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The Role of Private Companies in Promoting Ethics and Transparency in Public Business in Mozambique

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role that private companies can play in promoting ethics and transparency in public sector business in Mozambique. It focuses on the relationships these companies establish with public institutions when supplying goods and services to meet public needs. In the context of public procurement, there are evident instances where individuals representing the contracting parties engage in unethical practices for personal gain, to the detriment of the public interest. At the same time, the drive for profit among private enterprises often results in corrupt behaviour, embezzlement of public funds, and the supply of low-quality goods and services, negatively impacting end users and overall social well-being. Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative approach, primarily using documentary and bibliographic analysis, supplemented by questionnaires and interviews with key stakeholders. The findings, based on content and discourse analysis, reveal a decline in ethical standards in public business. Nevertheless, the study identifies potential for improvement through coordinated efforts by key actors and suggests practical measures to foster change.

Keywords: Ethics, transparency, company, business, public

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INTRODUCTION

In Mozambique, ethics and transparency in public business are increasingly under scrutiny, as these activities pursue public interests and involve the use of public resources.

The emergence of specific cases of public contracts conducted without adherence to ethical and transparent principles has prompted public debate, social protests, and the initiation of judicial procedures, as well as other administrative or disciplinary measures aimed at holding those responsible to account. These actions include efforts to recover assets and repair damages caused to society as a result of unethical practices committed by representatives of both public and private contracting entities involved in such cases.

Indeed, it has become increasingly common in recent years to see, across various media platforms, public debates, social networks, and even informal family discussions, references to contractual situations involving private companies and public institutions. These discussions often share a common theme — that something went wrong in such contractual relationships, and that someone may have intentionally benefited from public resources to the detriment of the wider citizenry.

At the same time, within the framework of relations between governmental entities, the private sector, and international development partners — aimed at improving the business environment — there have been acknowledgements of ethical failures in the conduct of public business involving private companies. These shortcomings have had a direct impact on poverty reduction efforts and collective development.

In this context, the present study focuses on the role of private companies in promoting ethics and transparency in public business in Mozambique. It seeks to explore the contribution that these companies can make — without undermining their own legitimate goals, including profit — to the creation of a business environment that meets the aspirations of Mozambican society. This includes improving the country's public image, particularly as globalisation increasingly requires Mozambique to conform to internationally accepted standards of ethical business conduct.

Throughout human history, ethics has been a central subject of reflection, concerned with understanding what guides human conduct in different contexts, from everyday life to business and governance.

Aristotle is regarded as the "father of ethics", highlighting that every human action aims at a greater good, which he defined as happiness — understood as "the ultimate end, around which all other pursuits revolve" (Ferraz, as cited in Galvão, 2021, p. 8). Ethics, therefore, emerges as a practical science directed towards human development, grounded in values such as living well and acting rightly. In this sense, Lima (2023) adds that ethics concerns the study and orientation of character, with the ultimate aim of enabling a happy life.

Philosophical reflection over time has generated several schools of ethical thought. Aristotelian ethics values virtue as the means to achieving happiness, asserting that the highest good resides in the rational exercise of human capacities. Melo (2024, p. 12) summarises this view as a "virtuous behaviour of individuals through the excellent and rational exercise of their abilities in a balanced pursuit of the good". In the business context, this perspective implies that leaders and managers should act with fairness and balance,

contributing to the common good — which strengthens organisational credibility and trust (Rosa et al., 2023)

Kant, in contrast, proposed a deontological ethics based on duty and the "categorical imperative", understood as a universal moral law valid under all circumstances. According to Lisboa (2023, p. 267), it represents a maxim that one should act upon "only according to that maxim whereby you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law". Thus, irrespective of the consequences, morality must rest on rational and universal principles that uphold human dignity.

Habermas' discourse ethics, in turn, introduced dialogue as a moral foundation. For him, ethical norms are legitimate only when they emerge from a process of consensus among individuals under conditions of equality. Mendonça (2024, p. 17) stresses that this is an inclusive ethics, whereby norms "must be established through dialogical consensus among individuals". This paradigm favours a participatory model grounded in solidarity and mutual understanding.

