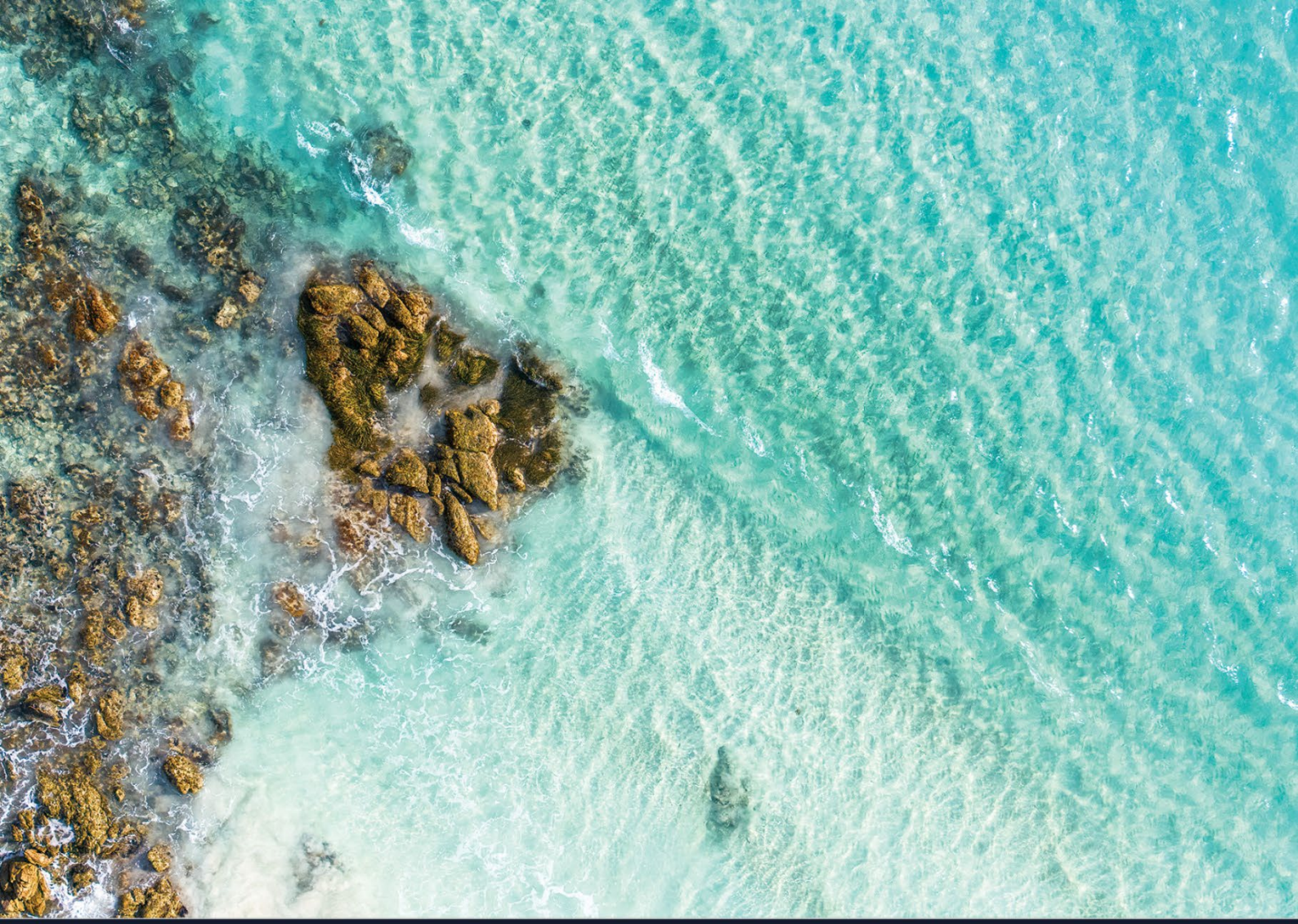

Insights on a New Framework for Responding to the Geographies of Corruption: Connecting theory and practice

