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Impunity and citizen participation in the fight against corruption: a systematic review

Impunidad y participación ciudadana en la lucha anticorrupción: una revisión sistemática

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Abstract

The research analyzed how the perception of impunity affects citizen participation in anti-corruption initiatives, with a focus on the context of Peru and Latin America. A qualitative approach was used through a systematic review of the literature based on PRISMA 2020, which examined 20 studies published between 2019 and 2025 in databases such as SciELO, Scopus, and Dialnet. The results show that the perception of impunity has a paralyzing effect on citizens, discouraging them from reporting corruption and collaborating in anti-corruption projects because they consider them ineffective. This perception has multiple causes and stems from institutional deficiencies, the social normalization of corruption, the lack of protection for whistleblowers, the political co-optation of participatory spaces, and systemic violence against activists and journalists. It is concluded that citizen inaction does not represent apathy, but rather a logical response to a rule of law that is perceived as ineffective. This creates a vicious circle where impunity fuels mistrust and the absence of social oversight perpetuates corruption. Therefore, citizen participation is not a cause, but a consequence of a judicial system capable of effectively punishing and generating public trust.

Keywords: impunity, citizen participation, corruption.

Resumen

La investigación analizó cómo la percepción de impunidad afecta la participación ciudadana en iniciativas anticorrupción, con un enfoque en el contexto de Perú y América Latina. Se empleó un enfoque cualitativo mediante una revisión sistemática de la literatura basada en PRISMA 2020, que examinó 20 estudios publicados entre 2019 y 2025 en bases de datos como SciELO, Scopus y Dialnet. Los resultados evidencian que la percepción de impunidad ejerce un efecto paralizante sobre la ciudadanía, desmotivando la denuncia y la colaboración en proyectos anticorrupción al considerarlos ineficaces. Esta percepción es multicausal y se origina en deficiencias institucionales, la normalización social de la corrupción, la falta de protección para denunciantes, la cooptación política de espacios participativos y la violencia sistémica contra activistas y periodistas. Se concluye que la inacción ciudadana no representa apatía, sino una respuesta lógica frente a un Estado de derecho percibido como ineficaz. Esto genera un círculo vicioso donde la impunidad alimenta la desconfianza y la ausencia de vigilancia social perpetúa la corrupción. Por tanto, la participación ciudadana no es una causa, sino una consecuencia de un sistema judicial capaz de sancionar de manera eficaz y generar confianza pública.

Palabras clave: impunidad, participación ciudadana, corrupción.

Introduction

In accordance with Objective 16.3 of the United Nations 2030 Agenda, which aims to ensure access to justice, impunity represents a critical barrier to sustainable development and the strengthening of the rule of law. The Global Impunity Index (GII) 2020, prepared by the Universidad de las Américas Puebla, highlights its close relationship with corruption and inequality, as well as the importance of citizen participation and organizations in its prevention (Alda et al., 2021). Furthermore, the 2024 Corruption Perceptions Index from Transparency International, published in February 2025, indicates that widespread corruption fuels impunity and undermines human rights. According to the organization, the global average score has remained at 43 points over the last twelve years, reflecting a lack of significant advancements. Additionally, it annually recognizes individuals who combat impunity and promote transparency.

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In Latin America, corruption and impunity are deeply interconnected, eroding public trust and inhibiting institutional progress. This phenomenon is associated with structural weaknesses that affect the rule of law. Aguirre and Cupa (2025) emphasize that the 2020-2025 diagnosis from the Inter-American Association of Accountancy points to accountability, transparency, and citizen engagement as pillars for preventing corruption, particularly in contexts where weakened judicial systems facilitate high levels of impunity. In 2023, the Citizen Observatory on Corruption initiated its second phase to foster transparency and participation through research and training. Concurrently, Transparencia por Colombia introduced the Anti-Corruption Citizen Agendas in 2024 as local initiatives aimed at improving public management.

The Due Process of Law Foundation (DPLF), in a June 2025 article, asserts that corruption undermines fundamental rights and exacerbates inequalities. In Peru, impunity persists and is evident in the most notorious cases of corruption. The 2025 World Report from Human Rights Watch warns that Congress has promoted laws that compromise judicial independence and restrict investigations, thereby reinforcing impunity (Guillén et al., 2025). The Effective Collaboration Law, implemented in December 2023, represents a significant shift for anti-corruption investigations.

