

International Cooperation and the Fight Against Corruption in Nigeria: An Assessment of the Role of International Organisations

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Abstract

Corruption remains a persistent governance and development challenge in Nigeria despite extensive domestic reforms and growing international cooperation. This study examines the nature and forms of international cooperation in combating corruption in Nigeria, assesses the role of international organisations in supporting Nigeria's anti-corruption efforts, and evaluates the challenges affecting the effectiveness of such cooperation. The study adopts a qualitative documentary research design and relies exclusively on secondary data obtained from peer-reviewed scholarly literature, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), World Bank, Financial Action Task Force (FATF), Transparency International, Nigerian government publications, and documented international asset-recovery records. The analysis is guided by the neoliberal institutionalist perspective associated with Robert O. Keohane, which emphasises the capacity of international institutions to facilitate cooperation, information exchange, monitoring, and rule-based coordination among states. Findings indicate that international cooperation has taken the forms of treaty-based obligations, mutual legal assistance, extradition, information sharing, technical assistance, peer review, anti-money-laundering cooperation, and international asset recovery. International organisations have strengthened Nigeria's institutional capacity and facilitated significant cooperation in recovering proceeds of corruption. However, weak domestic institutions, political interference, limited enforcement capacity, fragmented inter-agency coordination, difficulties in cross-border evidence gathering, and lengthy asset-recovery procedures constrain effectiveness. The study concludes that international cooperation is necessary but insufficient without credible domestic enforcement institutions and sustained political commitment.

Keywords: Corruption; international cooperation; international organisations; Nigeria; asset recovery; anti-corruption governance.

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Introduction

Corruption has emerged as a significant concern in contemporary International Relations because its causes, mechanisms and consequences increasingly transcend national boundaries. Although corruption often originates within domestic political and administrative systems, the proceeds of corrupt practices can be transferred across jurisdictions through international banking systems, shell companies, offshore financial centres, real estate transactions and other transnational channels. Consequently, the prevention, investigation and prosecution of complex corruption increasingly require cooperation among states, international organisations and other transnational actors. The transnational character of corruption has therefore expanded the issue beyond domestic governance into the domains of international law, global governance, transnational organised crime, international development and economic security.

The internationalisation of corruption has encouraged the development of international norms and institutional mechanisms designed to facilitate cooperation among states. The United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC), the African Union Convention on Preventing and Combating Corruption, international anti-money-laundering standards and bilateral and multilateral mutual legal assistance arrangements have established frameworks through which states can exchange information, investigate transnational corruption, trace illicit assets, prosecute offenders and recover proceeds of corruption. International organisations also support these processes through technical assistance, peer review, institutional capacity building, policy coordination and the development of common standards. Jongen (2018) observes that international peer-review mechanisms have become important instruments for encouraging states to comply with international anti-corruption commitments, although their authority and effectiveness vary according to institutional design and the willingness of participating states to implement recommendations.

Nigeria provides an important case for examining the relationship between international cooperation and anti-corruption efforts. As one of Africa's most populous states and a major political, economic and diplomatic actor, Nigeria's governance challenges have implications for regional stability, economic development and its international relations. Corruption affects public administration, the delivery of public services, investment, institutional legitimacy and democratic accountability. Its consequences also extend beyond Nigeria's territorial boundaries because illicitly acquired resources can be transferred to foreign jurisdictions and concealed through complex financial and corporate arrangements. Consequently, addressing corruption in Nigeria requires not only domestic enforcement but also cooperation with foreign governments, international organisations, financial institutions and law-enforcement agencies.

The persistence of corruption in Nigeria can be observed through both experience-based and perception-based indicators. The 2023 National Survey on Quality and Integrity of Public Services in Nigeria, conducted by the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) in collaboration with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), involved 33,035 interviews with adults across Nigeria's 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory. The survey found that 27% of Nigerians who had contact with public officials during the reference period reported paying a bribe. When situations in which a bribe was requested but refused were included, 34% of interactions with public officials involved a bribery request or payment. The payment-only prevalence represented a modest decline from 29% recorded in 2019 (UNODC, 2025). These findings indicate that, notwithstanding continuing domestic and international anti-corruption interventions, bribery remains a significant feature of interactions between citizens and public officials.

The financial magnitude of petty bribery is also substantial. The 2023 UNODC/NBS survey estimated that approximately ₦721 billion was paid in cash bribes to public officials during the 12 months preceding the survey. This represented approximately 0.35% of Nigeria's gross domestic product for the relevant period (UNODC, 2025). The figure should, however, be interpreted within the methodological boundaries of the survey. It represents reported cash bribes in interactions between citizens and public officials and should not be treated as an estimate of the total financial value of corruption in Nigeria. Grand corruption, procurement fraud, embezzlement, illicit

financial flows and other complex forms of corruption are not fully captured by a household bribery survey. Nevertheless, the estimated amount demonstrates the continuing economic significance of corruption in everyday public-service interactions.

International governance indicators also point to continuing weaknesses in Nigeria's control of corruption. The World Bank's revised Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI) report Nigeria's 2024 Control of Corruption governance estimate at approximately -1.3 on a scale ranging from about -2.5 to 2.5, while its corresponding governance score is 21.4 on a 0–100 scale (World Bank, 2025). The Control of Corruption indicator measures perceptions of the extent to which public power is exercised for private gain, including both petty and grand forms of corruption and the capture of the state by elites and private interests. Because the WGI is perception-based and aggregates information from several sources, it should be interpreted as an indicator of governance conditions rather than a direct count of corruption cases.

A similar picture is presented by Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI). In the 2025 CPI, Nigeria recorded a score of 26 out of 100 and ranked 142nd among 182 countries and territories (Transparency International, 2026). The score remained unchanged from the preceding CPI. The CPI measures perceived levels of public-sector corruption using information from independent sources and therefore does not constitute a direct measurement of the actual number or monetary value of corrupt transactions. Nevertheless, it provides a useful comparative indicator of how experts and businesspeople perceive public-sector corruption across countries.