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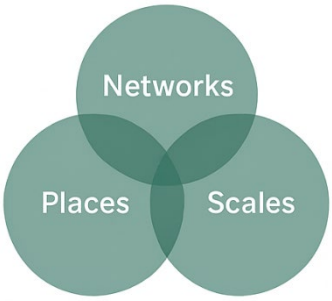
1. Introduction

Corruption and weak governance continue to threaten trust in public institutions around the world. Despite decades of reform, integrity systems are struggling to keep pace with the complexity and scale of today's governance challenges. In Australia, these issues have come into sharper focus with increasing public concern about corruption shaping elections and leading to the establishment of the National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC) in mid-2023 — a milestone that has reignited public and policy conversations about how integrity can be strengthened across all levels of government.

Addressing these challenges requires more than the creation of new agencies. It demands a stronger, more connected network of integrity actors — spanning local, national, and transnational scales — who can work together to identify risks, share intelligence, and reinforce ethical public service cultures. How to do this in practice remains less clear, though an increasing body of research suggests connecting theory with practice (and vice versa) is key to make meaningful progress (e.g. Walton and Dinnen, 2020; Brown A J et al 2020). The purpose of the remainder of this paper is to do just that.

This discussion paper draws on insights from a hybrid workshop convened by the Australia and New Zealand School of Government (ANZSOG) and the NACC with policymakers and practitioners from across Australia's integrity landscape. Held in November 2025, the workshop explored how integrity systems might be reconceptualised in light of novel insights from a **"relational place" framework** that centres on how connections between people, institutions, and places shape both the risks of corruption and the possibilities for reform. The framework focuses on how three key geographical concepts —***place, scale, and networks*** (see figure 1)**—**shape corruption and efforts to prevent and respond to it. This approach contrasts with more traditional frameworks that have long guided anti-corruption thinking. Conventional models, such as the *National Integrity Systems* framework (see Appendix 1), focus primarily on assessing the strength of national institutions—parliaments, courts, watchdog agencies, and civil society—often treating them as isolated pillars operating within fixed national boundaries. However, as argued below, geographically informed responses, could hold the key to more effectively addressing corruption.

Figure 1: The components of the relational place approach



Practically, **five key recommendations** emerged from the workshop with participants highlighting the importance of:

1. **Improving data and ensuring it is consistent and can be shared across and between jurisdictions**
2. **Strengthening trusted formal and informal networks of integrity including local through to international organisations and actors**
3. **Developing a single front door for reporting (a "clearinghouse") that connects the public to integrity institutions operating at different scales**
4. **Better engaging with the geographical threats posed by rapidly changing technology**
5. **Strengthening response mechanisms in high risk environments**

Achieving these recommendations will rely upon shifting ideas about the geographical forces that shape integrity and building political will to ensure change. The practical and conceptual insights from this paper can help policymakers, practitioners, and researchers think differently about how to design and sustain integrity systems that earn and maintain public trust.

This paper begins by providing a brief background to current policy and academic thinking about anti-corruption reform and provides an overview of the relational place framework (section 2). This is followed by a high-level summary of feedback from participants about how they engage with place, scale and networks in the work that they do, the challenges they face and changes they'd like to see in practice (synthesised into five key recommendations) (sections 3-5). The paper concludes by suggesting directions for future research.

2. Framing anti-corruption thinking and policy

Some scholars argue that integrity scholarship, policy, and practice have long suffered from a limited appreciation of the geographical factors that shape threats to integrity systems (Brown & Cloke 2007; Walton & Dinnen 2020). These factors include the transnational flow of illicit money and resources, the uneven capacity for inter-governmental cooperation, and the global reach of criminal networks. Too often, research and policy focus on the formal strength of national integrity institutions operating at the scale of the nation-state, rather than on the place-based, trans-local, and transnational forces that facilitate corruption and shape integrity systems. As highlighted in the 2025 ANZSOG academic work program paper describing the objectives of this project, insights from political geography and emerging anti-corruption literature highlights the importance of understanding and responding to three different geographical elements:

1. The cross-jurisdictional **networks** that enable corruption.
2. The ways the political, economic and cultural relationships shape corruption risk within particular **places**.
3. The multiple (and interconnected) **scales** in which threats to integrity systems take place (at the local, subnational, national, regional and global scale).