Levinas, with his ethics of alterity, broke with the tradition centred on the "self" by placing the "other" at the heart of moral responsibility. This shift entails recognising in the other a face that calls for and demands an ethical response. Souza (2021, p. 12) explains that alterity "is characterised as an ethics of free and responsible encounter, in which the other is recognised as a protagonist". This conception extends not only to human beings but also to nature, regarded as an essential component of the collective whole, deserving of respect and care (Martins & Santin, 2024).

Business ethics represents a contemporary extension of these reflections. Although commercial activity was historically associated with questionable practices, modern society has introduced new expectations of credibility and transparency.

Within this framework, codes of ethics have emerged as essential instruments, serving as minimum standards of professional conduct and a first step towards self-regulation (Gonçalves, 2020). At the same time, business ethics transcends the pursuit of profit, encompassing relationships with employees, clients, suppliers, and regulators — with the broader objective of achieving growth founded on trust and responsibility (Dias, 2024).

However, one of the greatest ethical challenges of the present time is corruption — an ancient and persistent phenomenon that undermines institutional trust and compromises development. Transparency International (2024, p. 12) notes that less corrupt countries are better equipped to confront global challenges, including climate change.

Corruption may take many forms — such as bribery, fraud, or state capture — but in all cases, it erodes social and political integrity. According to Souza et al. (2022, p. 11), it is a mechanism through which elites capture the state apparatus, diverting resources that should ensure essential public services.

The consequences of corruption are wide-ranging, including social inequality, poverty, environmental degradation, insecurity, and institutional distrust. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16 explicitly calls for the reduction of corruption as a prerequisite for building just and inclusive societies. Gaspar (2025, p. 4) underlines that corruption is among the greatest obstacles to eradicating poverty by 2030, diverting resources

that could otherwise improve living conditions. The International Monetary Fund estimates that bribes alone account for about two per cent of global GDP, illustrating the magnitude of the problem.

Ethics, in all its dimensions, thus emerges as central to addressing contemporary dilemmas. Whether through the cultivation of virtue, adherence to duty, rational dialogue, or responsibility towards others, ethics provides essential tools for building fairer, more sustainable, and transparent societies.

Business ethics, in particular, is indispensable in a globalised world where consumers and citizens increasingly demand responsible conduct. Combating corruption and strengthening corporate and social ethics are therefore urgent steps towards ensuring not only economic development but also the full flourishing of humanity.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative approach**,** given the nature of the phenomenon under examination.

As highlighted by Gonçalves (2021, p. 8), "qualitative research involves the engagement of multidisciplinary elements through various methods of data collection and analysis, followed by the subsequent presentation of results". This assertion supports the methodological choice and underscores the complexity and depth of the proposed analysis.

The methodological structure of this investigation was designed primarily to respond with clarity, coherence, and depth to the central research question: What is the role of private companies in promoting ethics and transparency in public business in Mozambique?

The choice of an applied and qualitative study ensured the collection of in-depth, contextually grounded data concerning the behaviours, perceptions, and practices of private companies in their relationships with the State. This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how ethical norms are experienced and negotiated within the context of public procurement, going beyond statistical data to capture meanings and motivations. It thus enables a detailed and realistic answer to the research question.

Regarding the methodological procedures, data collection relied on documentary and bibliographic research, including database searches on private companies, the analysis of legal case files involving unethical and criminal acts in five contracting cases between private companies and public entities, as well as periodic reports from the judiciary and related communications to the legislative branch.

The careful selection of five emblematic cases of contracts between the public and private sectors in Mozambique ensured that the investigation was based on representative and informative examples. By including cases with political, economic, and social relevance, the sample enabled the exploration of various forms of interaction between companies and the State, facilitating the identification of both ethical and unethical behavioural patterns.