According to an article by LP Derecho (2024), corruption in Peru is linked to the absence of an ethical culture, institutional weaknesses, and a limited culture of reporting. The Corruption Perceptions Index 2023 confirms the deterioration of the situation, underscoring the crucial role of citizens and the media in comprehensive anti-corruption policies. Since 2019, corruption has been perceived as the primary national issue, even surpassing crime (Villanueva, 2025). Numerous cases of collusion and embezzlement are archived, creating a "lenient criminal law" for the corrupt. Peru, as a member of the Open Government Partnership (OGP), maintains international commitments to combat corruption and promote transparency.

Impunity is defined as the absence of penalties for those who commit crimes or violate human rights, allowing them to act without consequences. This generates cycles of violence, institutional distrust, and the weakening of the rule of law (García, 2022). Citizen participation in the fight against corruption involves active oversight, reporting, and cooperation with institutions, as well as the promotion of transparency practices. Its significance lies in strengthening democracy, enhancing accountability, and empowering the populace to build more responsible institutions.

González (2021) analyzes citizen participation as an effective tool for reporting and monitoring in Latin America, while Corral (2020) demonstrates its influence on anti-corruption policies in Mexico, emphasizing the need for collaboration between citizens and authorities. In this context, the central question arises: how does the perception of impunity affect citizen participation in anti-corruption initiatives? This study explores that relationship, identifies the factors that shape the perception of impunity, and evaluates the effectiveness of current initiatives to propose recommendations that enhance social engagement and improve perceptions of justice.

Corruption and impunity pose persistent challenges that threaten sustainable development and institutional legitimacy. The perception of impunity discourages citizen participation and perpetuates a vicious cycle of corruption and lack of accountability. Therefore, this study is relevant for understanding how this perception conditions citizens' willingness to engage in the anti-corruption struggle and for formulating guidelines that promote greater transparency and a more trustworthy institutional environment.

The primary objective is to analyze how the perception of impunity affects citizen participation in anti-corruption initiatives. A specific goal is to identify the factors motivating this perception among citizens. This analysis is crucial since corruption undermines institutional credibility, weakens the democratic system, and diminishes public trust.

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative approach aimed at analyzing the relationship between the perception of impunity and citizen participation in anti-corruption activities within the Peruvian context.

Research design

The design is based on a systematic literature review following the guidelines of the PRISMA 2020 model, selected to ensure transparency and methodological rigor (Page et al., 2021). A critical review of bibliographic and documentary sources was conducted, emphasizing indexed scientific articles, reports from non-governmental organizations, documents from international bodies, official documents from the Peruvian government, and specialized academic literature. The main sources consulted included Google Scholar, Dialnet, Scopus, and SciELO.

