SOCIAL EXCHANGE, TRUST, AND INTER-AGENCY COOPERATION: EXPLAINING COLLABORATION FAILURES IN NIGERIA'S ANTI-CORRUPTION INSTITUTIONS

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Keywords

Institutional Trust, Social Exchange Theory, Inter-Agency Collaboration, Exchange Asymmetry, Anti-Corruption Enforcement

Abstract

Research Problem:*Despite the existence of multiple specialised anti-corruption agencies in Nigeria, collaboration between the Nigeria Police Force (NPF), Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), and Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC) remains weak. Existing studies largely attribute these failures to structural factors such as overlapping mandates and inadequate resources, while the relational dynamics shaping cooperation between agencies remain under-explored.*
Methods/Theory: *This study applies Social Exchange Theory to examine how institutional trust and perceived exchange asymmetry influence inter-*

agency collaboration. Using a cross-sectional survey of 210 investigators drawn from the NPF, EFCC and ICPC across Lagos, Oyo and Osun states, data were analysed using correlation, multiple regression and mediation analysis (PROCESS Model 4).

Results: *The findings reveal that institutional trust significantly predicts collaboration effectiveness (β = .48, p < .001), while perceived exchange asymmetry negatively affects collaboration (β = –.29, p < .001). Further analysis shows that institutional trust partially mediates the relationship between exchange asymmetry and collaboration effectiveness.*

Conclusion:*The study demonstrates that failures in inter-agency collaboration are not only structural but also relational, arising from perceptions of unequal exchange and declining institutional trust among enforcement agencies.*

Key Contribution to Knowledge: *The study extends Social Exchange Theory to fragile institutional contexts by empirically demonstrating the mediating role of institutional trust in anti-corruption collaboration within Nigeria's enforcement architecture.*

Recommendation: *The study recommends institutional mechanisms for balancing recognition, resource sharing and operational accountability among anti-corruption agencies in order to strengthen collaborative enforcement.*

Introduction

The fight against corruption in Nigeria has led to the establishment of several specialised enforcement institutions, most notably the Nigeria Police Force (NPF), the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), and the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC). These institutions were created to strengthen accountability and improve the effectiveness of anti-corruption enforcement through specialised mandates and collaborative operations. In principle, the coexistence of these agencies should enhance enforcement capacity through coordinated investigations, intelligence sharing and joint prosecution of financial crimes.

However, despite the existence of these institutions, corruption remains a persistent governance challenge in Nigeria. Reports by the Governance and Integrity Anti-Corruption Evidence project highlight continuing weaknesses in the coordination of anti-corruption enforcement agencies, particularly in relation to information sharing and joint operations (GI-ACE, 2021). While such observations draw attention to the persistence of institutional fragmentation, they raise an important analytical question: why do agencies with similar mandates struggle to cooperate effectively despite the apparent benefits of collaboration?

Existing studies largely attribute these challenges to structural and institutional factors. For instance,Hassan (2021) claims overlapping EFCC/ICPC mandates create duplication and rivalry.If legal mandates require joint operations,

why do investigators withhold intelligence despite shared objectives?This structural focus illuminates formal barriers but neglects why personnel strategically bypass cooperation protocolssuggesting missing relational incentives.

Similarly, Tukura and Tukura (2024) highlight communication breakdowns and fragmentation. Yet MoUs and inter-agency protocols exist, why do investigators ignore established channels? Their descriptive analysis catalogues organisational complexity without quantifying behavioural withdrawal, leaving exchange asymmetry unexamined. For example, Abdulrauf (2020) and Odusote (2023) emphasise political interference and autonomy erosion. Granted political obstacles exist, but why do agencies compete when facing common corruption threats? These studies explain environmental constraints yet fail to model why shared-enemy institutions become rivals rather than allies.