Data collection was also conducted through questionnaires and interviews with forty individuals, selected based on their knowledge of public procurement and their experience in resolving disputes arising from unethical practices in contracting processes.

These interviews and questionnaires captured the perspectives of social actors directly involved in the analysed contracts. This material proved essential to understanding how business executives and public officials perceive ethics and how their experiences and suggestions may contribute to enhancing ethical conduct.

Variables

From a conceptual perspective, a variable is understood as any characteristic capable of varying within an object of study. The literature distinguishes between the independent variable — regarded as the presumed cause of a phenomenon — and the dependent variable, which represents the effect arising from changes in the former (Agostinho & Coelho, 2023).

In this investigation, the independent variable was defined as the conduct of private companies in contractual relations with public entities, while the dependent variable referred to ethics and transparency in public business in Mozambique. The adopted conceptual model assumes that corporate behaviour directly influences the level of integrity and accountability characterising public procurement processes.

For operationalisation purposes, empirical indicators were established to enable the practical analysis of both variables. In the case of the independent variable, indicators included participation in public tenders, adherence to codes of conduct, and any history of involvement in scandals. Regarding the dependent variable, the indicators examined included perceptions of integrity in contracts, the frequency of unethical practices, and the degree of institutional trust.

This operationalisation linked the variables to the study's objectives: identifying business practices that influence contractual ethics, assessing the historical evolution of transparency in public business, analysing shared responsibilities, and proposing measures to reinforce ethical conduct.

The choice of these two central variables allowed the research to capture the complex interdependence between the private and public sectors. Business conduct does not occur in isolation but in constant interaction with state agents and within institutional contexts that may either foster or hinder transparency.

This analytical framework facilitated the identification of responsible business practices that can be replicated, as well as institutional shortcomings requiring correction to promote a more ethical contractual environment. The research therefore provided empirical and analytical insights that may support policy reforms, guide regulatory adjustments, and inspire cultural change in both the public and private sectors.

The chosen methodological path proved appropriate for addressing the research question. The qualitative approach, based on interviews, document analysis, and the observation of practices, enabled the capture not only of occurrences of conduct but also of the underlying processes and motivations. Such interpretative depth was crucial for understanding the tensions between immediate economic interests and the need to ensure institutional legitimacy and long-term sustainability.

In summary, the adopted methodological pathway ensured coherence between the defined objectives, the analysed problem, and the instruments for data collection and analysis,

thereby guaranteeing the scientific rigour and social relevance of the study. This research goes beyond a descriptive reading; it offers a critical and contextualised analysis that not only interprets the present but also points towards possible paths for the future.

FINDINGS

Table 1: Sample Characterisation

Type of participant	Number of participants	Gender (M/F)	Age ≤ 35	Age ≥ 36	Origin / Sector
Interviewees (Public Sector – UGEAs)	20	14 / 6	13	7	Ministries, provincial directorates, municipalities, and public institutes
Respondents (Private Sector Companies)	20	15 / 5	9	11	Suppliers of goods, services, and construction contractors
Total	40	29 / 11	22	18	—

Table 2: Thematic blocks of the interviews

No.	Theme
1	Ethics as a social reality and its importance in business
2	The evolution of ethics over time
3	Agents of ethics
4	Contributions towards strengthening ethics in Mozambique

Table 3: Findings from public sector interviews

Aspect evaluated	Percentage
Ethics ensures fairness in business	40%
Promotes fair competition	20%
Strengthens public institutions' credibility	15%
Attracts investment	15%
Prevents conflicts	10%

Evolution of ethics (past ten years)

100% of respondents stated that ethics in public business has been declining.

