

Working Paper No. 195

Remittances and corruption perceptions in Africa

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Abstract

The relationship between remittances and corruption is contested. For some authors, external income endows individuals with financial buffers, which undermine these individuals' incentive to hold governments to account and allow rent-seeking politicians to invest fewer resources in public goods. For others, remittance payments undermine clientelist networks and increase individual-level political engagement and accountability. For others still, remittances diffuse social norms, since senders are likely to live in large cities or wealthier countries where corruption is less tolerated. However, despite being rooted in individual-level assumptions, many of the conflicting results in the extant literature have an empirical focus at the aggregate level. In this paper we offer a corrective, explaining variation in individual-level perceptions of corruption among remittance recipients through a new mechanism. With survey data from 34 African countries, we show that recipients are endowed with greater cash income, which is used to bribe officials in the hope of securing preferential access to basic services. This act of paying bribes, coupled with the fact that access does not appear to improve, fuels perceptions that the government is corrupt.

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

According to the World Bank, remittances reached an estimated US\$589 billion in 2021, surpassing all flows of portfolio capital, overseas development assistance, and foreign direct investment. Following a sharp decline in the second quarter of 2020, in the face of worldwide lockdowns in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, these payments rebounded quickly in the first quarter of 2021, emphasising the importance of this income for consumption smoothing across migrant-sending countries.¹ Given the importance, and size, of remittances for these economies, significant attention has now turned to their political effects.²

One branch of this literature has focused on the relationship between remittances and corruption, but, to date, has produced conflicting findings. Several studies have suggested that financial remittances lead to a reduction in corruption at the national and local level.³ For example, Tyburski (2012) has argued that remittances facilitate political engagement and improve recipients' ability to hold governments to account in Mexico. For Pfutze (2014), remittances have rendered clientelism more expensive across Mexican municipalities, improving the programmaticism and accountability of electoral linkages. In Nigeria, Ajide and Olayiwola (2020) have contended that remittances reduce corruption, an effect driven by increased demands for accountability among recipients. Williams (2017) reports a similar positive effect of remittances on democratic institutions for a cross-national African sample, as does Tusalem (2018) for the Philippines. All these studies explore outcomes at the aggregate level, but the microfoundations of their arguments begin with individuals.

Work contending that remittances increase corruption presents a similar dynamic. For Abdih, Chami, Dagher, and Montiel (2012), remittances allow governments to engage in corrupt behaviour; external payments enable households to purchase goods that substitute public services, and so the cost of the government appropriating public funds is easier to bear. Ahmed (2012) makes a similar point: Remittances provide citizens with private income buffers, thereby allowing governments to shift money earmarked for public goods to patronage for their supporters. Where institutions are weak, remittances magnify this deterioration in the quality of governance. Likewise, Berdiev, Kim, and Chang (2013) found that remittances led to an increase in corruption across 111 countries. And in a slight deviation, Tyburski (2014) connects the individual-level accountability mechanism with a top-down political one, arguing that remittances are more likely to reduce corruption, via accountability, in open democracies and more likely to facilitate corruption, through political agency, in closed regimes. Again, the mechanisms underpinning the link between remittances and corruption nearly all lie at the individual level, in contrast to the aggregated empirical focus.⁴

Clearly, there is a lack of consensus in the extant literature on the relationship between remittances and corruption, and these arguments rest on claims about individual-level behaviour seldom theoretically developed or empirically explored. But whether remittances

¹ pp. 10-11, [Ratha et al. \(2021\)](#)

² For example, see [Escribà-Folch, Wright, and Meseguer \(2022\)](#); [Germano \(2018\)](#); [Singer \(2010\)](#).

³ Another potential mechanism is via “social remittances” – the diffusion of ideas and values from those sending money, who are likely to live in large urban settings or abroad. See [Córdova and Hiskey \(2015\)](#).

⁴ There are three exceptions. [Höckel, Santos Silva, and Stöhr \(2018\)](#) demonstrate that migrant-sending households in Moldova, via norm transfer, reduce informal payments to teachers. Similarly, [Ivlevs and King \(2017\)](#) find that having family abroad and receiving remittances reduces the likelihood of paying bribes and tolerance for bribes in the former Yugoslav states, again via the transfer of norms. In contrast, [Konte and Ndubuisi \(2020\)](#) find that remittance recipients in Africa are more likely to pay bribes than non-recipients, an effect that is conditioned by context and the migrant host state. None of these three studies, however, examine corruption perceptions.

shape the perceptions that recipients have about corruption or how these payments might influence their experiences of corruption remain largely unexplored. The lack of consensus in this literature on corruption stands in contrast to other political economy work on remittances, such as that concerned with support for the incumbent⁵ or voter turnout,⁶ which tells a more consistent story.

In this paper, therefore, we add clarity to this literature by developing a plausible argument linking the receipt of remittances to perceptions of corruption at the individual level. Remittances bolster recipients' cash income and purchasing power, which, in contexts of weak state capacity, enable these individuals to increase their demands for basic goods and services. This intensifies their contact with agents of the state and exposes them to requests for bribes to a greater extent than non-recipients. And it is this increased exposure to bribery that shapes their heightened perceptions of corruption. Paying bribes to local officials and everyday personal experience of this type of "pocketbook" corruption will, as Klačnja, Tucker, and Deegan-Krause (2016) argue, increase the salience of the issue to those affected.

We provide evidence for this argument, and the observable implications of its mechanisms, with data from 34 African countries. We show that remittance recipients perceive the government to be more corrupt, and we offer evidence that the relationship is driven by increased contact with government officials and the self-reported payment of bribes. It is beyond the scope of this paper to comment on what this might mean for aggregate levels of corruption further downstream. Nonetheless, we believe that examining individual-level perceptions can shed light on the accountability and substitution mechanisms on which existing perspectives are based.