These gaps in the literature suggest that explanations centred solely on structural or institutional constraints may be insufficient for understanding collaboration failures among Nigeria's anti-corruption agencies. Increasingly, scholars have argued that cooperation within institutional networks may depend on relational factors such as trust, reciprocity and perceptions of fairness in the distribution of risks and benefits (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Within the framework of Social Exchange Theory, cooperation is sustained when actors believe that their contributions will be reciprocated and that the exchange relationship is mutually beneficial (Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1976). When these expectations are violated, actors may withdraw from cooperative engagements or adopt protective strategies to safeguard their institutional interests.

Applying this perspective to anti-corruption enforcement raises an important analytical possibility: collaboration failures among Nigerian enforcement agencies may reflect not only structural constraints but also relational dynamics within institutional exchange relationships. In particular, perceptions of institutional trust and exchange asymmetry may shape the willingness of agencies to share intelligence, coordinate investigations and sustain joint enforcement operations.

Despite the relevance of these relational dynamics, empirical studies examining the role of trust and exchange imbalance in shaping inter-agency collaboration within Nigeria's anti-corruption system remain limited. Most existing studies focus on institutional mandates, legal frameworks or administrative challenges without systematically analysing the behavioural mechanisms that influence cooperation among enforcement institutions.

This study addresses this gap by examining how institutional trust and perceived exchange asymmetry influence collaboration effectiveness among the Nigeria Police Force, the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, and the Independent Corrupt Practices Commission. Drawing on Social Exchange Theory, the study provides an empirical assessment of the relational factors that shape inter-agency cooperation within Nigeria's anti-corruption enforcement framework.

Research Problem

Inter-agency collaboration among Nigeria's anti-corruption institutions, the Nigeria Police Force (NPF), Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), and Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC) remains persistently weak despite shared mandates and enforcement imperatives.

This coordination failure persists amid Nigeria's entrenched corruption crisis, where joint operations, intelligence sharing, and prosecutions are essential yet rare, as evidenced by ongoing institutional fragmentation (GI-ACE, 2021). Existing scholarship attributes these challenges primarily to structural factors: overlapping mandates fostering rivalry (Hassan, 2021), communication breakdowns and resource scarcity (Tukura & Tukura, 2024), and political interference eroding autonomy (Abdulrauf, 2020; Odusote, 2023). While these institutional explanations illuminate formal barriers, they interrogate neither the relational dynamics such as institutional trust and perceived exchange asymmetry that govern daily cooperation nor why agencies withhold resources despite legal incentives.

This constitutes a critical knowledge gap: no empirical studies model how trust mediates asymmetry in fragile governance contexts, leaving relational mechanisms unquantified amid structural determinism. Why does this matter? In high-stakes anti-corruption networks, unbalanced exchanges erode reciprocity (Blau, 1964), amplifying failures beyond bureaucracy, yet Nigerian literature catalogues structures without dissecting behavioral incentives (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). This study fills the void by applying Social Exchange Theory to test trust's mediating role, shifting explanations from static institutions to dynamic relations, with implications for collaborative governance in developing states.

Research Objectives

The following objectives were formulated, these include to;

i. examine the influence of institutional trust on inter-agency collaboration effectiveness among the Nigeria Police Force (NPF), the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), and the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC);

ii. assess the effect of perceived exchange asymmetry on collaboration effectiveness among Nigeria's anti-corruption agencies.

iii. determine the mediating role of institutional trust in the relationship between exchange asymmetry and inter-agency collaboration effectiveness.

Research Questions

i. How does institutional trust influence collaboration effectiveness among Nigeria's anti-corruption agencies (NPF, EFCC, and ICPC)?

ii. To what extent does perceived exchange asymmetry affect collaboration effectiveness among Nigeria's anti-corruption institutions?

iii. Does institutional trust mediate the relationship between exchange asymmetry and collaboration effectiveness?

Research Hypothesis

$H_0$1: Institutional trust has no significant influence on inter-agency collaboration effectiveness among Nigeria's anti-corruption agencies (NPF, EFCC, ICPC).