Table 4: Main agents of ethics

Agent	Percentage
Representatives of public entities	80%
Representatives of private companies	15%
Any citizen	5%

Table 5: Suggested measures to strengthen ethics

Measure	Percentage
Appointment of integrity-driven leaders	30%
Severe penalties for unethical conduct	25%
Monitoring of conflicts of interest	15%
Improved salaries for public officials	15%
Rewarding ethical behaviour	10%
Involvement of religious institutions	5%

Table 6: Findings from private sector questionnaires

Aspect evaluated	Percentage
Ethics ensures impartiality of the State	30%
Promotes fair profit	30%
Ensures balanced competition	25%
Secures sustainable business	10%
Contributes to peaceful conflict resolution	5%

Evolution of ethics:

100% of respondents perceived a decline in ethics over the last ten years, mainly due to corruption.

Table 7: Agents of ethics

Agent	Percentage
Public officials	90%
Representatives of private companies	10%

Table 8: Proposals to Strengthen Ethics

Proposal	Percentage
Prohibit public officials from conducting private business	30%
Effective implementation of codes of conduct	20%
Full compliance with contractual clauses	15%
Regulation of commissions	15%
Monitoring of conflicts of interest	10%
Increased remuneration for public officials	10%

Table 9: Analysed case studies

No.	Case	Description / Impact
1	Embraer	Bribery of political decision-makers to secure aircraft contracts.
2	Odebrecht	Payment of improper advantages to obtain public works contracts.
3	Hidden Debts	Financial scandal involving secret contracts and illegal guarantees.
4	Former Minister of Justice	Unlawful favouritism in national business dealings.
5	Former Minister of Labour	Collusion between companies and officials, revealing a permissive culture.

Table 10: Role of the Attorney-General's Office (2014–2025)

Aspect	Description
Focus	Unethical practices in public procurement
Actions	Annual reports to the National Assembly
Content	Corruption, conflicts of interest, abusive direct awards, improper payments
Result	Reinforcement of public awareness of the seriousness and persistence of ethical issues in the public sector

DISCUSSION

The analysis of the data reveals significant convergence between the public and private sectors regarding the recognition of ethics as central to contract management and the functioning of public institutions in Mozambique. The investigation demonstrates that both representatives of the Unidades Gestoras de Aquisições (UGEAs – public procurement management units) and agents from the private business sector view ethics as a structural element underpinning transparency and institutional credibility.

Most participants associated ethical behaviour with fairness in business, fair competition, and institutional credibility, while a smaller percentage highlighted its role in conflict prevention and investment attraction. This perception suggests a growing conceptual maturity concerning ethics — one that transcends punitive notions and moves towards a systemic understanding rooted in prevention and organisational integrity.

However, the analysis also shows that this recognition has not yet translated into consolidated institutional practice. All respondents, from both the public and private sectors, stated that ethics in public business in Mozambique has been declining over the past ten years. This decline reflects a widespread perception of deteriorating integrity within public administration.

The findings indicate that this decline stems from a combination of factors: impunity, weak internal control mechanisms, political interference, and the absence of an effective culture of accountability. Furthermore, although 80 per cent of interviewees attributed greater

responsibility to public sector representatives, 15 per cent acknowledged the co-responsibility of private companies, and a minority considered ethics a shared duty among all citizens.

The participants' proposals reflect a deeper understanding of ethical dynamics. The suggested measures encompass both corrective actions — such as severe penalties and the appointment of upright leaders — and preventive initiatives, including fair remuneration, monitoring of conflicts of interest, and the promotion of exemplary ethical conduct.

In the private sector, recommendations emphasised the need to prohibit public officials from owning or managing private enterprises, ensure the effective implementation of codes of conduct, and regulate commissions and contractual clauses. Together, these measures reveal a desire to harmonise integrity mechanisms across the public–private relationship.

These recommendations converge on the understanding that ethics must be a transversal principle, integrated into professional training, organisational culture, and public management.

The concrete case studies analysed in this research illustrate, in a paradigmatic manner, the consequences of lacking ethics and effective control mechanisms.

The case involving the former Minister of Labour demonstrates a network of unethical practices in public procurement for personal gain. Using her hierarchical position, the minister directly interfered in direct-award procedures, favouring specific companies without legitimate grounds of urgency. The receipt of undue benefits and manipulation of financial systems revealed not only a serious ethical breach but also an institutional culture of permissiveness, where internal controls were inoperative or deliberately ignored.