These three elements – networks, places and scales – constitute what can be labelled as a "relational place approach" to understanding and responding to corruption.

Emerging literature – including from the author (Walton 2018, 2023) suggests that the challenge for anti-corruption efforts is to bridge the divide between traditional institutional models and emerging spatial insights from the "relational place" approach. Doing so requires recognising that effective integrity work is not only about stronger laws or agencies, but about the relationships that connect them to particular locations. By adopting this more geographically informed approach, integrity practitioners can design interventions that reflect the real-world complexity of corruption—its local roots, its global reach, and the networks of people and institutions that link the two.

Having said this, the literature on corruption is eerily quiet when it comes to informing *how* practitioners and policy makers engage with these concepts, and what they need to strengthen their ability to respond to the geographies of corruption. And, as explored below, that's where a recent ANZSOG and NACC sponsored workshop, comes in.

3. Connecting theory with practice: ANZSOG & NACC Workshop

On 6 November 2025 ANZSOG and NACC co-hosted a hybrid workshop titled the 'Geographies of Anti-Corruption in Australia and Beyond', which featured about 30 policy makers and practitioners who worked for a range of state and Commonwealth integrity agencies and government organisations across Australia. The workshop provided policy makers and practitioners the opportunity to reflect on the relational place framework and discuss how they might better address the geographies of corruption.

To inform the discussion, before the workshop participants were provided with a briefing paper which outlined the relational place framework and its potential for reframing understandings about and responses to corruption. NACC Commissioner Paul Brereton introduced the workshop and provided his reflections on the discussion paper, and the important role geography plays in preventing and responding to corruption. The workshop was then led by Associate Professor Grant Walton who started by outlining the relational place framework followed by a series of small group discussion that engaged with three key questions:

1. *How do you already engage with networks, scales and places ("relational place") in your anti-corruption/integrity work?*
2. *What challenges do you face in addressing the geographies of corruption?*
3. *What needs to be done to overcome these challenges and build networks of integrity across scales and sectors?*

In closing, participants were asked about what top three changes they would like to see take place to address the geographies of corruption. The following section provides a high-level analysis of insights garnered from the workshop.

4. Analysis of Insights

Workshop participants reflected on their experiences using the **relational place framework** to understand and respond to corruption across multiple levels of governance. Their discussions revealed recurring themes around how illicit and integrity networks operate, scale shapes coordination, and place anchors the practical realities of integrity work. The following provides a high-level summary.

Engaging with networks, scales and places

Understanding corruption as embedded in networks, scales and place brings into focus the ways practitioners actually operate day to day. Their work involves moving across institutional boundaries, managing relationships, and engaging at local, national, and international levels. The reflections in this section show how respondents engage with these geographical concepts in practice.

Participants frequently framed their work in reference to the adversarial and cooperative **networks** they engage with —both the ones they're trying to disrupt and the ones they rely on to get things done. On the adversarial side, this included networks that enable corruption: illicit trade in drugs and tobacco, misuse of funds in community-based governance, and complex illicit money trails extending offshore. Responding to these threats rarely involves a single agency or territory. It typically involves working across borders and alongside a mix of integrity agencies, government departments, NGOs and others. Sometimes these integrity networks extended overseas, though more often they involved collaboration between various local, state and national agencies across Australia, such as through joint investigations with Commonwealth and state and territory agencies. For many, fostering these relationships is central to building trust amongst integrity agencies, sharing intelligence and lifting overall investigative capacity.

A recurring theme was the tension between formal and informal networks. Formal networks—like mutual legal assistance treaties and law enforcement agreements—were necessary for accountability and due process. However, informal connections, such as professional relationships built through international liaison or peer-to-peer conversations, were often more effective for quickly obtaining information or solving problems. Some noted that a quick call to a counterpart, can unlock information far more efficiently and effectively than following formal procedures. That said, many were clear-eyed about the risks: informal pathways can blur boundaries and create the potential for overreach if not handled carefully. There's a constant balancing act between being agile and staying within the rules.

