received for this work and/or its publication. The broader research project on which this article draws received partial financial support from the Secretaría de Educación Superior, Ciencia, Tecnología e Innovación (SENESCYT). The funder had no role in the study design, data collection, analysis, interpretation of the findings, preparation of the manuscript, or decision to publish.

Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared that this work was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

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Supplementary material

The Supplementary material for this article can be found online at: https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpos.2026.1869966/full#supplementary-material

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