The persistence of corruption despite the existence of domestic institutions and international anti-corruption mechanisms raises an important International Relations question: to what extent can international cooperation contribute to combating corruption when the effectiveness of international rules and institutions depends substantially on domestic political, legal and administrative conditions? This question is particularly important because international organisations do not normally possess unlimited coercive authority over sovereign states. Their influence is generally exercised through international agreements, peer review, technical assistance, capacity building, information exchange, monitoring, coordination, reputational incentives and other institutional mechanisms.

International cooperation can consequently be understood as the process through which states and international institutions coordinate policies, exchange information, provide technical assistance, facilitate legal and investigative processes, and establish common standards to address problems that cannot be effectively managed within the jurisdiction of a single state. In the context of corruption, such cooperation becomes particularly important when suspects, evidence, financial transactions or illicit assets are located outside the country in which the alleged offence occurred.

One of the most visible manifestations of international anti-corruption cooperation involving Nigeria is international asset recovery. Corrupt proceeds may be transferred from Nigeria to foreign jurisdictions, thereby creating jurisdictional difficulties for Nigerian law-enforcement agencies. Investigators and prosecutors may consequently require assistance from foreign governments, financial intelligence units, courts and international organisations to trace, freeze, confiscate and return such assets. The World Bank's Stolen Asset Recovery Initiative (StAR) identifies international cooperation as an important component of asset recovery because the investigation and recovery of stolen assets frequently require coordination between the country of origin and countries in which assets are located (World Bank StAR, 2025).

The Nigerian experience provides concrete illustrations of this process. One notable example is the recovery of approximately US\$311.8 million associated with the Abacha asset-recovery case. The assets were returned to Nigeria in February 2020 following proceedings involving the United States and Jersey. The recovery involved sustained cooperation among the relevant authorities, and the arrangement for the return of the funds was linked to Article 57(5) of UNCAC and included provisions relating to transparency, accountability and monitoring of the returned funds (World Bank StAR, 2025).

Another illustration is the Technip-NLNG bribery case, in which approximately US\$30 million was returned to Nigeria. The case involved cooperation involving Nigeria, France and the United States, with UNCAC identified as a legal basis for international cooperation (World Bank StAR, 2025). The case demonstrates how corruption involving multinational business activities can require cooperation among several national jurisdictions.

The importance of international cooperation in asset recovery is also demonstrated by the experience of Diepreye Alamieyeseigha. International cooperation involving Nigerian and foreign law-enforcement authorities contributed to the recovery of assets held in the United Kingdom and other jurisdictions. The World Bank StAR records indicate that approximately US\$17.7 million was recovered through domestic and foreign proceedings in the broader Alamieyeseigha case (World Bank StAR, 2025). Esoimeme (2020) argues that Nigeria's asset-recovery framework would benefit from stronger institutionalisation and from adapting effective practices developed in jurisdictions such as the United Kingdom and the United States. Olujobi (2021) similarly emphasises the importance of legal mechanisms and international assistance in recovering proceeds of corruption held outside Nigeria.

These cases demonstrate that international cooperation can produce tangible anti-corruption outcomes. They also illustrate the relevance of international institutions to the Nigerian anti-corruption process. However, individual cases of successful asset recovery should not be interpreted as evidence that international cooperation has systematically eliminated or substantially reduced corruption in Nigeria. Asset recovery primarily addresses the proceeds of corruption after illicit wealth has been generated. Sustainable anti-corruption governance additionally requires prevention, transparent public administration, effective investigation and prosecution, institutional independence, public accountability, beneficial ownership transparency and credible deterrence.

The distinction between international cooperation as a mechanism and corruption reduction as an outcome is therefore central to this study. International organisations may provide legal frameworks, technical expertise, information networks and institutional support, but the effectiveness of these mechanisms ultimately depends on the capacity and willingness of domestic institutions to implement them. Senu (2020), in examining the implementation of international anti-corruption strategies in sub-Saharan Africa, identifies a persistent gap between international commitments and domestic implementation. Similarly, Jongen (2018) demonstrates that international peer-review mechanisms differ in their ability to induce compliance, while Hafner-Burton and Schneider (2019) caution that international organisations themselves can produce varying anti-corruption outcomes depending on institutional incentives and the characteristics of their membership.

Nigeria's experience therefore provides an important opportunity to examine the practical relationship between international institutions and domestic anti-corruption governance. The study is situated within International Relations because it focuses not simply on corruption as a domestic political problem but on the networks of cooperation through which Nigeria interacts with international organisations and foreign jurisdictions to address corruption.

The central argument emerging from the literature and documentary evidence is that international cooperation has expanded Nigeria's legal, institutional and technical capacity to combat corruption, particularly in relation to asset recovery, financial intelligence, international legal assistance and institutional capacity building. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of these mechanisms remains constrained by domestic institutional weaknesses, limited enforcement capacity, political and bureaucratic challenges, difficulties in obtaining evidence across jurisdictions and the complex legal procedures associated with cross-border asset recovery. The Nigerian case therefore demonstrates both the possibilities and limitations of international institutional cooperation in addressing a problem that operates simultaneously at domestic and international levels.

Statement of the Problem

Nigeria has developed a substantial domestic anti-corruption architecture consisting of institutions such as the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC), Code of Conduct Bureau, Nigerian Financial Intelligence Unit and relevant units within the

Federal Ministry of Justice. Nigeria has also adopted national anti-corruption strategies and legislation designed to prevent and punish corruption.

However, corruption remains persistent. Recent scholarly literature identifies problems involving institutional weakness, political interference, selective enforcement, social norms, weak accountability and inadequate implementation of anti-corruption policies (Ocheje, 2018; Esoimeme, 2020; Omigbodun, 2021; van Duyn & Harvey, 2025). The persistence of corruption raises questions about the capacity of domestic institutions to implement international commitments effectively.

The problem is more complicated when corruption crosses national borders. Nigerian authorities may require foreign evidence, financial intelligence, freezing orders, extradition, confiscation and repatriation assistance. Such processes are affected by differences between legal systems, evidentiary requirements, bureaucratic procedures, diplomatic considerations and the willingness of foreign jurisdictions to cooperate.