Some explained how they operated across **multiple scales**, from community-level engagement to international cooperation. Within Australia, joint investigations across state and territory integrity

agencies represented the most common form of inter-scalar collaboration. Participants also recognised varying levels of maturity across agencies: some, such as the Australian Federal Police, maintain extensive international networks that traverse local, subnational, state, national and international scales, while others remain in earlier stages of developing linkages beyond their jurisdictional mandate.

Finally, participants reflected on the way they engaged with the political, economic, cultural and social dynamics in particular **places.** For example, one respondent reflected on the way their agency engaged with places deemed to have a high risk of corruption, including infrastructure projects that can be prone to "foreign interference". In such circumstance, preventing and investigating corruption required strong relationships with local partners who could navigate the complexities of these sometimes-fraught contexts. Others drew on their experience with education, outreach, and community engagement programs to illustrate how understanding different contexts can enhance preventive integrity work. In other words, corruption risks and responses don't play out the same way everywhere —they are shaped by local institutions, relationships, and social dynamics that need to be understood and managed.

The challenges of addressing the geographies of corruption

If corruption and responses to it are shaped by networks, scales and place, then responding to it becomes inherently more complex. It requires agencies to navigate complex systems, relationships and ways of working. The reflections below focus on where this becomes difficult in practice.

A consistent theme emerging from the discussion was that building integrity **networks** is one thing; sustaining them is another. Engagement can't be limited to a single operation or event. The real work involves maintaining relationships over time, often with limited resources and competing priorities. Respondents also spoke about the constant negotiation between formal and informal modes of working. Formal arrangements provide accountability and legitimacy, but they can be slow to activate. Informal relationships can move much faster and help surface useful information, though they raise questions about how ensure informal relations do not undermine formal rules and procedures.

There was also a sense that the number of integrity networks, particularly across the Pacific, has grown to the point where Australian agencies have to be selective. It's no longer possible to engage everywhere. Decisions tend to come down to prior relationships and trust: who people have worked with before, and who they feel confident relying on when it matters.

At the same time, institutional constraints continue to get in the way. Several pointed to siloed ways of working, shaped by organisational remit, culture, or legislation, that limit collaboration. Even where there is willingness to work beyond these silos, information sharing can be restricted, especially if it has come through informal channels. Differences in organisational priorities can also

complicate things. Anti-corruption work often depends on making issues visible, while partner organisations, including international counterparts, may prefer to keep matters confidential. That tension can slow or even stall cooperation. One respondent noted that visibility is important for deterrence and public trust, but it needs to be balanced carefully with operational sensitivity, particularly in overseas contexts.

Face-to-face engagement was seen as far more effective for building networks of integrity, especially across borders, and for understanding how corruption risks play out in specific **places**. But it comes at a cost. Travel is expensive, and in a constrained funding environment, choices about when and where to invest in these engagements need to be deliberate. Continuity is another weak point. Relationships are often built between individuals, so when people move on from their position, those connections can fall away. Maintaining institutional links over time remains a challenge. Working across cultures adds additional challenges. Approaches that assume, in the words of one respondent, that “coming in and saying this is what works in our country” were widely seen as ineffective.

Finally, there was concern that technology is widening the gap between integrity agencies and those engaged in corrupt activity. Digital tools allow networks involved in corruption to move faster, operate across multiple jurisdictions, and **scale** their activities in ways that are difficult to contain. One respondent described a scheme promoted through social media that deliberately overwhelmed agencies’ capacity to respond. Formal responses to tech-enabled corruption can be far too slow. Legislative change takes time, procedures can be cumbersome, and coordination across jurisdictions that cover different scales adds further delay. Even where collaboration between agencies is strong, this imbalance makes it difficult to keep pace with increasingly agile and dispersed networks.