This case supports respondents' perception that ethical degradation results from the convergence of corruption among public agents and the cooperation of companies willing to engage in illicit acts. In this sense, corruption emerges as a phenomenon operating at the interface between public and private interests, sustained by governance weaknesses and distorted economic incentives.

The case of the former Minister of Justice reinforces this interpretation, revealing a pattern of abuse of office and misappropriation of public funds for personal purposes, under the pretext of an official mission. The use of state funds to finance a religious pilgrimage to Mecca represents a clear violation of the principles of secularism and sound financial management.

The case also exposes the failure of internal control mechanisms and the hierarchical subservience characterising parts of the public administration, where ethics is often subordinated to authority. The complicity of the travel agency that accepted public payments without a formal contract shows that corruption is rarely unidirectional: it depends both on the misuse of public power and on the willingness of private actors to engage in unethical practices in exchange for financial benefit.

The complexity of relations between public and private corruption is even more evident in the Embraer case. The involvement of senior executives of the state-owned airline Linhas Aéreas de Moçambique (LAM) and officials of the Ministry of Transport and Communications in bribery and money-laundering schemes illustrates that corruption in Mozambique has reached a level of sophistication that transcends national borders.

The deliberate inflation of aircraft prices and the use of intermediaries and offshore accounts demonstrate an institutionalised network of corruption in which foreign private companies knowingly participated in illegal processes. As the data collected indicate, corruption results both from the willingness of public officials to deviate from their duties and from the complicity of private companies that prioritise profit over integrity. This case underscores the urgent need for robust corporate ethics and stringent auditing and transparency mechanisms, particularly in international contracts.

The "Hidden Debts" scandal represents the most critical point of ethical degradation in Mozambican public administration. With a financial impact estimated at over two billion US dollars, this case involved a network of institutionalised corruption connecting political power, intelligence services, and national and foreign companies.

The secret contracting of debts with international banks — circumventing parliamentary oversight — reveals an almost complete capture of the state by private interests. Acts of bribery, resource diversion, and money laundering, as well as the use of fictitious contracts and tax havens, constitute a criminal structure maintained by impunity and weak oversight mechanisms.

This case confirms the central hypothesis of the research: ethics and transparency in public management depend not only on the legal framework but also on the political will and personal integrity of decision-makers. The participation of the supplier company, which offered bribes and falsified contracts, shows that corruption is bilateral and requires responses that combine institutional reform and effective accountability for all parties involved.

Similarly, the Odebrecht case demonstrates the interconnection between domestic corruption and international financing schemes. The involvement of a minister in receiving bribes to facilitate guarantees for the construction company and its financing bank illustrates the penetration of corruption into strategic state decisions.

As Nurmalasari, Priyarsono, and Sari (2023) observe, centralised decision-making and the limited capacity of internal audit units create opportunities for deviant practices, explaining the persistence of corruption even after legal reforms. The Odebrecht case, like the others, reveals that corruption does not occur in isolated episodes but as a systemic relationship between public and private agents, sustained by fragile institutions and a permissive ethical culture.

Collectively, the results and case studies confirm the direct relationship between ethical deterioration and institutional fragility. As Fernandes (2022, p. 14) asserts, "corruption occurs at the interface between public and private interests, resulting from dysfunctions in public management and compromised business ethics".

Therefore, ethics in public business in Mozambique should be understood as both a social and institutional construct, dependent on the effectiveness of regulations and on individuals' moral commitment. The study demonstrates that, despite legal and anti-corruption reforms, practical implementation and accountability remain insufficient.

The lack of effective monitoring and the culture of impunity perpetuate a cycle of corruption that erodes public trust, restricts development, and deepens social inequality.