Consequently, the existence of international conventions does not automatically translate into effective enforcement. Senu (2020), in a study of Kenya and Nigeria, argues that the implementation of UNCAC and other anti-corruption strategies in sub-Saharan Africa faces substantial institutional and political constraints. Similarly, Hafner-Burton and Schneider (2019) show that international institutions can influence anti-corruption behaviour, but institutional membership and political conditions affect whether international rules produce meaningful results.

The central problem addressed in this study is therefore the gap between international anti-corruption commitments and practical implementation within Nigeria. While international organisations have expanded the rules, institutions and networks available for combating corruption, corruption remains widespread. The study consequently asks whether international cooperation is producing sufficient institutional and enforcement benefits and what factors constrain its effectiveness.

Research Gap

Existing research on corruption in Nigeria has largely concentrated on domestic institutions, political leadership, anti-corruption agencies, legal frameworks, public administration and socio-cultural factors. Ocheje (2018) emphasises the interaction between law, norms and social change; Esoimeme (2020) examines asset tracing and recovery; Olujobi (2021) investigates legal mechanisms for recovering corruption proceeds; and Omigbodun (2021) examines the implementation of SERVICOM as an anti-corruption reform.

Other studies have examined broader international dimensions of corruption. Senu (2020) assesses UNCAC implementation in sub-Saharan Africa, while Jongen (2018) examines the authority of international anti-corruption peer reviews. Hafner-Burton and Schneider (2019) investigate how international organisations can influence corruption among their members. Reinsberg (2020) considers the role of international financial institutions and the possibility that some international policy interventions can produce unintended corruption risks.

Despite these contributions, there remains room for a focused International Relations assessment of the forms, institutional mechanisms and practical limitations of international cooperation in Nigeria's anti-corruption efforts. Much of the Nigerian literature studies domestic institutions independently of the international networks in which they operate. Conversely, much of the international literature analyses international organisations comparatively without examining how their mechanisms operate within Nigeria.

This study addresses that gap by bringing together the domestic and international dimensions. It treats Nigeria's anti-corruption struggle as a form of multi-level governance in which domestic institutions, foreign states and international organisations interact through treaty obligations, peer review, technical assistance, financial intelligence, mutual legal assistance and asset recovery.

Objectives of the Study

The study seeks to:

- i. Examine the nature and forms of international cooperation in combating corruption in Nigeria.
- ii. Assess the role of international organisations in supporting Nigeria's anti-corruption efforts.
- iii. Evaluate the challenges affecting the effectiveness of international cooperation in combating corruption in Nigeria.

Research Hypotheses

The study tests the following hypotheses as documentary propositions:

- H₁:** International cooperation provides significant institutional and legal mechanisms for strengthening Nigeria's capacity to combat corruption.
- H₂:** International organisations contribute positively to Nigeria's anti-corruption efforts through technical assistance, monitoring, capacity building, information sharing and support for asset recovery.
- H₃:** Domestic institutional weaknesses, political interference and cross-border enforcement difficulties significantly constrain the effectiveness of international cooperation in combating corruption in Nigeria.

Because the research relies on documentary evidence rather than a primary survey, these hypotheses are assessed through triangulation of peer-reviewed studies, official datasets, institutional reports and documented international cooperation cases.

Theoretical Framework: Neoliberal Institutionalism

The study is anchored in Neoliberal Institutionalism, particularly the work of Robert O. Keohane. Neoliberal institutionalism argues that although the international system is characterised by anarchy and states remain sovereign actors, international institutions can facilitate cooperation by reducing transaction costs, providing information, creating expectations of reciprocity, monitoring compliance and establishing rules that make cooperation more predictable.

Keohane's institutional approach is particularly useful for analysing corruption because corruption frequently creates collective-action problems that cannot be solved by individual states acting independently. A state may possess the legal authority to prosecute corruption domestically but lack jurisdiction over assets, bank accounts, companies or evidence located abroad. International institutions can help bridge these jurisdictional gaps.

From the neoliberal institutionalist perspective, international organisations perform several functions relevant to anti-corruption cooperation.

First, they provide information. International monitoring and peer-review systems allow states to evaluate one another's compliance with agreed standards.

Second, they establish common rules. UNCAC, regional conventions and anti-money-laundering standards provide common expectations for states.

Third, they reduce transaction costs. Mutual legal assistance networks, financial intelligence cooperation and international asset-recovery mechanisms make it easier for domestic agencies to communicate with foreign counterparts.

Fourth, they facilitate repeated interaction. Repeated engagement among government officials, prosecutors, financial intelligence experts and diplomats can create professional networks that make cooperation more efficient.

Fifth, they increase reputational costs. Peer reviews and international monitoring can make weaknesses in national anti-corruption systems more visible.

The theory does not imply that international organisations automatically produce successful outcomes. Indeed, the literature identifies important qualifications. Jongen (2018) shows that the authority of international peer reviews varies. Hafner-Burton and Schneider (2019) argue that the composition of international organisations can influence whether anti-corruption rules are meaningful or merely symbolic. Reinsberg (2020) similarly demonstrates that international institutions may generate both beneficial and unintended consequences.

This qualification is particularly important in the Nigerian case. International organisations can create opportunities for cooperation, but Nigerian institutions must possess sufficient legal, administrative and political capacity to utilise those opportunities.

Empirical Review

Recent empirical scholarship provides important insights into the relationship between anti-corruption institutions, international cooperation and domestic governance. The literature generally suggests that international norms and institutional mechanisms can strengthen anti-corruption efforts, but their effectiveness depends substantially on domestic institutional capacity, political incentives and the quality of implementation.

Ocheje (2018) examines Nigeria's anti-corruption struggle from the perspectives of law, social norms and institutional change. The study argues that the persistence of corruption cannot be explained solely by deficiencies in formal legislation. Rather, the effectiveness of anti-corruption laws is influenced by prevailing social norms, institutional practices and the broader political environment. This finding is relevant to international cooperation because externally supported legal reforms may have limited effects when domestic institutions and social practices do not sufficiently support their implementation.