5. Recommendations for improving responses to the geographies of corruption

Recognising the geographic nature of corruption raises an obvious question: what needs to change in how agencies respond? Participants identified priority areas for reform, which included the need to:

1) **Improve data and ensure it is consistent and can be shared across and between jurisdictions**

Several participants argued for a *national minimum data set on anti-corruption/integrity* to enable better cross-jurisdictional monitoring of corruption trends over time. The emphasis was not on collecting "more" data, but on *consistency*: developing common definitions and comparable fields between states/territories and the Commonwealth so trends can be interpreted "in relative terms" (e.g., how patters of corruption in Queensland differs from New South Wales, or what agencies in Western Australia did when a similar increase in certain types of corruption appeared years earlier). These discussions highlighted how sharing better data could strengthen understandings about trends across different spatial scales (local, state/territory, Commonwealth, and potentially beyond).

2) **Strengthen trusted formal and informal networks of integrity**

While there were many challenges (including the tendency for integrity agencies to work in silos), some noted the significant advantages of building networks of integrity based on trust. One participant noted that building relationships can lead to a virtuous cycle: the more openly agencies share information (within legal limits) and engage with one another, the faster problems resolve, and the easier it becomes to collaborate in the future. Participants stressed that – given the insights gained from the workshop – most integrity agencies could better engage with local, subnational, national, regional and international actors and organisations.

More formally, this could mean designing legislation and/or a memorandum of understanding to help agencies share and obtain information and to simplify/expedite mutual assistance requests. Fostering informal networks was also considered important, though these relationships could be less reliable when it came to managing the formalities around prosecutions and investigations. One respondent for example recalled how they were sanctioned for drawing on the informal relationship with a fellow law enforcement officer to try and respond to a transnational case of corruption in a timely manner.

Given the limitations around resources and the proliferation of integrity agencies across the region, building both formal and informal networks, some warned, needed to be done "strategically". This means integrity agencies should invest in long-term relationships with a select few partners they can trust. One respondent reflected that they had found that engaging with community partners has led to increased trust, but warned that while "trust is really important …it's not something that

happens…straight away, it actually takes years". Other respondents noted that building trust was particularly difficult in overseas contexts, given the different interests and agendas that are often misaligned. For instance, one noted that while sharing information confidentially with foreign integrity institutions can be easy, "the point where we need to actually have something called evidence and expose that publicly, that's where things get really difficult…[and] cooperation can break down". Overcoming these misalignments is not easy, and requires taking time to understand, in the words of one respondent, "the politics and the culture of these places" and then carefully cultivating longer-term relationships that are not just tied to individual people but embedded within and across institutions.

3) **Develop a single front door for reporting (a "clearinghouse") that easily connects the public to integrity institutions operating at different scales**

Many considered establishing a central repository/system or clearinghouse as a key priority. This could involve developing a "hotline" (potentially a phone number, text line, and/or web portal) for reporting and vetting complaints and directing them to the appropriate local, state or Commonwealth agency. Respondents felt this would improve public access to appropriate integrity agencies, and to improve triage, reduce duplication, and strengthen analytical capacity across administrative scales.

4) **Strengthen responses to technology-driven integrity risks**

As previously noted, participants suggested that integrity agencies are struggling to keep pace with the ways technology facilitates corruption. In turn, they emphasised the need for more sophisticated corruption-risk assessment tools, modernised legislative frameworks, and proactive integrity promotion through strategic use of social media. A key part of this response is recognising and addressing the inherently multi-jurisdictional nature of digital technologies—where platforms, data storage, and users frequently sit outside Australia's legal reach—necessitating coordinated, internationally informed approaches. For example, some messaging platforms use encryption which can impede investigations. Highly specialised and technical environments, including defence, may also present distinct integrity risks that warrant targeted attention.

5) **Strengthen response mechanisms in high-risk environments**

Finally, participants stressed the importance of deepening insights into the cultural, economic, social, and political factors that shape corruption risks in specific places—such as local councils, public sector workplaces (including health facilities), and the offices of public officials. Several suggested the development of "heat maps" to visualise where integrity agencies are active, highlight overlaps or service gaps, and identify areas of elevated risk. This place-based intelligence could support more targeted prevention and enforcement strategies. Participants also emphasised the value of a "no wrong door" approach, where individuals can seek support through any public service and be guided to the appropriate integrity agency. In high-risk locations, this could operate alongside a "clearing house" model to ensure affected communities have clear, localised pathways for reporting and assistance.