Remittances and corruption perceptions

Remittance recipients have heightened perceptions of corruption, relative to non-recipients. This is the central claim we make and explain in this paper, and is illustrated in Figure 1. Each model is based on data from Round 7 of the Afrobarometer survey, which sampled 34 African countries in 2016-2018, with between 1,200 and 2,400 respondents per country.⁷ These and all subsequent models are country fixed effect specifications, with standard errors clustered by country to account for potential correlation of the error term resulting from national-level differences in sampling.⁸

We make use of the following two questions in the Afrobarometer survey, concentrating on remittance dependency alongside perceptions that various government actors are corrupt.⁹

"Considering all the activities you engage in to secure a livelihood, how much, if at all, do you depend on receiving remittances from relatives or friends living in other countries?"

"How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?"

⁵ See [Bravo \(2012\)](#); [Germano \(2018\)](#); [Tertychnaya, De Vries, Solaz, and Doyle \(2018\)](#).

⁶ See [Escribà-Folch, Meseguer, and Wright \(2015\)](#); [Dionne, Inman, and Montinola \(2014\)](#).

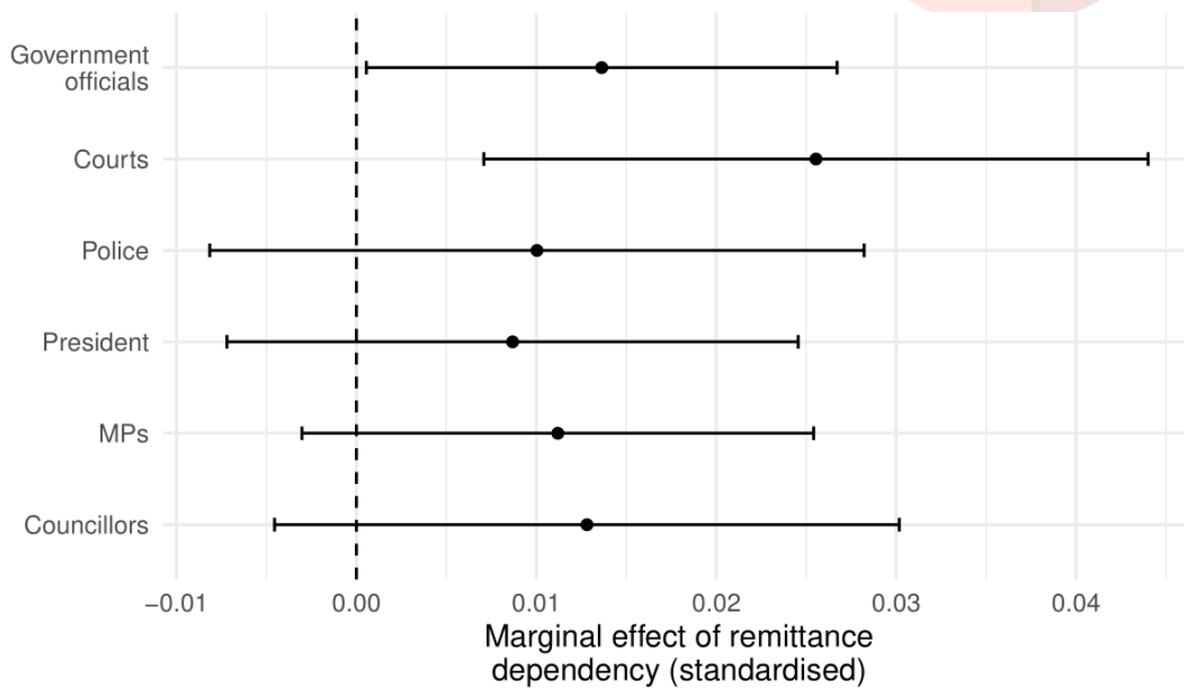
⁷ For a full list of countries and a range of descriptive statistics, see the supplementary materials in the Appendix.

⁸ All models are estimated using the `fixest` package in R. All continuous outcome and treatment measures were standardised with mean 0 and standard deviation 1, and the coefficients plotted represent percentage standard deviation shifts. Full details of all variable codings and specification choices can be found in the Appendix.

⁹ We concentrate on remittance dependency, as we view it as a better approximation of how important such payments are to a respondent's overall budget, and the impact they will hence have on spending decisions. This contrasts with questions in past survey rounds, which asked only about the regularity with which payments are received (but not their size).

Figure 1 illustrates that dependency is associated with a belief that government officials (and courts) are more corrupt. A standard deviation shift in remittance dependency is associated with a 1.5% standard deviation increase in a respondent's perception that government officials are, in general, corrupt. These effects are concentrated in perceptions of corruption in the judicial system and among local government officials. Although positive, the effect is not significant for the president, members of Parliament, or local government councillors.¹⁰

Figure 1: Remittances and perceptions of corruption



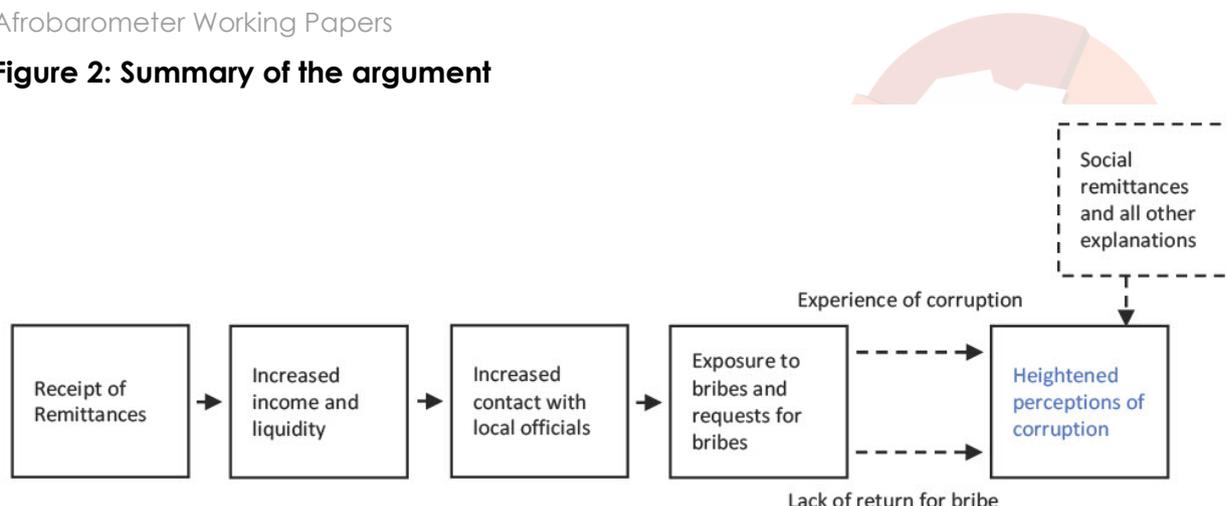
But why would remittance recipients have higher perceptions of corruption, relative to non-recipients? And why would this effect be concentrated in local government officials (and the judicial system) and not with high-ranking political agents?