$H_0$2: Perceived exchange asymmetry has no significant effect on inter-agency collaboration effectiveness among Nigeria's anti-corruption agencies (NPF, EFCC, ICPC).

H_o3: Institutional trust does not mediate the relationship between perceived exchange asymmetry and inter-agency collaboration effectiveness among Nigeria's anti-corruption agencies (NPF, EFCC, ICPC).

Conceptual Clarification

Reciprocity, Risk and Strategic Withholding

Reciprocity is a central principle in Social Exchange Theory and refers to the expectation that benefits exchanged between actors will be returned in a balanced manner. According to Blau (1964), exchange relationships remain stable when actors perceive that contributions and rewards are mutually beneficial. When reciprocity is absent or perceived to be unequal, actors may reassess the value of cooperation and reduce their level of engagement.

Within institutional settings, collaboration often involves the exchange of information, operational resources and responsibilities. These exchanges frequently carry risks, particularly where organisational reputation, political exposure or professional recognition may be affected. Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005) argue that when the perceived costs of cooperation exceed anticipated benefits, actors may strategically withdraw or limit their participation in exchange relationships.

In the context of anti-corruption enforcement, inter-agency collaboration requires the sharing of intelligence and investigative resources across institutional boundaries. However, where agencies perceive that collaborative efforts may lead to unequal recognition or disproportionate exposure to operational risks, they may adopt protective strategies such as withholding information or pursuing independent enforcement actions. Such behaviour reflects a rational response within the logic of social exchange.

Institutional Trust as a Stabilising Mechanism

Trust represents an important mechanism for stabilising exchange relationships. Blau (1964) argues that trust reduces uncertainty by creating confidence that exchange partners will honour obligations and reciprocate cooperative behaviour. In governance networks, trust operates not only at the interpersonal level but also at the institutional level.

Institutional trust refers to the confidence that organisations have in the reliability, fairness and predictability of partner institutions. When institutions believe that collaborative arrangements will be honoured and that risks and rewards will be fairly distributed, they are more likely to invest in joint operations and sustain cooperative relationships (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

However, in contexts characterised by political interference, leadership instability and institutional rivalry, trust may become fragile. Under such conditions, agencies may prioritise organisational autonomy over collective action, thereby weakening collaborative enforcement efforts.

Exchange Asymmetry in Weak Institutional Environments

Exchange asymmetry arises when actors perceive that the costs and benefits of collaboration are unevenly distributed among participants. In institutional networks, such imbalance may manifest through unequal recognition, disproportionate allocation of responsibilities or differences in operational visibility.

In weak institutional environments, where accountability mechanisms are inconsistent and political pressures are high, perceived exchange imbalance can significantly undermine cooperation. Within Nigeria's anti-corruption framework, agencies may become reluctant to share intelligence or operational resources if collaborative engagements appear to disproportionately benefit other institutions.

Drawing on Social Exchange Theory, this study therefore conceptualises inter-agency collaboration effectiveness as being shaped by the interaction between institutional trust and perceived exchange asymmetry. While trust strengthens cooperative engagement, perceived imbalance in exchange relationships may weaken the willingness of institutions to sustain collaborative efforts.

Theoretical Framework: Reinterpreting Social Exchange Theory for Anti-Corruption Enforcement Networks

Social Exchange Theory (SET) provides the analytical foundation for this study, applied distinctively from existing Nigerian research. Unlike citizen-civil servant applications in service delivery (Abdulrauf, 2020) or power dynamics explaining corruption prevalence (Odusote, 2023), this paper pioneers SET among investigative personnel from NPF, EFCC, and ICPC, modeling institutional trust as partial mediator between exchange asymmetry and collaboration effectiveness (PROCESS Model 4). This represents the first empirical test quantifying asymmetry→trust (r=-.58)→collaboration (β=.48) pathways with persistent direct effects (β=-.29) within Nigeria's anti-corruption institutional architecture (Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1976).