Senu (2020) examines the implementation of the United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC) in sub-Saharan Africa, with particular attention to Kenya and Nigeria. The study identifies implementation difficulties associated with maladministration, corruption, nepotism, illicit activities and weaknesses within anti-corruption institutions. The findings demonstrate an important distinction between the adoption of international anti-corruption commitments and their effective implementation at the domestic level. For Nigeria, this distinction is particularly significant because international commitments require effective domestic institutions to translate international standards into practical enforcement.

Jongen (2018) investigates peer review as an instrument of international anti-corruption governance. Drawing on interviews and survey evidence involving officials, the study compares the OECD Working Group on Bribery, the Council of Europe's Group of States against Corruption (GRECO) and the UNCAC Implementation Review Mechanism. The findings indicate that the authority and effectiveness of peer-review mechanisms differ across international institutions and are influenced by institutional design, membership and patterns of participation. The study therefore demonstrates that international monitoring mechanisms do not operate uniformly and that their influence depends partly on the institutional arrangements through which they are implemented.

Hafner-Burton and Schneider (2019) examine the potential unintended consequences of cooperation within international organisations. Their analysis suggests that participation in international organisations does not automatically produce improvements in governance and may, under certain institutional conditions, be associated with adverse outcomes. The study highlights the importance of the characteristics and incentives of member states and demonstrates that international organisations should not be treated as uniformly beneficial mechanisms of governance. This finding is relevant to the Nigerian case because the effectiveness of international anti-corruption cooperation depends not only on formal institutional mandates but also on the willingness and capacity of participating states to implement those commitments.

Reinsberg (2020) examines the relationship between international financial institutions and anti-corruption reforms, with particular attention to the International Monetary Fund. The study indicates that international financial conditionality can create incentives for governance and anti-corruption reforms, while some policy interventions may simultaneously generate opportunities for rent extraction. The findings provide an important qualification to the assumption that external intervention necessarily produces positive governance outcomes. International cooperation can create incentives for institutional reform, but the consequences depend on the design and implementation of the intervention and the domestic political environment in which it operates.

Gans-Morse et al. (2018), through an interdisciplinary review of anti-corruption interventions, examine the evidence concerning the effectiveness of different approaches to reducing corruption. Their review indicates that interventions involving monitoring, audits, transparency mechanisms and electronic governance have comparatively stronger empirical support than several conventional approaches. The authors also caution that anti-corruption agencies, while potentially useful, cannot by themselves resolve systemic corruption. The implication is that effective anti-corruption strategies require complementary institutional mechanisms rather than reliance on a single organisation or intervention.

Anders et al. (2020), in their study of Malawi, examine the relationship between law enforcement and corruption deterrence in a context characterised by institutional constraints. Their findings suggest that credible enforcement can contribute to deterrence even where institutional capacity is limited. Although the study is not directly focused on Nigeria, it provides comparative African evidence that strengthens the argument that international cooperation in investigation, prosecution and legal assistance must ultimately be connected to credible domestic enforcement mechanisms.

Esoimeme (2020) examines Nigeria's asset-tracing and asset-recovery framework and argues that institutionalising asset-recovery procedures and drawing lessons from international experience can strengthen Nigeria's ability to identify and recover proceeds of corruption. The study highlights the importance of developing institutional mechanisms capable of tracing illicit assets across jurisdictions. This is particularly relevant to the present study because stolen assets are frequently transferred outside the country in which the underlying corruption occurred, thereby creating a need for international legal and institutional cooperation.

Olujobi (2021) examines civil forfeiture and the recovery of proceeds of corruption in Nigeria. The study emphasises the importance of legal mechanisms for recovering assets derived from unlawful activities and highlights the relevance of international cooperation and UNCAC provisions on asset recovery. The findings reinforce the argument that the transnational movement of illicit assets creates jurisdictional challenges that cannot be effectively addressed by Nigerian authorities acting independently.

Omigbodun (2021) examines the implementation of Nigeria's SERVICOM reform and draws attention to the gap that may emerge between the intentions of policy designers and actual implementation by public institutions. The study demonstrates the importance of institutional behaviour and bureaucratic practices in determining whether governance reforms achieve their intended objectives. Although the study is not exclusively concerned with international anti-corruption cooperation, its findings are relevant because international development and governance initiatives ultimately require domestic bureaucratic institutions to implement externally supported reforms.

Feil (2021) examines the relationship between corruption and World Bank project performance and demonstrates that corruption can negatively affect the implementation and outcomes of development projects. The study is particularly relevant to the present research because international development cooperation often involves the transfer of financial and technical resources to domestic institutions. Where accountability mechanisms are weak, development resources may be exposed to diversion or inefficient use. Consequently, international development cooperation requires effective domestic transparency, monitoring and accountability mechanisms.

Peiffer et al. (2021) examine anti-bribery interventions in Uganda's health sector and demonstrate the importance of local institutional conditions in determining the effectiveness of anti-corruption interventions. Their findings indicate that interventions designed to discourage bribery cannot be considered independently of the institutional and social environments in which they are implemented. The study provides comparative evidence for understanding why international standards and externally supported anti-corruption programmes may produce different outcomes across domestic contexts.

Lewis (2021), using survey-experimental evidence from five Nigerian states alongside cross-national African data, examines the relationship between corruption perceptions and political protest. The study finds that perceptions of elite corruption are associated with greater support for protest, while perceptions of police corruption do not demonstrate the same relationship. The findings suggest that corruption has consequences that extend beyond financial losses and administrative inefficiency to questions of political legitimacy, public trust and citizen mobilisation. This is relevant to the present study because international anti-corruption cooperation ultimately has implications for the legitimacy and accountability of domestic political institutions.

Taken together, the reviewed studies reveal three major patterns. First, international institutions provide important mechanisms through which states can establish common anti-corruption standards, exchange information, strengthen institutional capacity and facilitate the investigation and recovery of illicit assets. Second, the existence of international rules and commitments does not automatically guarantee effective domestic implementation. Third, domestic institutional quality, enforcement capacity, bureaucratic practices and political incentives significantly influence the outcomes of international anti-corruption interventions.