We argue that this result operates through the increased income that remittances provide. Our general argument is summarised in Figure 2. The boost in liquidity from remittances, particularly for poorer recipients, enables them to increase consumption and investment, which, in turn, generates increased contact with public officials. This contact with government bureaucrats increases their exposure to bribes, heightening the salience of corrupt behaviour for recipients. This type of everyday pocketbook corruption, involving bribes to local officials and government bureaucrats, will also be more likely to concentrate perceptions of corruption in these political actors, rather than in the president or parliamentarians, who are more likely to be attributed blame for sociotropic corruption scandals (see Klačnjak, Tucker, & Deegan-Krause, 2016).

Although we cannot definitively identify our mechanism, in the subsequent sections we provide observational evidence in support of the main empirical implications.

¹⁰ We also note that some of the null findings could stem from ceiling effects, since respondents might have strong prior beliefs that certain actors are corrupt. A pertinent example is the police, with a large literature on African politics documenting everyday norms of corruption among officers.

Figure 2: Summary of the argument



The income effect

Our argument begins with the income effect of remittances. The boost to the general income of recipients that remittances provide has already been well-established; remittances facilitate increased consumption of everyday necessities, but they also allow recipients access to more advanced consumer goods and can facilitate investments in health and business.¹¹ Remittances don't just facilitate consumption, however. They can also act as an important source of household insurance, providing a safety net for citizens in the event of unanticipated shocks, either as household savings or as counter-cyclical payments from family abroad.¹² Overall, then, the receipt of these payments significantly improves recipients' perceptions of the health of their pocketbooks.¹³

We can observe a very similar dynamic for remittance dependents across Africa. Figure 3 depicts the relationship between income and remittance dependency, considering sets of questions that address differences in respondents' pocketbooks, and in turn whether these differences are attributed to government.

First, in Panel (a), we show that remittance dependents generally report having healthier financial circumstances. Respondents give more positive responses across Afrobarometer's standard economic perception module, i.e. when asked about their own present living conditions, how their living conditions compare to their compatriots, and the economic condition of the country as a whole. Perhaps more specific to our argument, we also use a question that asks respondents how often they have gone without a cash income in the past 12 months. Reversing the scale of responses, we see that remittance dependency is associated with more secure access to liquidity.

If remittance dependents are materially wealthier, this poses something of a puzzle. A core finding from global studies of voting behaviour is that people become more supportive of the incumbent government when their pocketbook circumstances improve. Yet, for remittance dependents in Africa, this is not what we see. In Panel (b) we look at how remittance dependency affects perceptions of how the government has handled particular issues over the past 12 months. We see that dependency is associated with significantly higher approval on distinctively economic issues, such as income inequality and the living conditions of the

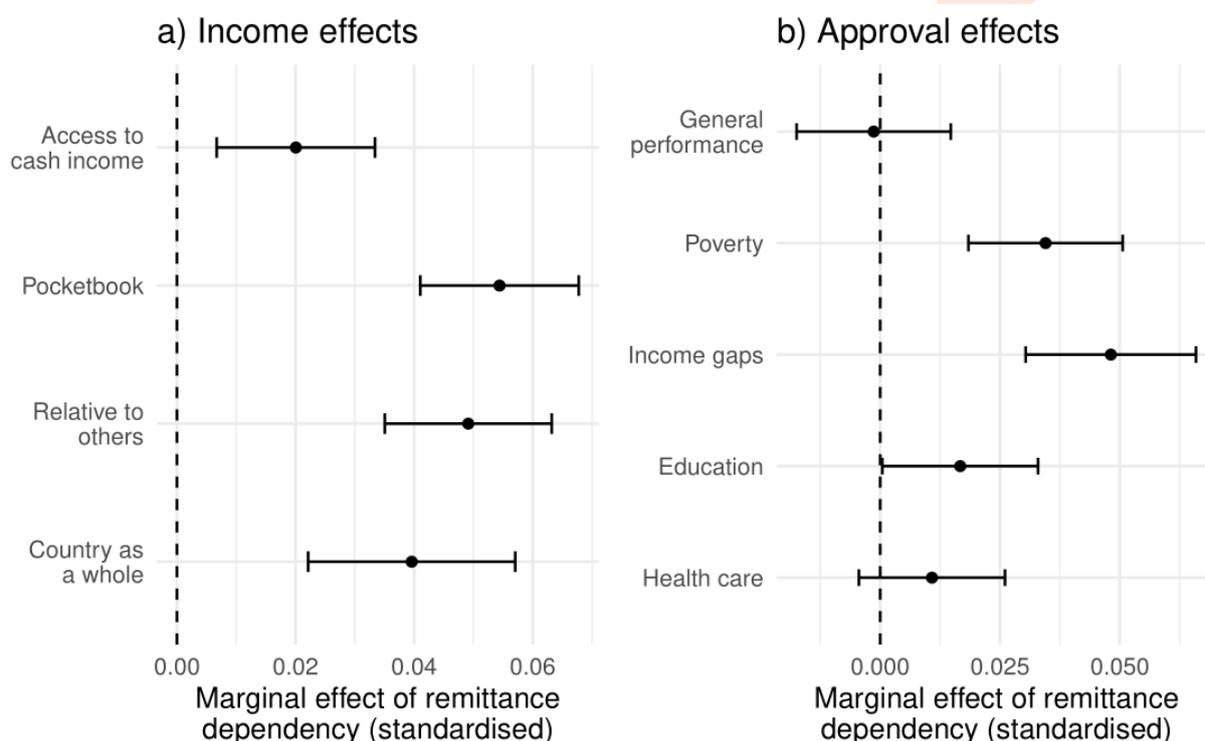
¹¹ See Barajas, Chami, Fullenkamp, Gapen, & Montiel (2009); Germano (2018); Orozco (2013).