In summary, public ethics in Mozambique faces a structural challenge that extends beyond the normative dimension to encompass cultural and behavioural aspects. The empirical analysis demonstrates that both interviewees and respondents recognise the need for a systemic approach — based on effective legislation, strengthened internal control mechanisms, continuous ethical education, and the real accountability of offenders.

As one participant stated, "It is difficult to maintain integrity when the system itself forces you to compete with those who pay bribes." This testimony encapsulates the ethical dilemma at the heart of the Mozambican public sector and reinforces the urgency of rebuilding a governance model founded on transparency, responsibility, and shared integrity between the State and the private sector.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that public procurement processes in Mozambique remain deeply affected by unethical practices, which have been widely reported by the media and subjected to intense public debate. The findings confirmed that the main deviations arise from the replacement of collective interest with personal gain, particularly by state agents who, taking advantage of their positions, manipulate tenders, demand bribes, and favour certain companies in exchange for illicit benefits.

However, it was equally evident that the private sector, rather than merely resisting such practices, frequently accepts or even encourages them. This complicity exacerbates corruption and further erodes social trust in public institutions.

Public awareness of the seriousness of the problem, reflected in growing demands for transparency, oversight, and accountability, represents a positive pressure on the system. Nevertheless, despite normative and technological advances — such as the introduction of the Sistafe and the launch of the e-GP platform — the last decade has witnessed a decline in adherence to ethical principles in the management of public contracts.

The persistence of corruption, fraud, and mismanagement reveals weaknesses not only in the enforcement of rules but also in the effective accountability of offenders. This situation should not be interpreted solely as pessimistic but as an urgent warning for structural and cultural transformations that can consolidate consistent institutional practices of integrity.

A key contribution of this research was to show that private companies are not merely beneficiaries of public contracts but co-responsible for their integrity. The business sector, through the adoption of compliance mechanisms, codes of conduct, and internal controls, can play an active role in strengthening transparency.

The interviews and questionnaires confirmed that business representatives increasingly perceive ethics as a strategic investment: companies that act with integrity establish longer-lasting relationships with the State, earn social legitimacy, and attract investment. In contrast, those that engage in corrupt practices become vulnerable to sanctions, lose credibility, and contribute to the weakening of institutional environments.

Ethics should therefore be understood not merely as an abstract moral principle but as a practical tool for sustainable development. Transparent procurement processes reduce waste,

strengthen investor confidence, enhance business competitiveness, and promote greater social justice.

However, the analysis of empirical cases revealed that the cessation of unethical behaviour has largely occurred as a result of external factors, such as judicial proceedings or dismissals, rather than from genuine internal reform. This finding highlights that prevention must rely on a combination of educational, regulatory, and punitive measures that are both consistent and effective.

Based on the analysed data, the following measures are identified as priorities:

1. **Legislative and institutional strengthening**, through the establishment of robust codes of conduct, transparency portals, and effective anti-corruption laws.
2. **Reinforcement of independent oversight**, through audit courts, inspectorates, and regulatory bodies endowed with autonomy and impartiality.
3. **Promotion of corporate self-regulation**, via best governance practices, compliance frameworks, and internal audits.
4. **Ethical and civic education**, led by schools, universities, and the media, fostering a culture of intolerance towards corruption.
5. **Fair remuneration of public servants**, to reduce vulnerability and susceptibility to unethical incentives.
6. **Active engagement of civil society and the press**, serving as permanent watchdogs in the exposure of irregularities.

It can therefore be concluded that the promotion of ethics and transparency in public procurement in Mozambique is not only desirable but a strategic and urgent necessity for strengthening the rule of law, economic development, and social well-being.

The construction of an ethical culture requires time, perseverance, and coordination among the State, the private sector, civil society, and the media. It is precisely in this convergence of efforts that the hope lies to transform public procurement in Mozambique into a space of integrity, fairness, and institutional trust. Ethics should thus be regarded not merely as a moral imperative but as a practical and indispensable condition for ensuring sustainability, institutional legitimacy, and collective prosperity.

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