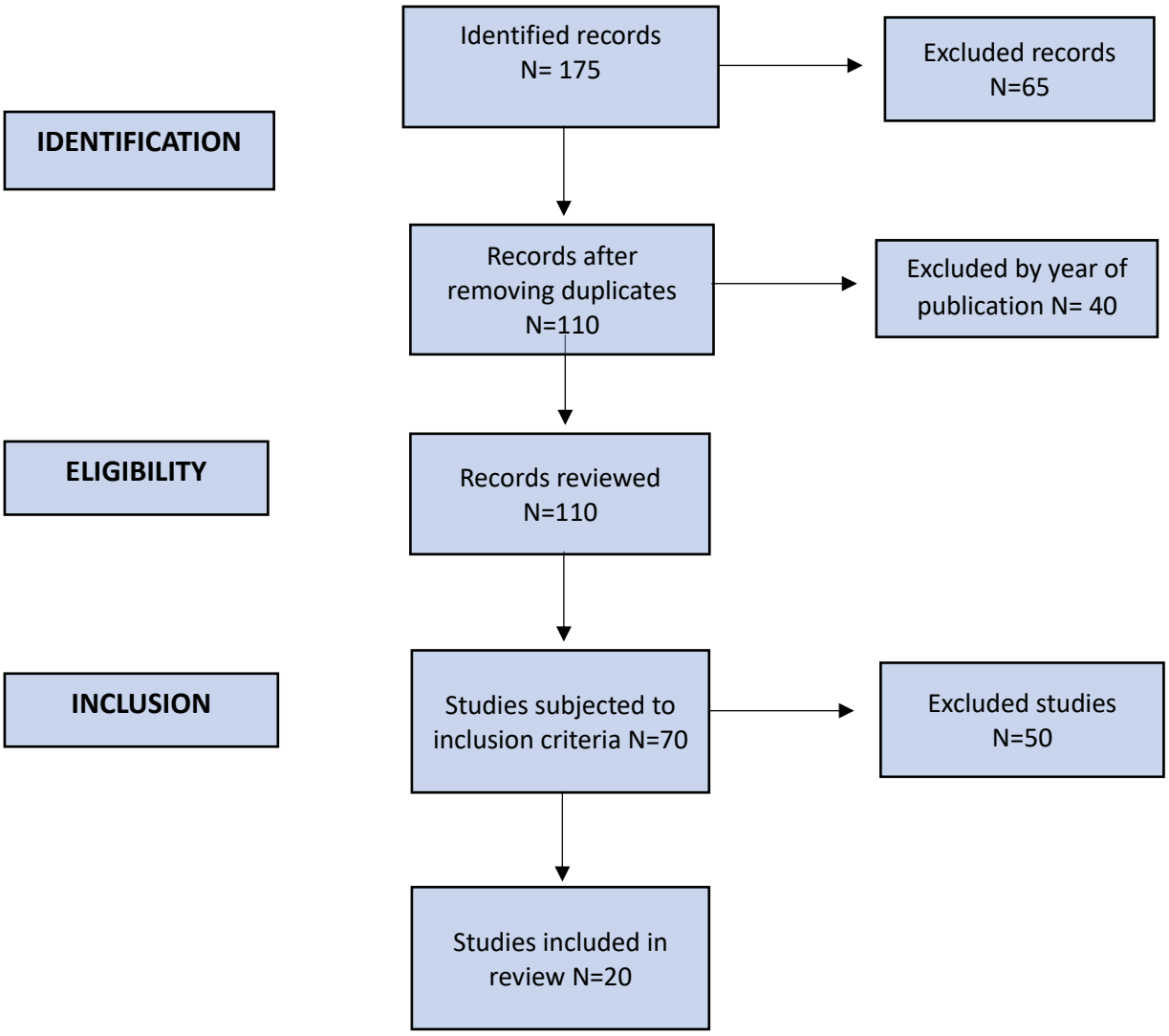
The review process was structured according to the work plan proposed by Garrard (2017). In the first phase, a comprehensive search was conducted in the selected databases. To ensure the coverage of relevant

information, a search equation constructed with Boolean operators (OR, AND) and keywords derived from the research question was employed: (“no punishment” OR “no sanction” OR “impunity”) AND (“Peru”) AND (“corruption” OR “anti-corruption”) AND (“social oversight” OR “citizen perspective” OR “civil action”). Additionally, further combinations were used to broaden the search scope, such as (“Peru” AND “fight against corruption” AND “idea of impunity”).

In the second phase, inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied to select pertinent, recent, and high-quality articles. Studies published between 2019 and 2025, in either Spanish or English, were considered, while those over ten years old or not directly addressing the study topic were excluded. This procedure ensured the relevance and currency of the reviewed literature. A total of 175 relevant articles were identified and analyzed in depth.

Figure 1

Flowchart of the article selection process according to the PRISMA method



Results

Table 1

Database of articles cited and referenced by year

No.	Author(s)	Year	Country	Objective	Sample	Results
1	Uribe, M. V.	2021	Colombia	Enumerate and analyze the multiple causes of impunity to propose a strategy.	Reflection and case analysis	Impunity arises from a combination of institutional failures and social factors that normalize it.
2	Bergman, M.	2022	Latin America	Analyze the connection between security, corruption, and impunity.	Qualitative analysis of reports and social data	The perception of impunity leads citizens to cease reporting and resolve conflicts outside the law, undermining formal participation.
3	Mexicanos Contra la Corrupción y la Impunidad & Reforma	2022	Mexico	Explore narratives and justifications for citizen apathy towards corruption.	National survey with qualitative analysis	Personal experiences with corruption and impunity shape the willingness to participate or resign.
4	Valle-Ríos, R.	2023	Mexico	Analyze the institutional and social factors generating corruption.	Qualitative analysis of institutional factors	The lack of incentives and protection for whistleblowers demotivates participation and reinforces the perception that corruption has no consequences.
5	Comité de Participación Ciudadana (Interview with Mariclaire Acosta)	2019	Mexico	Gather expert perspective on priorities in the anti-corruption fight.	Key expert interview	The priority must be to combat impunity, as society perceives that without punishment, corrupt behaviors will continue, justifying apathy.
6	Fundación del Debido Proceso	2020	Latin America	Analyze the obstacles that civil society faces in the fight against corruption.	Compilation of experiences and expert analysis	Procedural obstacles impede effective civil society participation, fueling the perception of exclusion.
7	Altamirano Castro, M. A.	2022	Mexico	Analyze the incidence and limitations of citizen participation in the National Anti-Corruption System.	Analysis of Committee designs	Despite the existence of committees, the perception of impunity persists due to structural limitations, reducing their effectiveness.
8	Muñoz, P., & Tuesta, F.	2024	Peru	Propose conditions for fighting corruption.	Expert and citizen diagnosis	There exists a "culture parallel to the legal system that hinders its compliance," describing structural impunity and