¹² See Yang and Choi (2007); Germano (2018); Chaudhry (2015).

¹³ See Germano (2018); Bravo (2012); Tertychnaya et al. (2018).

poor, which are plausibly seen through the lens of one's own pocketbook.¹⁴ But more general public services, such as education and health care, see weaker relationships. Moreover, deviating from some existing work, we find sharply estimated null effects on a respondent's overall assessment of government performance. We believe that bribe exposure and corruption perceptions offer a resolution to this puzzling result.

Figure 3: Relationship between remittances and economic and government assessments



Remittances increase contact with public officials and exposure to bribes

Again, remittances provide recipients with significant additional income. And with this additional liquidity, recipients may seek to purchase property, start a business, buy a car, seek hospital treatment, or improve their education or that of their children (Ivlevs & King, 2017). All these activities will likely increase the contact of remittance recipients with local officials and agents.¹⁵

This increased contact with local officials will also increase the likelihood that recipients will be exposed to bribes or requests for bribes. This may be because recipients will use the additional liquidity that remittances provide to seek preferential or expedited access to state-provided goods or services, which should in theory be public and universal, but in contexts of

¹⁴ For similar effects on incumbent approval, see [Germano \(2018\)](#); [Bravo \(2012\)](#); [Tertychnaya et al. \(2018\)](#).

¹⁵ An alternative expectation, of course, might be rooted in the substitution effect of remittances, where recipients use this income to seek private provision of basic goods and services, resulting in reduced contact with public officials. It is possible that this dynamic might occur, but this assumes that market alternatives for state-provided services are readily available, which may not always be the case for some African states. In addition, purchasing items such as cars, or investing in property, or using remitted income to migrate, would all necessitate increased contact with state officials to source the relevant documents.

weak state capacity have highly truncated provision. In this context, remittance recipients are more open to the payment of bribes to public officials to access desired services (Ivlevs & King, 2017, p. 392). Alternatively, local officials, aware that remittance recipients have increased liquidity, at least relative to non-recipients, might solicit *additional* bribes from these individuals once contacted for access to services. Although it is impossible with these data to establish which process is more prevalent, both will ultimately result in increased exposure to bribery.

In existing studies, there is indeed some evidence to suggest that the receipt of remittances increases the probability of being asked for a bribe. In the Balkan states, Ivlevs and King (2017) show that requests for bribes, though not necessarily payments, are higher among remittance recipients. Meanwhile, Konte and Ndubuisi (2020) demonstrate that recipients in Africa are more prone to make bribe payments than non-recipients, using Afrobarometer data from 2004 to 2016. This effect also varies by where those sending remittances live, with bribe effects diminishing in contexts where migrants primarily settle in OECD countries. Konte and Ndubuisi (2020) suggest that this is due to a countervailing norm or value-transfer effect: In contexts where corruption is low, migrants might transfer intolerance of corrupt practices back home, thereby countering the income effect of remittances and reducing the willingness of recipients to pay bribes.

In our sample, Figure 4 demonstrates that remittance dependency is associated with greater contact with local officials and service providers, in conjunction with an increased propensity to pay bribes.

To measure contact, we make use of a series of Round 7 questions that ask respondents whether they had contact with a given good or service, and in turn whether they paid bribes to secure access to it. For schools, for instance, the following questions are asked:

"In the past 12 months have you had contact with a public school?"

"And how often, if ever, did you have to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour for a teacher or school official in order to get the services you needed from the schools?"

Similar questions are asked with respect to public health clinics; obtaining government documents (passports, driving licenses, etc.); accessing water, sanitation, and electricity services; requesting assistance from the police; and encountering the police at roadblocks/checkpoints and paying bribes to avoid trouble.

Turning to our findings, Panel (a) illustrates that remittance dependency is associated with increased contact across a range of service providers, with significant effects on all except health care and police assistance. On average, a standard deviation increase in dependency sees the probability of contact increase by around 1%. And, in turn, the results in Panel (b) suggest that dependency is associated with an increased propensity to pay bribes.¹⁶

Consistent with our mechanism, these bribe effects are most pronounced among the poorest remittance recipients; in Figure 5, we model the conditional effect of dependency on the payment of bribes at different levels of wealth and show that bribe payments are concentrated among respondents who are both poor and dependent on remittances. This is arguably because wealthier individuals already have prior access to basic goods and services (through private means or self-selection into wealthier neighbourhoods) and remittances provide poorer recipients, with limited prior access, greater liquidity to obtain them. In other words, the marginal *income effect* of remittances is greater for poorer recipients, and this filters through to the likelihood of contact and paying bribes.

¹⁶ The dependent variable here is a standardised continuous measure of the regularity with which bribes were paid. Note that each model here uses the subset of those who say they had contact with the given good or service, so these are bribe effects, conditional on having made contact with a service.