Despite these contributions, an important gap remains in the literature. Much of the existing research examines particular dimensions of anti-corruption governance, such as legal reform, asset recovery, peer review, development assistance, conditionality or domestic enforcement. Fewer studies bring these dimensions together within an International Relations framework to examine how international organisations contribute to Nigeria's broader anti-corruption efforts and how domestic institutional conditions affect the effectiveness of that cooperation. The present study addresses this gap by examining the nature of international cooperation in combating corruption in Nigeria, assessing the role of international organisations, and analysing the principal challenges that constrain the effectiveness of international anti-corruption cooperation.

Methodology

Research Design

The study adopted a qualitative documentary research design. This approach is appropriate because the research questions concern international cooperation, institutional roles, treaty mechanisms, policy implementation and cross-border enforcement processes. These phenomena can be effectively examined through systematic analysis of legal instruments, institutional reports, peer-reviewed research and documented cases.

The study did not collect primary data from respondents. Accordingly, no questionnaire, interview or field survey was conducted. The empirical findings are based entirely on secondary data.

Sources of Data

The principal secondary sources comprised five categories.

First, the study used peer-reviewed academic literature published between 2016 and 2025. These studies were obtained and cross-checked through publisher platforms and scholarly databases including ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, Wiley Online Library, Cambridge Core, Oxford Academic, Taylor & Francis, SAGE and institutional repositories.

Second, the study used reports from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), particularly the Nigeria corruption surveys.

Third, it used data and publications from the World Bank, especially the Worldwide Governance Indicators and Stolen Asset Recovery Initiative.

Fourth, it examined materials from Transparency International and the Financial Action Task Force (FATF).

Fifth, it used Nigerian governmental publications, including information from the Federal Ministry of Justice concerning the Asset Recovery and Management Unit and implementation of Nigeria's National Anti-Corruption Strategy.

Data Analysis

The study employed qualitative content analysis. Documents were organised according to three analytical categories corresponding to the study objectives:

- i. Forms and mechanisms of international cooperation;
- ii. Roles and contributions of international organisations; and
- iii. Constraints affecting effectiveness.

The evidence was then triangulated across academic literature, international institutional reports and documented cases.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability was enhanced by prioritising peer-reviewed research and official institutional publications. Where numerical data were used, the study relied on original institutional datasets rather than secondary commentary.

Validity was strengthened through source triangulation. For example, claims concerning corruption prevalence were assessed against UNODC/NBS survey evidence, while claims concerning international asset recovery were checked against World Bank StAR records and Nigerian government documentation.

A limitation of documentary research is that institutional reports may reflect the mandates and reporting practices of their respective organisations. The study therefore avoids treating any single institutional measure as a complete representation of corruption in Nigeria.

Results and Discussion

Nature and Forms of International Cooperation in Combating Corruption in Nigeria

Treaty-based cooperation

One of the principal forms of cooperation is treaty-based. UNCAC establishes a global legal framework for preventing and combating corruption and includes provisions concerning international cooperation, mutual legal assistance, extradition and asset recovery.

Nigeria's participation in UNCAC places its domestic anti-corruption framework within an international normative structure. This creates expectations concerning criminalisation, prevention, international cooperation and recovery of illicit assets.

The importance of this framework is illustrated by Senu's (2020) finding that UNCAC provides an important basis for anti-corruption cooperation in sub-Saharan Africa but that implementation remains constrained by domestic political and institutional conditions.

Treaty-based cooperation is therefore best understood as an enabling framework. It establishes legal obligations and procedures, but practical outcomes depend on national institutions.

Mutual legal assistance

Mutual legal assistance (MLA) is particularly important where corruption investigations require evidence located in another jurisdiction. Nigerian investigators may need bank records, corporate ownership information, property documentation, witness testimony or evidence relating to financial transactions outside Nigeria.

International cooperation allows such requests to be transmitted through established legal channels.

The importance of MLA is demonstrated in Nigerian asset-recovery cases documented by the World Bank StAR initiative. The James Ibori case, for example, involved Nigerian requests to the United Kingdom and the application of international cooperation mechanisms including UNCAC and bilateral legal arrangements.

MLA therefore transforms anti-corruption from a purely domestic process into a transnational investigative process.

Extradition and cross-border prosecution

Corruption cases may also involve suspects who are located outside Nigeria. Cooperation among states can facilitate extradition or other mechanisms through which suspects are brought within the jurisdiction of investigating authorities.

However, extradition can be complicated by differences in criminal law, evidentiary standards, citizenship protections, judicial review and political considerations. The existence of an international relationship does not necessarily guarantee immediate extradition.

This demonstrates a wider lesson from neoliberal institutionalism: institutions facilitate cooperation, but they do not eliminate the sovereign interests of states.

Financial intelligence cooperation

Corruption increasingly involves complex financial transactions. International cooperation among financial intelligence units allows suspicious transactions and financial information to be exchanged across borders.

Such cooperation is particularly relevant to anti-money-laundering regimes. The FATF framework has increased the importance of beneficial ownership transparency, suspicious transaction reporting and financial intelligence cooperation.

Nigeria's international anti-money-laundering engagement illustrates the connection between anti-corruption and broader international financial governance. Nigeria was placed under FATF increased monitoring in February 2023 because of identified strategic deficiencies in its anti-money-laundering and counter-terrorist-financing framework. In October 2025, Nigeria was removed from the increased-monitoring list after completing its action plan and making progress in addressing the identified deficiencies.

This episode illustrates how international monitoring can create incentives for domestic institutional reform.

Asset recovery

Asset recovery represents one of the most tangible forms of international cooperation.

The cross-border movement of illicit wealth means that Nigerian agencies cannot recover all stolen assets through domestic action. Cooperation with foreign governments, prosecutors, courts, financial institutions and international organisations is therefore essential.

The World Bank's StAR programme specifically identifies international cooperation as essential to recovering assets hidden abroad. It notes that corruption cases may involve multiple jurisdictions, requiring formal and informal information exchange, mutual legal assistance and cooperation among asset-recovery networks.

Nigeria has recorded several documented asset recoveries through such processes.