						proposing the strengthening of civic oversight.
9	Cancimance, A.	2020	Colombia	Analyze youth perceptions of corruption and citizen participation.	Focus groups and interviews in Mocoa	Youth perceive corruption as a closed clientelist system, generating apathy and distrust in formal mechanisms.
10	Curi, W. & Velásquez, A.	2021	Peru	Determine the influence of corruption perception on citizen participation.	Interviews with citizens and leaders in Huamanga	A high perception of corruption correlates with low willingness to participate in public hearings, viewing them as a mere simulation.
11	Open Society Justice Initiative	2021	Guatemala	Document the process of dismantling the anti-corruption fight.	Case studies and in-depth interviews	The report reveals a coordinated strategy to reverse anti-corruption advances, generating a climate of fear that paralyzes participation and reporting.
12	Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica	2022	Colombia	Analyze narratives of violence against journalists.	Analysis of life stories and testimonies	Violence aims to eliminate a form of social oversight; impunity ensures that networks of corruption remain uninvestigated, affecting the right to information.
13	Tórrez, F.	2022	Bolivia	Analyze tensions within social control organizations.	Case study based on interviews	Many social control instances are co-opted by political power, generating disillusionment and apathy among citizens.
14	Palacio Quejada, A.	2023	Colombia	Analyze perceptions of political corruption among university students.	Survey of 586 undergraduate students	Youth express interest in politics and reject corruption, displaying orientations between conformism and desire for renewal, indicating tension between apathy and action.
15	Jaramillo, C.	2025	Latin America (Peru)	Analyze the normalization of political violence and impunity.	Qualitative analysis of repression cases	The systematic denial of state violence discourages protest and participation, considering them dangerous and futile.
16	Johnson, M. & Carter, S.	2022	South Africa	Examine the role of community participation in the	Interviews with community leaders	Community participation enhances transparency.

				fight against corruption.		
17	Alvarado Mendoza, A.	2023	Mexico	Analyze the challenges of the citizen participation committee.	Case study	Identification of challenges in the implementation of anti-corruption initiatives.
18	Arévalo Bencardino, J., García Albarracín, A., & Ortiz Escobar, D.	2021	Colombia	Analyze the relationship between corruption, transparency, and political participation.	Surveys of citizens	Corruption diminishes trust in institutions.
19	Nguyen, T. & Tran, L.	2022	Vietnam	Explore perceptions of impunity and their effect on political participation.	Focus groups	The perception of impunity reduces citizen participation.
20	Ortiz Monasterio, L., & Laris García, M.	2020	Mexico	Analyze the impact of corruption perception on trust in institutions.	Analysis of surveys and political speeches	Distrust in institutions, fueled by perceptions of corruption and power-based rhetoric, corrodes their functioning and citizen willingness to engage, such as reporting crimes.

The literature analysis, comprising twenty studies conducted in Latin America and Spain between 2019 and 2025, presents results corresponding to the general and specific objectives of the research.

1. Results related to the general objective

The studies agree that the perception of impunity generates a paralyzing effect on citizen participation. This perception discourages the filing of complaints and collaboration in anti-corruption initiatives due to the belief that there will be no repercussions for those responsible for corrupt acts (Uribe, 2021; Bergman, 2022; Mexicanos Contra la Corrupción y la Impunidad & Reforma, 2022; Valle-Ríos, 2023). The persistence of impunity is sustained by institutional and social deficiencies that normalize corruption and the absence of punishment (Uribe, 2021; Muñoz & Tuesta, 2024).