Figure 4: Remittances, contact with local officials, and the payment of bribes

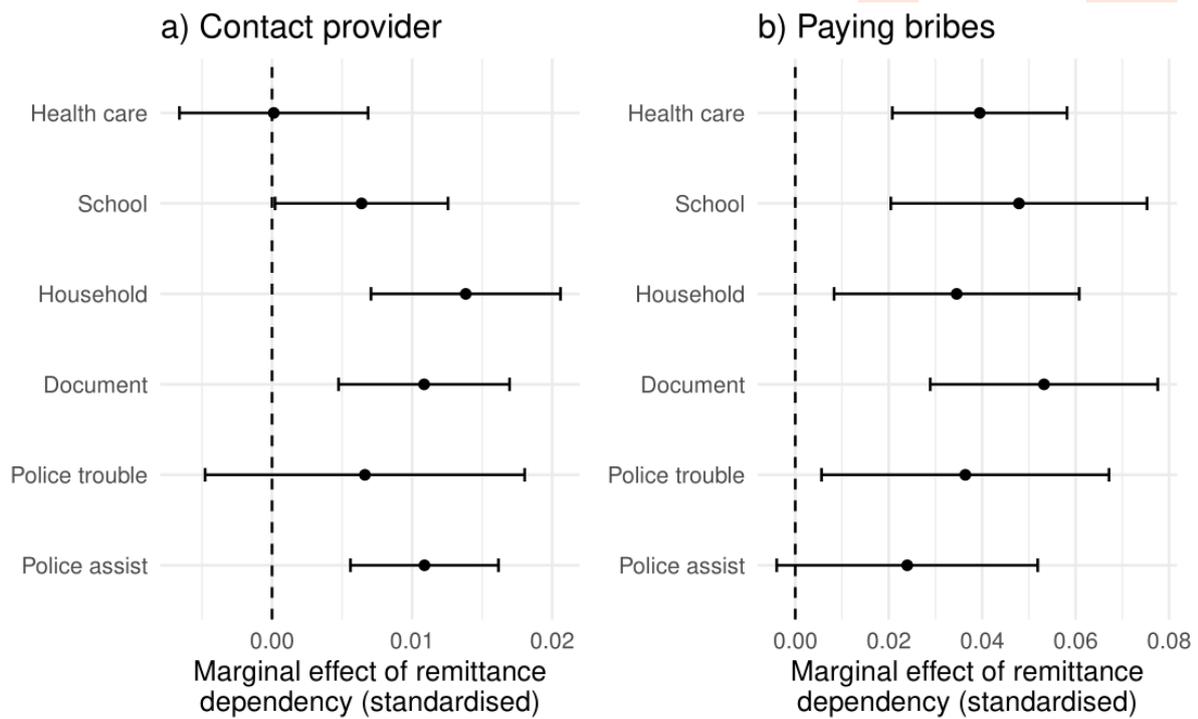
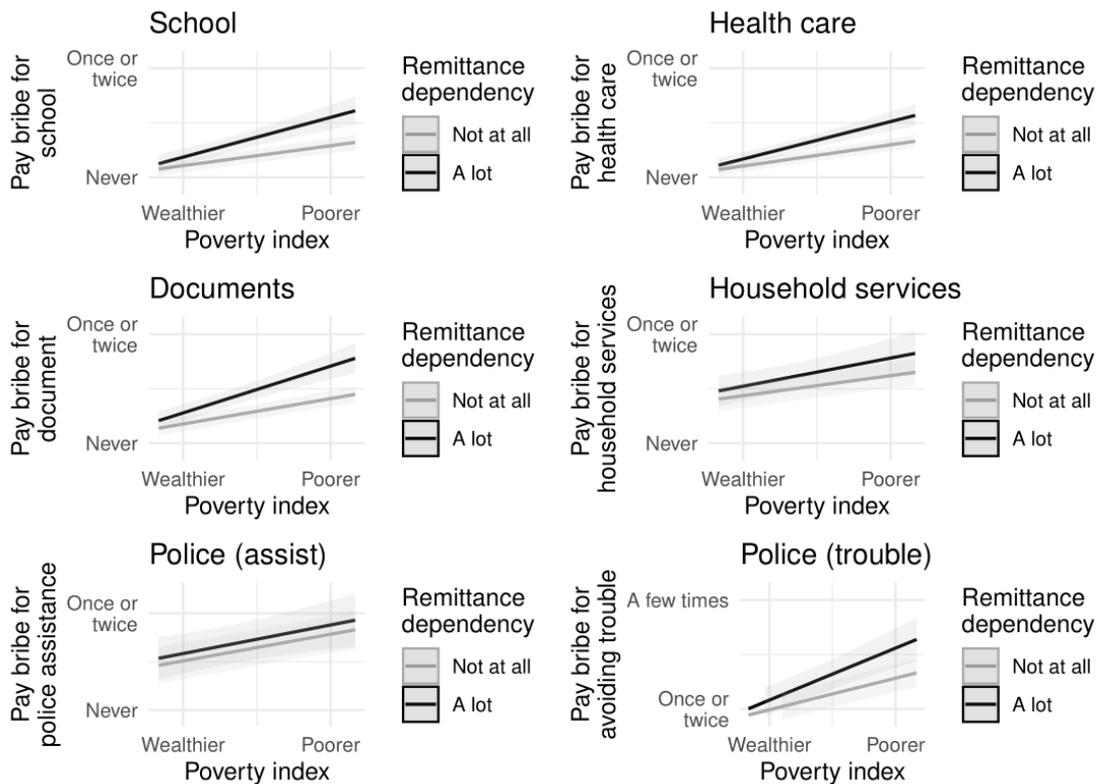
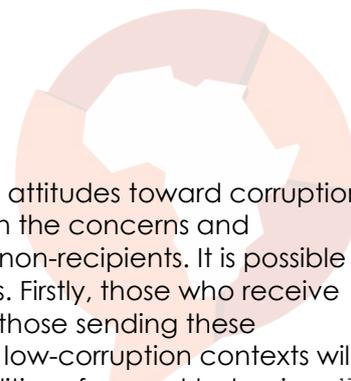


Figure 5: Remittances, poverty, and the likelihood of paying bribes





Experience of corruption and corruption perceptions

We argue that it is this exposure to bribes that shapes recipients' attitudes toward corruption. These diverging personal experiences will, we contend, heighten the concerns and perceptions of remittance recipients with corruption, relative to non-recipients. It is possible that this effect could operate through several different channels. Firstly, those who receive remittances might experience some form of value transfer from those sending these payments from abroad. That is, family members living abroad in low-corruption contexts will stress intolerance of corrupt practices and the negative externalities of corrupt behaviour.¹⁷ Alternatively, there may be a selection effect whereby those who have migrated, or chosen to "exit," are already from families highly concerned about corruption in their state.¹⁸ In both of these scenarios, heightened perceptions of corruption are not driven by the income effect of remittances; rather, they are a product of social remittances, which correlate highly with financial payments.¹⁹ Indeed, for Ivlevs and King (2017), the unwillingness of those with family abroad to accept bribe taking by officials in the Balkan states is not shaped by the income effect of remittances but rather the value transfer of social remittances.