Table 1

Principal Forms of International Cooperation in Nigeria's Anti-Corruption Efforts

Form of cooperation	Principal mechanism	Relevance to Nigeria
Treaty cooperation	UNCAC and regional conventions	Establishes common legal obligations
Mutual legal assistance	Formal requests between states	Obtaining foreign evidence
Extradition	Bilateral/multilateral arrangements	Bringing suspects within jurisdiction
Financial intelligence	FIU-to-FIU cooperation	Tracking suspicious financial flows
Asset recovery	Freezing, confiscation and repatriation	Recovering proceeds of corruption
Peer review	UNCAC review and related mechanisms	Monitoring implementation
Technical assistance	Training and institutional support	Building domestic capacity
Anti-money-laundering cooperation	FATF-related standards	Strengthening financial controls
Information exchange	Police, prosecutors and regulators	Supporting investigations

Source: Author's synthesis from Jongen (2018), Senu (2020), World Bank STAR, UNODC and FATF materials.

The table demonstrates that international cooperation is multidimensional. It does not consist simply of international organisations giving assistance to Nigeria. Rather, it involves a network of relationships among states, international organisations, financial institutions, law-enforcement agencies, prosecutors and regulatory authorities.

Role of International Organisations in Supporting Nigeria's Anti-Corruption Efforts

The United Nations and UNODC

The United Nations, principally through UNODC, plays a major normative and technical role.

The first major contribution is the development and implementation of UNCAC. Through the Convention, corruption is framed as an international governance issue requiring cooperation among states.

The second contribution is monitoring and review. UNCAC's Implementation Review Mechanism allows states to examine implementation and identify weaknesses.

Jongen (2018) demonstrates the importance of peer review as an instrument of international anti-corruption governance. Peer review provides a mechanism for identifying weaknesses even though its authority varies among institutions.

The third contribution is data generation. UNODC's Nigeria corruption surveys have generated systematic information about citizens' experiences with bribery. The 2023 survey involved 33,035 interviews with adults across Nigeria's 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory and provides important empirical evidence on citizens' experiences of bribery in Nigeria.

The survey's findings are important because they distinguish between perceptions and direct experiences. In 2023, 27% of citizens who had contact with public officials reported paying a bribe, while 34% either paid or were asked to pay and refused.

Table 2

Selected Indicators from the UNODC/NBS Nigeria Corruption Surveys

Indicator	2016	2019	2023
Bribery-payment prevalence	31%	29%	27%
Bribery involving payment or refusal	32.3%	30.2%	34%*
Approximate survey scale	Large national survey	Large national survey	33,035 households
Average number of bribes per bribe-payer	5.8	6.0	5.1

The 2023 figure incorporates requests that were refused and is therefore not directly comparable with the payment-only figures for earlier surveys.

Source: UNODC/NBS corruption surveys.

The table demonstrates an important methodological point. It would be misleading to state simply that corruption increased from 30.2% to 34% because the 2023 measure incorporates refused requests while the earlier comparable payment-only measure was 29%. The evidence instead suggests that experienced bribery remains persistent, with only modest changes.

The World Bank

The World Bank contributes through development financing, institutional reform, governance assistance and the StAR initiative.

StAR is particularly relevant because asset recovery requires cooperation among governments and jurisdictions. The initiative provides technical assistance, facilitates international networks and documents cases.

Nigeria's participation in the Global Forum on Asset Recovery also demonstrates the importance of international institutional platforms. The forum brought together jurisdictions, international organisations, civil society and practitioners to facilitate cooperation on asset recovery. The World Bank reports that the initiative generated numerous bilateral and multi-jurisdictional meetings concerning asset-recovery cases involving Nigeria and other focus countries.

The World Bank's governance indicators also provide comparative evidence concerning Nigeria's institutional environment. The 2024 Control of Corruption score of approximately 21.4/100 suggests that Nigeria continues to face significant governance challenges.

However, the World Bank's contribution should not be interpreted as direct evidence that its interventions caused changes in Nigeria's corruption levels. Governance indicators are perception-based and reflect multiple data sources. Similarly, World Bank interventions cover a wide range of sectors and cannot all be classified as anti-corruption programmes.

Financial Action Task Force

FATF contributes to the international anti-corruption environment through anti-money-laundering and counter-terrorist-financing standards.

Its importance derives from the fact that corruption proceeds frequently require laundering. Consequently, anti-money-laundering controls can assist in detecting and disrupting illicit financial flows.

Nigeria's period of increased monitoring demonstrates the use of international standards as a mechanism of pressure and reform. Nigeria was listed under increased monitoring in February 2025 but removed in October 2025 after addressing identified strategic deficiencies.

The implication is that international organisations can provide external incentives for institutional reform. Nevertheless, successful implementation ultimately requires Nigerian institutions to maintain the reforms after external monitoring diminishes.

African Union

The African Union provides the continental framework for anti-corruption cooperation through the African Union Convention on Preventing and Combating Corruption and related governance instruments.

The African regional framework is significant because corruption in Nigeria is not only a global issue but also a regional issue. Illicit financial flows, cross-border crime, money laundering and asset concealment can involve neighbouring states and wider African financial networks.

Regional institutions can therefore complement global institutions by creating geographically closer networks for information exchange and law-enforcement cooperation.

International organisations as capacity builders

International organisations also contribute through training, technical assistance and institutional development.

Gans-Morse et al. (2018) demonstrate that monitoring, audits and e-governance have stronger evidence of effectiveness than many traditional anti-corruption approaches. This supports the argument that international technical assistance should focus not only on laws but also on the operational capacity of domestic institutions.

Technical assistance may include training investigators, prosecutors and financial intelligence officers; developing data systems; improving procurement monitoring; strengthening beneficial ownership systems; and supporting asset-tracing capabilities.

Evidence of Tangible International Cooperation: Asset Recovery

Some of the clearest documentary evidence of international cooperation can be found in asset-recovery cases.

Abacha assets

The World Bank StAR database records the return of approximately US\$311.8 million associated with the Abacha case in February 2020. The recovery involved the United States, Jersey and Nigeria and was linked to UNCAC Article 57(5). The agreement incorporated transparency and accountability arrangements for the management of returned funds.

The case demonstrates several dimensions of international cooperation:

- i. identification and tracing of assets;
- ii. freezing and confiscation in foreign jurisdictions;
- iii. negotiation among governments;
- iv. legal arrangements for repatriation;
- v. monitoring of returned funds.