6. Impact, implementation and next steps

The findings from this project signal the potential for a critical shift in how integrity and anti-corruption systems can be understood and strengthened in Australia, and beyond. While the literature and policy frameworks that have guided reform to date—such as Transparency International's National Integrity Systems model (see appendix 1) —have provided valuable conceptual foundations, they often focus on discrete institutions and mandates at the expense of the relational, spatial, and cross-border realities through which corruption and integrity are enacted. The relational place framework offers a means of reinterpreting these systems, emphasising the interconnections between networks, scales, and places that together determine how integrity challenges emerge and how they might best be addressed.

Indeed, corruption is not solely an institutional or national problem but a profoundly spatial phenomenon. It flows along transnational money routes, adapts to differences in local capacity, and operates through multi-scalar networks that often ignore jurisdictional boundaries. Yet, until now, relatively little attention has been given to how practitioners and policy makers themselves experience and navigate these dynamics.

The workshop findings address that missing dimension by grounding theoretical insights in the practical realities of integrity work. Participants spoke of adversarial and cooperative networks spanning local, national, regional and international scales; the difficulties posed by jurisdictional boundaries and legislative constraints; and the central importance of trust, culture, and presence in determining the success of collaboration. Discussions revealed the value—and the tension—between formal mechanisms that ensure accountability and informal relationships that enable rapid information flow and response. This interplay echoes the central proposition of the relational place framework: that integrity is relational and contingent on the networks, scales and places in which corrupt activity takes place.

At the same time, participants described the limitations of the current system. Australia's integrity architecture is extensive but can be fragmented. Agencies operate at multiple scales, from small-scale rural community governance institutions to international fora, yet legislative, procedural, and cultural barriers continue to slow coordination and inhibit information sharing. Without consistent data standards, shared definitions, and mechanisms for cross-jurisdictional analysis, the capacity to act cohesively remains constrained. These observations mirror concerns in the academic and policy literature, which note that integrity frameworks often privilege vertical accountability and institutional autonomy over the horizontal relationships and adaptive networks needed to confront modern corruption risks (e.g. Brown and Cloke 2007; Walton, 2023; Denney, et al 2025).

The workshop and literature together point to the need for reform that embeds collaboration and

spatial awareness at the centre of integrity practice. Participants' emphasis on a national "clearinghouse" function and the development of common data definitions reflects the importance of developing Australia's integrity system into one that operates across and connects scales through learning from trends and experiences in other jurisdictions. Technology was identified as both a challenge and an opportunity. While corruption increasingly exploits digital networks and data flows, new analytical tools, shared datasets, and "integrity by design" approaches (i.e. proactively integrating ethical considerations into policies and systems) offer governments the means to anticipate and mitigate risk. These reflections extend existing policy discussions by showing that technology must be treated not merely as an operational aid, but as a structural enabler of relational integrity systems.

In turn, a clear message emerges: integrity should be understood as responding to challenges emerging from places and networks that operate across multiple scales. Achieving this requires political will to shift emphasis from protecting organisational boundaries to investing in trust, interoperability, and shared accountability. Building political will depends on further efforts to reframe integrity reform not as a compliance burden but as an enabler of effective governance, capable of improving policy delivery, efficiency, and public confidence within high-risk places and across jurisdictions. Demonstrating that spatially informed planning directly enhances outcomes will be essential to sustaining this shift.

By moving beyond institutional isolation, embracing cross-scale collaboration, and embedding the insights gleaned from the relational place framework, it is possible that Australia is better able to respond to the complex geographies of corruption that define the twenty-first century. The framework offers a conceptual and practical foundation for this transformation—one that bridges scholarship and policy and supports the creation of an integrity ecosystem capable of operating within an increasingly networked world.

7. Future Research Directions

The findings from this project suggest three main areas for future research. First, forthcoming research should focus on **mapping and analysing integrity networks across scales** to better understand how relationships between integrity agencies operating within different jurisdictions evolve over time. The workshop highlighted the importance of visualising "who is active where" and the value of both formal and informal connections in building effective anti-corruption coalitions. Building on existing efforts and previous literature (e.g. To et al, 2014; Denney et al 2025), by using network and spatial analysis, future work could track how trust, information, and cooperation flow between individuals and institutions, helping to operationalise the "relational place" framework and strengthen cross-jurisdictional collaboration within Australia, our neighbours, and beyond.