We argue, however, that the heightened perception of corruption reported by recipients is, at least partly, a product of increased exposure to corrupt practice. In this scenario, the payment of bribes and exposure to solicitations of bribes will trigger remittance recipients' awareness of the prevalence of corruption, and hence increase perceptions of it. For Klačnja, Tucker, and Deegan-Krause (2016), personal experience of corruption (*pocketbook corruption*) may increase its importance for voting behaviour, as paying a bribe imposes direct costs on individuals and can serve as a (negative) signal of government competence.²⁰

Figure 6 provides indicative evidence of this claim. We consider a thinned-down causal model in which the observed total effect of remittances on corruption perceptions is mediated by the payment of bribes. If we adjust for bribes, we can see whether remittances have any remaining "direct" effects on attitudes. If our theoretical argument is correct, they should not; remittances only matter *through* their propensity to increase bribe payments. We thus control for whether a respondent pays bribes and see if there is any remaining impact from remittances. In other words, for any two individuals who have similar exposure to bribe payments, do corruption perceptions differ by remittance dependency?²¹

In Panel (a) of Figure 6, we first confirm that paying a bribe does have a very large effect on corruption perceptions, associated with a 15%-20% standard deviation average increase in corruption perceptions. In Panel (b), we see that this largely removes the previous impact of remittance dependency, which now turns up very weak or sharp null effects. This suggests

¹⁷ See Ivlevs and King (2017); Höckel, Santos Silva, and Stöhr (2018).

¹⁸ However, in the Appendix, we demonstrate that remittance dependency appears balanced across partisanship, one key indicator of perceptions about the government. This provides some reassurance that our results are not driven wholly by such a selection effect.

¹⁹ See Levitt (1998).

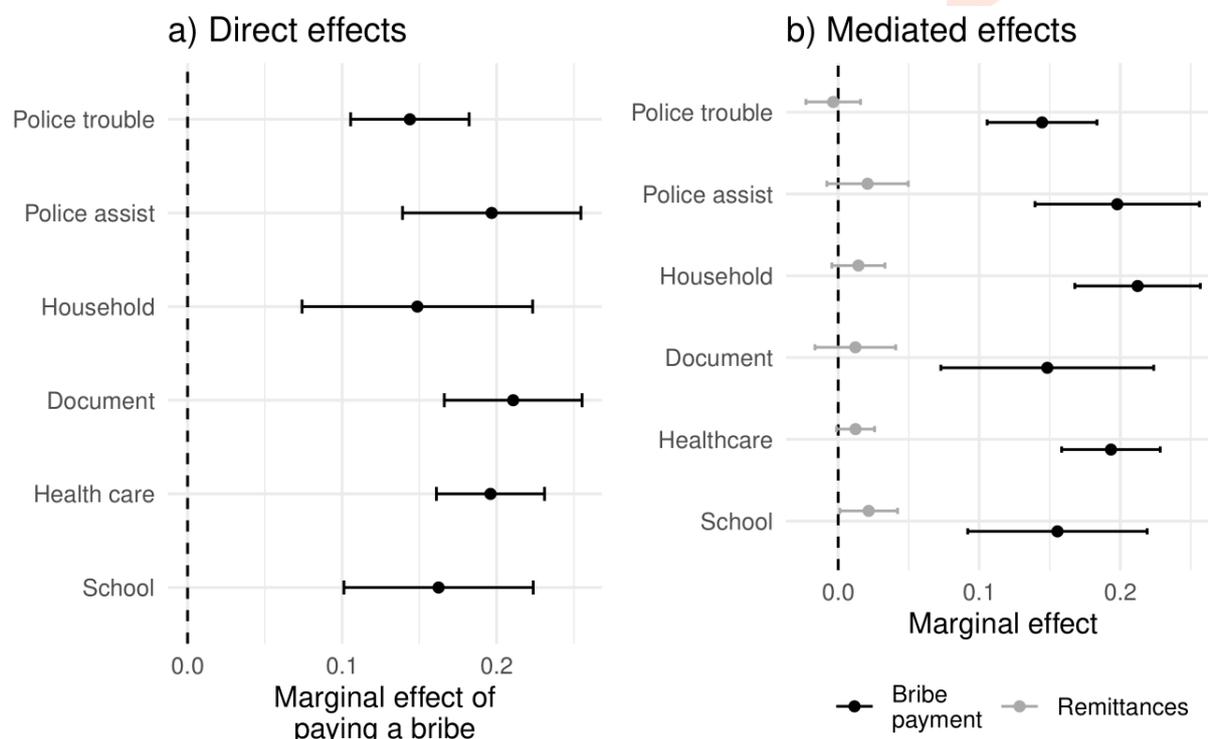
²⁰ See Klačnja, Tucker, and Deegan-Krause (2016) on the role of pocketbook-corruption voting triggered by exposure to bribes.

²¹ This approach works if we consider remittance dependency to be temporally prior to bribes. Things are more complicated if this is not the case. For instance, if a need to pay bribes makes someone become *more* dependent on remittances, we would be faced with issues of post-treatment bias. While we think this is unlikely, or at least will affect only a small portion of our sample, we note this possibility and are clear that while the results are *consistent* with our mechanism, they do not provide conclusive, *causal* evidence in its favour.

that the relationship between remittances and corruption perceptions largely runs *through* the payment of bribes, wholly consistent with our proposed mechanism.

Moreover, this might help explain why perceptions of corruption among remittance recipients are largely focused on government officials (i.e. bureaucrats) and the judicial branch. It is the everyday experience of pocketbook corruption, in the form of bribes to bureaucrats, that raises the salience of the corrupt behaviour among officials and concentrates perceptions of corruption in these political actors.