This is important because asset recovery is not simply an enforcement exercise. It also involves diplomatic negotiation and international governance.

Technip-NLNG case

The World Bank's Asset Recovery Watch records approximately US\$30 million returned to Nigeria in connection with the Technip-NLNG bribery case. The case involved cooperation among Nigeria, France and the United States, with the United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC) identified as a legal basis for international cooperation. The case illustrates how corruption involving multinational corporations can require cooperation among several national jurisdictions. It also demonstrates the practical importance of international legal and institutional mechanisms in tracing and recovering proceeds associated with cross-border corruption.

This illustrates how corruption involving multinational corporations can require cooperation among several jurisdictions.

Siemens case

The Siemens telecommunications bribery case provides another example. The World Bank records approximately €30 million returned in connection with the case, involving Germany and Nigeria. The record identifies cooperation between authorities and parallel investigative processes as important factors.

Table 3

Illustrative Nigerian International Asset-Recovery Cases

Case	Foreign jurisdiction(s)	Approximate recovered/returned amount	Cooperation mechanism
Abacha-related recovery	United States/Jersey	US\$311.8 million	UNCAC; confiscation; negotiated return
Technip-NLNG	France/United States	US\$30 million	UNCAC; international cooperation
Siemens	Germany	€30 million	Cross-border investigative cooperation
Alamieyeseigha	United Kingdom	About US\$5.0 million	MLA; UNCAC; bilateral cooperation

Source: World Bank StAR Asset Recovery Watch.

These cases provide strong evidence in support of the argument that international cooperation can generate tangible anti-corruption outcomes. However, they should not be interpreted as evidence that international cooperation has solved Nigeria's corruption problem. Rather, they demonstrate the capacity of international institutions and interstate mechanisms to address particular dimensions of corruption, especially the recovery of assets held abroad.

Assessment of the Effectiveness of International Cooperation

The evidence suggests a mixed picture.

On one hand, international cooperation has clearly expanded Nigeria's capacity. Nigeria possesses access to international legal frameworks, financial intelligence networks, asset-recovery mechanisms, peer-review processes and technical assistance.

On the other hand, the continuing prevalence of corruption suggests that these mechanisms have not yet produced systemic transformation.

Transparency International's 2024 CPI gave Nigeria a score of 26/100 and ranked it 140th of 180 countries at the time; its 2025 CPI maintained the score at 26 and placed Nigeria 142nd of 182 countries.

The World Bank's 2024 Control of Corruption score similarly remained low at approximately 21.4/100.

These indicators do not establish causation. They cannot demonstrate that international cooperation failed because they measure broader perceptions of public-sector corruption rather than the effectiveness of particular international programmes. However, they do show that the existence of international cooperation has not been accompanied by a clear, broad transformation in perceptions of public-sector corruption.

The UNODC/NBS data provide a more direct experience-based perspective. The reduction in bribery-payment prevalence from 29% in 2019 to 27% in 2023 is statistically significant according to UNODC but modest.

Therefore, the evidence supports a qualified effectiveness argument: international cooperation has been effective in creating mechanisms, building capacity and producing individual enforcement outcomes, but its ability to generate system-wide reductions in corruption is constrained by domestic institutional and political conditions.

Challenges Affecting the Effectiveness of International Cooperation

Weak domestic institutions

International organisations depend heavily on domestic institutions for implementation. If domestic agencies lack resources, autonomy, data systems or professional capacity, international cooperation may produce limited results.

Ocheje (2018) argues that Nigeria's anti-corruption challenge is embedded in institutional and social environments that cannot be transformed merely by passing laws.

This supports the theoretical proposition that international institutions facilitate cooperation but do not substitute for domestic state capacity.

Political interference

Political influence over anti-corruption enforcement can reduce credibility. Studies of Nigeria's anti-corruption policies have identified concerns regarding selective enforcement and institutional interference (Esoimeme, 2020; Omigbodun, 2021).

This matters for international cooperation because foreign jurisdictions may be reluctant to devote substantial resources to Nigerian requests if domestic investigations are perceived as politically motivated or inadequately supported by credible prosecutorial processes.

Fragmented institutional coordination

Nigeria has multiple agencies involved in corruption control, financial intelligence, prosecution, asset recovery and public accountability.

Fragmentation can create overlapping responsibilities and information gaps. International partners may consequently be required to communicate with multiple Nigerian institutions, increasing transaction costs.

The Federal Ministry of Justice's Asset Recovery and Management Unit (ARMU) was established in 2017 to facilitate domestic and international asset recovery and coordinate implementation of relevant asset-recovery legislation. Its mandate demonstrates recognition of the need for institutional coordination.

Differences in legal systems

Cross-border investigations are complicated by differences in criminal procedure, evidence rules, confiscation regimes and judicial requirements.

An action that is legally sufficient in Nigeria may not satisfy the requirements of a foreign court. Likewise, a foreign jurisdiction may require detailed evidence before freezing or confiscating assets.

Such differences can make MLA and asset recovery lengthy.

Beneficial ownership opacity

Modern corruption frequently involves corporate structures and intermediaries. Identifying the beneficial owner of a company or property can be difficult when ownership structures span several jurisdictions.

International cooperation is therefore increasingly dependent on accurate beneficial ownership information.

Limited domestic data

A significant obstacle to assessing anti-corruption performance is the quality and consistency of institutional data.

Van Duyne and Harvey (2025) note that Nigeria lacks a fully integrated empirical database capable of providing consistent cross-agency comparisons of corruption cases.

Without reliable administrative data, it becomes difficult to measure whether international cooperation has improved investigation, prosecution, conviction, asset recovery or prevention.

Enforcement versus prevention

International cooperation has often been particularly visible in enforcement and asset recovery. However, corruption prevention requires longer-term institutional reforms involving procurement, public finance, civil service recruitment, political financing, beneficial ownership and transparency.

Gans-Morse et al. (2018) caution against relying exclusively on individual-level enforcement in systemic corruption environments.

This suggests that international cooperation should be broadened beyond recovering stolen assets to preventing the creation and movement of illicit wealth.