A second priority is **comparative, place-based research that examines how corruption risks and integrity practices differ across contexts.** Workshop participants emphasised that geography, culture, and institutional history profoundly shape how corruption is perceived and addressed. Furthering insights found in diverse contexts (e.g. Harrison, 2006), comparative case studies that draw on practices could explore how local norms and relationships influence anti-corruption effectiveness, generating practical insights for Australian policy makers seeking to embed "integrity by design" in diverse governance environments.

Finally, there is scope for research into **technological and data innovations for integrity systems**. Participants noted that corrupt networks are increasingly agile, exploiting digital platforms faster than integrity systems can respond. Future studies could – like others have done in different contexts (e.g. Gawthorpe and Pozsgai-Alvarez 2024) – investigate how shared data standards, clearinghouses, and emerging technologies like AI and geospatial mapping can enhance information sharing, early detection, and public accountability. Integrating these tools into the relational place framework would advance both theory and policy, supporting more adaptive, connected, and data-informed integrity systems across Australia and beyond.

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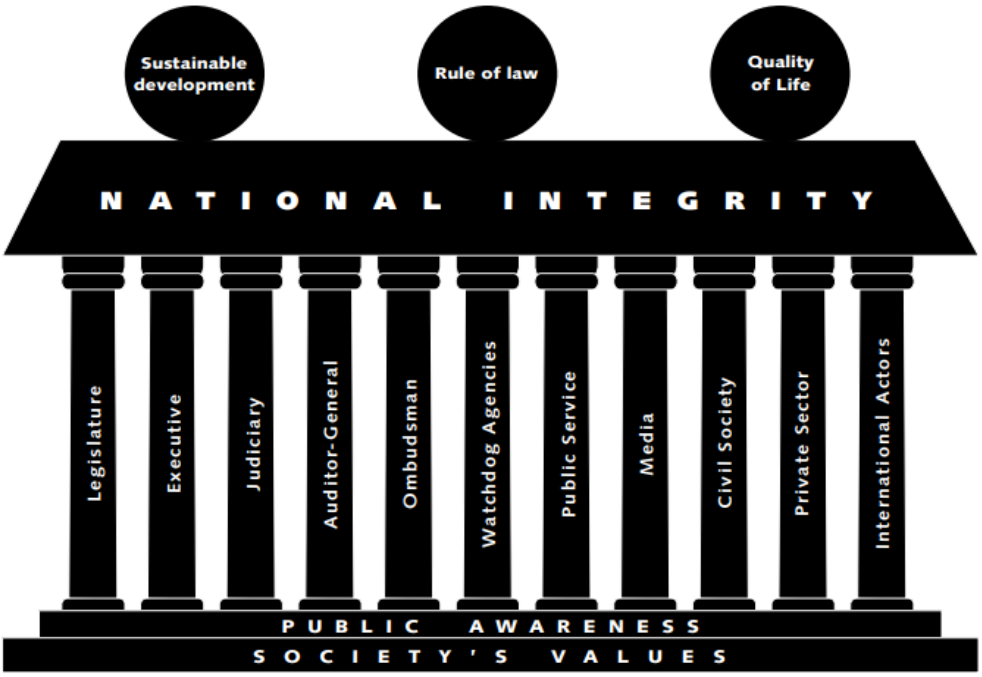
Appendix 1: National Integrity systems framework

Figure 2 provides a visual representation of Transparency International's National Integrity Systems Framework, a popular approach to understanding and assessing a nation's ability to respond to corruption. The Framework envisages integrity as a Greek temple, with key integrity institutions as its pillars. If these metaphorical pillars are weak, the temple crumbles and has detrimental impacts on sustainable development, rule of law and the quality of life.

Figure 2: Transparency International's National Integrity Systems Framework



Appendix 2: Acknowledgements

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