Figure 6: The effect of paying bribes on corruption perceptions



Improved access to basic goods and services?

The increased perceptions of corruption among remittance recipients, in some instances, will also be a product of their disappointment with the efficacy of the bribes that they have paid. One might reasonably anticipate that remittance recipients who pay bribes would be less concerned about corruption if the payment proves successful in securing improved access to public services. In some contexts, corruption has become normalised,²² and tolerance for corruption can be high, particularly when the economy is performing well.²³ And when citizens receive tangible benefits from corrupt behaviour, there is evidence to suggest that they become less concerned with corruption overall.²⁴ In this scenario, if remittance recipients, living in high-corruption contexts, receive tangible benefits from the payment of bribes, then we might not expect increased perceptions of corruption to ensue. If, however, recipients feel that these bribes have not resulted in some form of reciprocal benefit, then this will increase concerns.

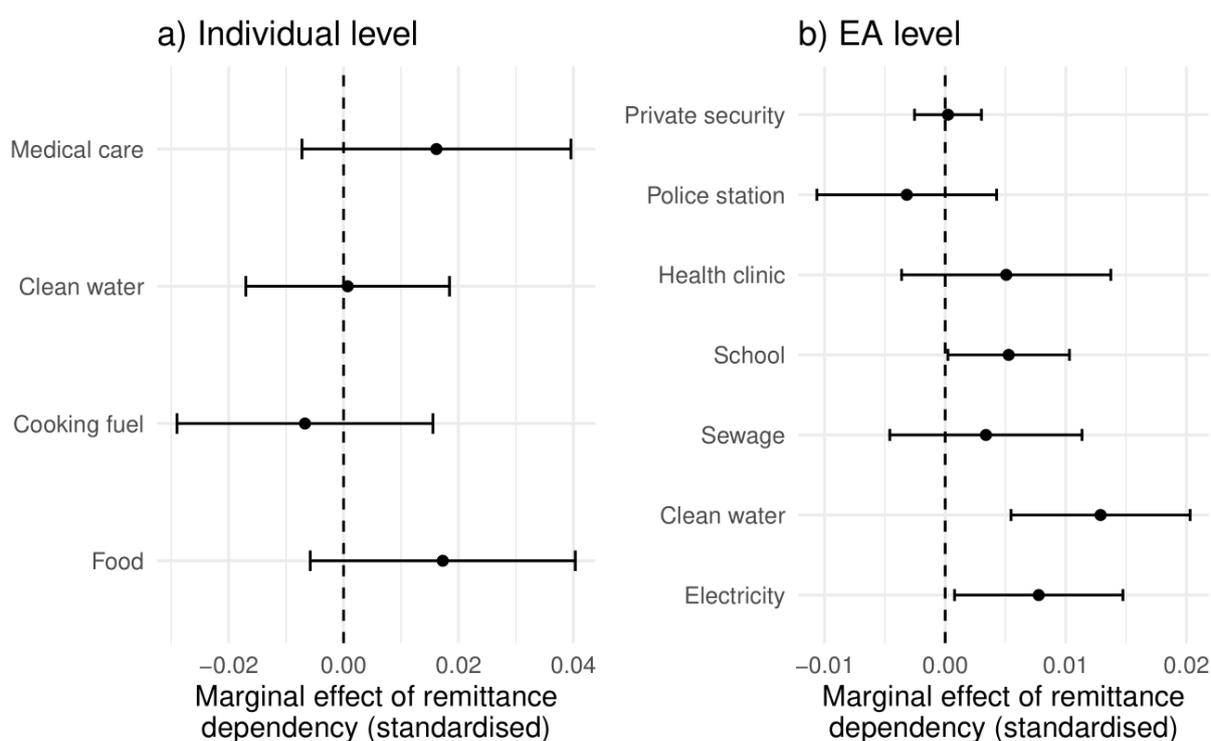
²² See [Caselli and Morelli \(2004\)](#).

²³ See [Klašnja and Tucker \(2013\)](#).

²⁴ See [Fernández-Vázquez, Barberá, and Rivero \(2016\)](#).

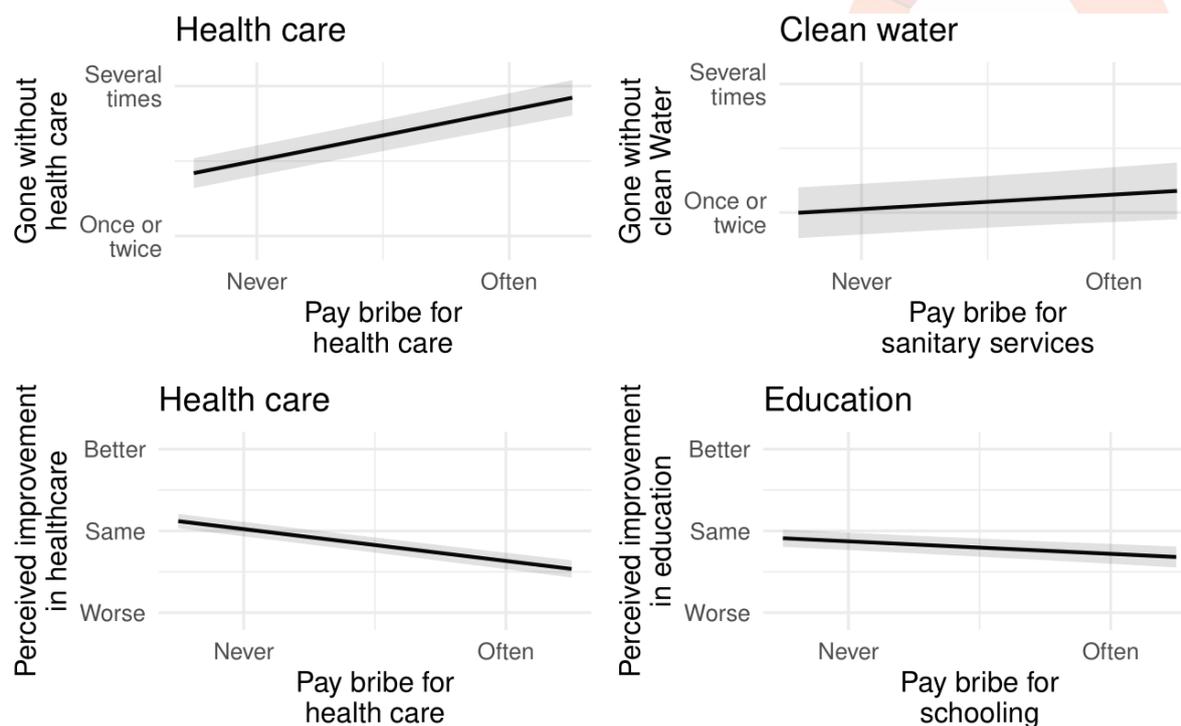
To explore this argument, we consider whether remittance dependents in Africa *actually* report better access to basic goods and services. Panel (a) of Figure 7 examines individual access to different goods, using a reversed version of a question that asks respondents how often they have “gone without” a given good or service in the past 12 months. We find null effects for access to medical facilities, clean water, cooking fuel, and food. Panel (b) considers the availability of services in a respondent’s local area, or enumeration area (EA), visible characteristics that are coded by the independent survey enumerator and so less amenable to reporting biases and subjectivity. We find positive effects for schooling, clean water, and electricity, but null effects across everything else. Where effects are positive, the magnitude of the finding is small. On both counts, this evidence is consistent with the argument that remittance recipients do *not* have systematically better satisfaction with, or access to, basic goods and services. This is despite strong evidence of pocketbook improvement.