Moreover, the perception of impunity fosters citizen disinterest, which reduces the likelihood of formal complaints and encourages conflict resolution outside the legal framework, adversely affecting traditional forms of participation (Bergman, 2022; Jaramillo, 2025). In contexts where impunity prevails, participation in official mechanisms—such as public forums or anti-corruption collectives—is limited, as these spaces are perceived as simulations or ineffective initiatives (Curi & Velásquez, 2021; Altamirano Castro, 2022). The lack of trust in state institutions, associated with perceptions of corruption and impunity, weakens citizen willingness to engage in actions against corruption (Ortiz Monasterio & Laris García, 2020; Arévalo Bencardino et al., 2021).

2. Results related to the specific objective

a) Institutional deficiencies. Various studies highlight that slow judicial processes, the scarcity of effective sanctions, and legal obstacles to pursuing corruption cases reinforce the perception of impunity (Uribe, 2021; Fundación del Debido Proceso, 2020; Valle-Ríos, 2023).

b) Social and cultural factors: Social acceptance of corruption and the existence of an "alternative culture" that relativizes adherence to the law contribute to consolidating the perception of impunity (Uribe, 2021; Muñoz & Tuesta, 2024).

c) Lack of incentives and protection: The absence of guarantees for whistleblowers, activists, and journalists creates fear and demotivation, strengthening the belief that reporting is futile or risky (Valle-Ríos, 2023; Comité de Participación Ciudadana, 2019; Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2022).

d) Personal experiences: Direct contact with corruption and the lack of justice produce feelings of resignation and indifference towards social oversight (Mexicanos Contra la Corrupción y la Impunidad & Reforma, 2022; Cancimance, 2020).

e) Cooptation and disillusionment: The influence of political groups in oversight bodies and the manipulation of anti-corruption initiatives generate distrust and citizen disinterest (Torres, 2022; Altamirano Castro, 2022).

f) Violence and repression: Aggressions against journalists and anti-corruption defenders, along with the impunity surrounding these attacks, limit public participation and reporting (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2022; Jaramillo, 2025; Open Society Justice Initiative, 2021).

g) Political discourse and climate of fear: Narratives that aim to delegitimize complaints or hinder anti-corruption advances create a hostile environment that inhibits citizen participation (Open Society Justice Initiative, 2021; Ortiz Monasterio & Laris García, 2020).

Synthesis of results

The perception of impunity is constructed from a complex web of institutional deficiencies, social and cultural factors, individual experiences, and dynamics of violence that together discourage citizen involvement in the fight against corruption. Without effective state action to reduce impunity, ensure protection, and promote incentives for reporting, citizen participation will continue to be limited, perpetuating the cycle of corruption and distrust in democratic institutions.

Discussion

This research aimed to analyze how the perception of impunity affects citizen participation in anti-corruption initiatives, utilizing a systematic literature review primarily focused on the Latin American and Peruvian contexts. The results convincingly corroborate the implicit notion in the research question: the perception of impunity is a key factor that demotivates participation, stifling and eliminating citizens' desire to combat corruption. This initial finding aligns with warnings issued by Transparencia Internacional and the UN, which have identified impunity as one of the main obstacles to the proper functioning of the rule of law (Alda et al., 2021; Transparencia Internacional, 2025).

Moreover, the literature analyzed describes the distancing from reporting mechanisms as a reaction to a perceived hostile and ineffective institutional and social environment, both cognitively and behaviorally. In this context, the research by Uribe (2021) and Bergman (2022) is essential, as they emphasize that the absence of genuine social justice, the lack of institutions that can guarantee it, and the persistence of scenarios in which society tolerates various forms of violence lead to a disconnection with formal reporting mechanisms. This reinforces the idea that if the justice system does not ensure certainty of punishment, civic participation is perceived not only as futile but also as dangerous. The perception that "nothing will happen" operates as a self-fulfilling prophecy: corruption persists because citizens do not act due to impunity; this inaction, in turn, deepens the very sense of impunity, consolidating a "vicious cycle."

The study also demonstrates that the perception of impunity emerges from the interaction of structural, cultural, and personal components. Impunity is supported by institutional deficiencies, such as ineffective sanctions (DPLF, 2020; Uribe, 2021) and the slowness of judicial processes. However, beyond institutional factors, the analysis highlights how citizens interpret and experience these failures. The reason many anti-corruption initiatives do not achieve the expected results is linked to the "culture parallel to the legal system" that Muñoz and Tuesta (2024) describe in the Peruvian context, as well as to the normalization of corruption (Uribe, 2021). Citizens not only observe a system that does not function, but they also perceive an alternative social structure where corruption operates as an implicit rule.