Hypotheses Assessment

Hypothesis One

H1: International cooperation provides significant institutional and legal mechanisms for strengthening Nigeria's capacity to combat corruption.

The evidence supports H1.

UNCAC provides a framework for international cooperation, while mutual legal assistance, extradition, financial intelligence exchange, peer review and asset-recovery mechanisms provide operational channels. Nigeria's participation in international asset-recovery processes demonstrates that these mechanisms have practical value.

The evidence from the Abacha, Technip-NLNG, Siemens and Alamiyeseigha cases confirms that international mechanisms have facilitated actual recovery and enforcement outcomes.

Assessment: The documentary evidence supports H1.

Hypothesis Two

H2: International organisations contribute positively to Nigeria's anti-corruption efforts through technical assistance, monitoring, capacity building, information sharing and support for asset recovery.

H2 is also supported, subject to qualification.

UNODC provides research, survey evidence, technical assistance and UNCAC-related mechanisms. The World Bank supports asset recovery and governance initiatives. FATF provides international standards and monitoring for anti-money-laundering systems. The AU provides regional normative and institutional frameworks.

The 33,035-household UNODC/NBS survey is particularly significant because it provides empirical information that can be used by Nigerian authorities and international partners to identify areas of corruption vulnerability.

However, the existence of international assistance does not establish that every programme produces a measurable reduction in corruption.

Assessment: The documentary evidence provides qualified support for H2, with the effectiveness of international assistance conditioned by domestic implementation.

Hypothesis Three

H3: Domestic institutional weaknesses, political interference and cross-border enforcement difficulties significantly constrain the effectiveness of international cooperation in combating corruption in Nigeria.

H3 is supported.

The literature identifies weaknesses in domestic implementation and institutional capacity, while the asset-recovery literature demonstrates the procedural complexity of cross-border enforcement (Ocheje, 2018; Senu, 2020; Olujobi, 2021).

The persistence of corruption indicators despite extensive cooperation further supports the argument that international mechanisms cannot compensate fully for domestic institutional weaknesses.

Assessment: The documentary evidence supports H3, particularly in relation to domestic institutional weaknesses and the procedural difficulties associated with cross-border enforcement.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

This study examined international cooperation and the fight against corruption in Nigeria from an International Relations perspective. It focused on the nature of international cooperation, the role of international organisations and the challenges that limit effectiveness.

The first major finding is that international cooperation in Nigeria's anti-corruption efforts takes multiple forms. These include treaty obligations, mutual legal assistance, extradition, financial intelligence exchange, technical assistance, peer review, anti-money-laundering cooperation and international asset recovery. International cooperation has therefore moved beyond diplomatic declarations to include practical investigative and legal mechanisms.

Second, international organisations play important supporting roles. UNODC provides normative, monitoring, research and technical assistance functions through the UNCAC framework and national corruption surveys. The World Bank contributes through governance programmes and the StAR initiative. FATF contributes international

standards and monitoring concerning money laundering and illicit financial flows, while the African Union provides a regional normative framework.

Third, international cooperation has produced tangible results, especially in asset recovery. The documented return of approximately US\$311.8 million in the Abacha-related process and other recoveries associated with the Technip-NLNG, Siemens and Alamiyeseigha cases demonstrate that international cooperation can translate into concrete outcomes.

Fourth, the evidence does not support the conclusion that international cooperation has, by itself, transformed Nigeria's corruption environment. Nigeria's 2023 corruption survey continued to record substantial bribery prevalence, while international perception indicators remained low.

The central conclusion is therefore that international cooperation is necessary but insufficient. Its effectiveness depends on the strength, independence, coordination and credibility of Nigerian institutions.

Theoretical Contribution

The study contributes to neoliberal institutionalism by demonstrating that international institutions can facilitate cooperation in an area where individual states face serious jurisdictional and information constraints.

However, the Nigerian case also demonstrates an important limitation of institutionalist expectations: international institutions can reduce transaction costs, provide information and establish rules, but they cannot automatically overcome domestic political incentives or institutional weakness.

The study therefore proposes a domestic-implementation condition to the application of neoliberal institutionalism to anti-corruption cooperation. International institutional capacity produces stronger outcomes where domestic agencies possess sufficient autonomy, resources, coordination and political support.

Policy Recommendations

- i. The Federal Government should strengthen the autonomy and professional capacity of anti-corruption and financial intelligence institutions. International cooperation should be supported by predictable domestic funding, professional recruitment and transparent performance standards.
- ii. The Ministry should strengthen the institutional coordination of mutual legal assistance and asset recovery. A centralised digital case-management platform should enable authorised Nigerian agencies to track international requests from initiation through response and conclusion.
- iii. The anti-corruption agencies should establish specialised international cooperation units staffed by investigators, prosecutors, financial analysts and legal experts capable of handling cross-border cases.
- iv. The NFIU should deepen cooperation with foreign financial intelligence units and strengthen systems for timely exchange of financial information consistent with applicable legal standards.
- v. UNODC, World Bank, FATF, AU and other international partners should place greater emphasis on long-term institutional capacity rather than short-term project outputs. Technical assistance should include measurable indicators relating to investigation quality, prosecution, conviction, asset recovery and prevention.
- vi. Foreign jurisdictions holding Nigerian illicit assets should simplify and accelerate lawful procedures for freezing, confiscation and repatriation while maintaining due-process safeguards.
- vii. Nigeria should strengthen beneficial ownership transparency and ensure that relevant corporate ownership information is accessible to authorised investigative and regulatory institutions.
- viii. Recovered assets should be managed through transparent mechanisms that enable citizens and oversight institutions to determine how returned funds are used. The accountability arrangements associated with the Abacha-related recovery demonstrate the value of independent monitoring.

- ix. International and domestic anti-corruption initiatives should support investigative journalism, civil society monitoring and public access to government information. External assistance should strengthen rather than substitute for domestic accountability institutions.
- x. Nigeria should develop a harmonised national anti-corruption database integrating information from the EFCC, ICPC, NFIU, Federal Ministry of Justice and other relevant institutions. This would make it easier to measure whether international cooperation results in increased investigations, prosecutions, convictions, asset recovery and prevention.

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