Figure 7: Remittances and access to basic goods as reported by respondents (Panel (a)) and enumerators (Panel (b))



To take this analysis a step further, we also consider whether paying bribes seems to work – i.e. whether bribe payments are themselves associated with better access to goods and services. Our analysis in Figure 8 suggests that this is not systematically the case, and that bribes are instead associated with an elevated likelihood of going without a respective good/service, as well as a decline in the perception that access has improved over the past 12 months.

This finding could reflect several patterns on the ground. On the one hand, bribes might simply be inefficient. Officials collect payments but do not follow through with the promised goods and services, leading to a lack of access for affected individuals. On the other, paying bribes might increase one’s quality expectations. If access stays constant or gets worse, but the expected quality goes up, then respondents will become less satisfied with the service they eventually receive. Either channel feeds into a lack of perceived return, and will only heighten and prime concerns among recipients about corruption.

Figure 8: Bribe payment and access to basic goods and services

Discussion and conclusion

In this paper, we have contributed to the extant literature on the political effects of remittances and, more specifically, on work focused on the relationship between remittances and corruption. We present an argument concerned with the effect of remittances on perceptions of corruption at the individual level, an effect driven by increased economic activity that the additional income from remittances facilitates and subsequent heightened experience of everyday pocketbook corruption. This focus on individual perceptions stands in contrast to much existing scholarship, which has tended to focus on the effects of remittances on local or national outcomes, while still being rooted in individual experience. Establishing a clear relationship between the receipt of remittances and perceptions of corruption can help clarify the mechanisms underpinning the existing findings.

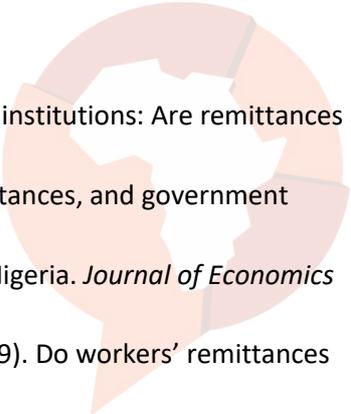
Why do these results matter? We suggest that our proposed mechanism has a range of implications for scholars and practitioners on the ground. Perhaps most importantly, we speak to ongoing research into the microfoundations of tax compliance in low-capacity states. Corruption perceptions are a key barrier to policy makers seeking to formalise economic structures and solicit the quasi-voluntary payment of tax. In this way, the macro-level consequences of remittance flows for *economic* development might be complicated by petty bribes at the local level. But remittances might also matter for *political* development; we know that corruption perceptions can have significant effects on vote choice and political participation.²⁵ In countries where sizeable portions of the population are dependent on remittances, our mechanism could be deeply consequential for aggregate electoral outcomes.

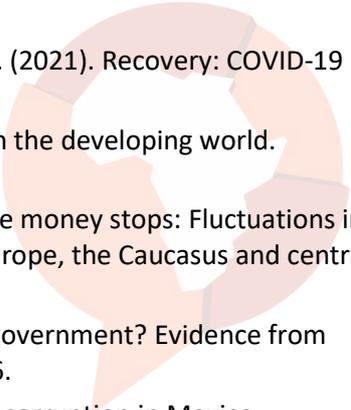
²⁵ See [Klašnja, Tucker, and Deegan-Krause \(2016\)](#) p. 3; also [Welch and Hibbing \(1997\)](#).

We note that our analysis has some limitations, and that future scholarship should seek to investigate the observable implications of our mechanism with greater empirical depth. On the one hand, some of the survey questions we utilise are not perfectly suited for our research questions of interest. For instance, we lack detailed information about precisely how much money respondents receive in remittance payments and how regular these payments are. And despite focusing our analysis on *within*-country comparisons, there are legitimate concerns about how social desirability bias might taint respondents' reporting of bribes. On a more inferential note, we also recognise that our findings are constrained by our use of cross-sectional survey data. While we show multiple results consistent with our mechanism, which we believe are unlikely to be driven by other explanations, these results cannot yield straightforward causal interpretation in and of themselves. One fruitful avenue for future research might be to use a selection of list and framing experiments to overcome such issues, and better identify variation in the behaviour of those dependent on remittances in Africa.

On balance, though, we present an intuitive and novel story about the relationship between remittance dependency and corruption perceptions in Africa. Our results add individual-level nuance and geographic diversity to the existing literature, and leave open several questions for future research to address.

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Appendix

See “Appendix: Remittances and corruption” [here](#).



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