In this scenario, the lack of trust becomes a constant. The findings of Curi and Velásquez (2021) and Altamirano Castro (2022) are particularly revealing, as they show that even when formal participation mechanisms, such as public hearings or citizen committees, are implemented, they are perceived with distrust, regarded as "falsehoods" or spaces co-opted by power (Torres, 2022). This distrust is exacerbated by personal experiences related to corruption (Mexicanos Contra la Corrupción y la Impunidad & Reforma, 2022) and, significantly, by violence and repression. Reports of attacks on journalists and activists (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2022; Open Society Justice Initiative, 2021) illustrate that the cost of participation can be extremely high. The lack of justice in these cases sends an alarming message: not only do the corrupt remain unpunished, but those who confront them also receive no protection.

The implications of these findings are significant. For policymakers in Peru and Latin America, the message is clear: initiatives promoting "citizen participation" that do not directly address the issue of impunity are

destined to fail. It is insufficient to implement new reporting systems or create citizen oversight bodies. Judicial reforms ensuring effective and perceptible sanctions are essential, as well as robust mechanisms of protection for whistleblowers and activists, as proposed by Valle-Ríos (2023). The fight against corruption cannot rest on a vulnerable and demotivated citizenry. The state must first demonstrate its capacity and willingness to impose sanctions to regain the trust and legitimacy necessary to involve society.

This analysis also presents several limitations. As it is based on a comprehensive literature review, the results rely on the quality and focus of previously published studies. While reports from non-governmental organizations and international entities have been included, there may be a bias toward findings disseminated primarily in scientific journals. Furthermore, although the analyzed period (2019-2025) ensures the current relevance of the data, it is possible that preceding studies relevant for historically contextualizing the phenomenon have been omitted. Finally, while the qualitative approach provides an in-depth analysis, it does not allow for measuring the magnitude of the relationship between variables, an aspect that future research could address.

Consequently, new lines of research emerge. It would be pertinent to conduct large-scale quantitative studies in Peru that measure the percentage effect of the perception of impunity on the willingness to report or participate. Additionally, comparative case studies between regions with different levels of impunity are needed to identify which specific factors make a difference. Assessing the impact of successful local programs, such as the "Anti-Corruption Citizen Agendas" mentioned at the outset, could provide valuable lessons on how to rebuild trust from the local level, even within an adverse national context.

Conclusions

This research clearly concludes that the perception of impunity exerts a negative and paralyzing impact on citizen participation in anti-corruption initiatives in Peru and Latin America. It is not merely a matter of disinterest or apathy, but a rational and protective response to a judicial system perceived as ineffective, slow, and lacking the capacity or will to punish those who commit corrupt acts.

This perception does not constitute an abstract or isolated notion; rather, it is based on multiple concrete factors. Among these are persistent institutional deficiencies—such as the ineffectiveness of judicial bodies and the absence of exemplary sanctions—the social and cultural acceptance of corruption, the lack of protection, and the real risks faced by whistleblowers, activists, and journalists, as well as the manipulation of formal participation spaces, which are ultimately perceived as mere ineffective simulations.

These elements reaffirm the existence of a harmful cycle: widespread impunity generates distrust and discourages citizen participation; that lack of participation, in turn, facilitates the continuity of corrupt practices and the persistence of impunity. Breaking this pattern cannot be achieved through simple exhortations for citizens to participate in a system they do not trust. The central premise that emerges from the findings is that sustained citizen participation does not, by itself, lead to a reduction in corruption; rather, it is the consequence of a robust rule of law capable of demonstrating through clear actions its commitment to justice. As long as impunity continues to dominate, any attempts to foster citizen participation will lack legitimacy and effectiveness.

Finally, various lines of research are identified that could expand the understanding of this phenomenon. These include developing qualitative and comparative studies on anti-corruption initiatives, evaluating the impact of institutional reforms, analyzing participation modalities in contexts with high levels of impunity, examining the role of the media, exploring the relationship between different types of corruption and impunity, and studying the effect of these factors on institutional trust. Such research would contribute to designing more effective strategies to combat corruption in Peru and the region.

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