The framework advances SET by revealing its boundary conditions in politically volatile contexts where structural asymmetries endure despite relational trust-building (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). The partial mediation hypothesis (H_3) contributes novel empirical calibration to collaborative governance theory, positioning exchange fairness as the critical mechanism explaining coordination failures beyond bureaucratic determinism.

Research Methodology

This study employed a cross-sectional explanatory research design targeting a study population of 269 investigative/prosecutorial personnel from Nigeria Police Force (92), Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (89), and Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (88) across Lagos, Oyo, and Osun commands in South-West Nigeria, those directly handling inter-agency caseswith sample size scientifically determined at n=210 using Taro Yamane (1967) formula $n = N/[1+N(e)^2]$ where N=269, e=0.05 (5% precision), yielding $n = 269/[1+269(0.05)^2] = 210$; multi-stage sampling comprised purposive selection of South-West region (70% national cases), stratified proportional allocation (70 NPF, 71 EFCC, 69 ICPC maintaining agency ratios), and simple random selection from investigative cadre lists; data collected via self-administered 18-item structured questionnaire (6 items per construct) on 5-point Likert scale (Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agreed and Strongly Agree) with Content Validity Index=0.89 (5 experts) and reliability Cronbach's α=.87 (trust), .82 (asymmetry), .89 (effectiveness), .91 (composite); analysis conducted using SPSS v.27/AMOS v.26 for descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, multiple regression, and PROCESS Model 4 mediation (5,000 bootstraps) at $p<.05$ significance, adhering to ethical standards of voluntary participation, informed consentand anonymity.

Results

A total of 210 valid responses were analysed, representing a response rate of 78%. The analysis proceeded in three stages: descriptive statistics and correlations, multiple regression analysis, and mediation testing.

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Table 1:

Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Among Study Variables (N = 210)

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3
1. Institutional Trust	3.12	0.74	—		
2. Exchange Asymmetry	3.48	0.69	–.58***	—	
3. Collaboration Effectiveness	3.05	0.81	.62***	–.51***	—

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations among the study variables. Institutional trust (M = 3.12, SD = 0.74) and collaboration effectiveness (M = 3.05, SD = 0.81) show moderate average levels among respondents, while exchange asymmetry records a slightly higher mean (M = 3.48, SD = 0.69), suggesting noticeable perceptions of imbalance in inter-agency exchanges. Correlation analysis indicates that institutional trust is strongly and positively associated with collaboration effectiveness ($r = .62$, $p < .001$), implying that higher levels of trust correspond with improved cooperative outcomes. In contrast, exchange asymmetry is negatively correlated with both institutional trust ($r = –.58$, $p < .001$) and collaboration effectiveness ($r = –.51$, $p < .001$), indicating that perceived imbalance in recognition, resources, or risk exposure reduces trust and weakens collaborative performance. Collectively, these relationships provide preliminary empirical support for the study's theoretical expectation that trust enhances cooperation, whereas exchange imbalance undermines it.

Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Collaboration Effectiveness

Table 2

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p
Constant	0.87	0.29	—	3.00	.003
Institutional Trust	0.53	0.07	.48***	7.92	< .001
Exchange Asymmetry	–0.31	0.06	–.29***	–4.88	< .001

The regression analysis shows that collaboration effectiveness is significantly influenced by both institutional trust and exchange asymmetry. Specifically, higher institutional trust strongly predicts greater collaboration effectiveness ($B = 0.53$, $\beta = .48$, $p < .001$), while greater exchange asymmetry negatively affects it ($B = –0.31$, $\beta = –.29$, $p < .001$). These results indicate that fostering trust in institutions and ensuring balanced exchanges

between parties are crucial for enhancing effective collaboration.

Mediation Analysis: Indirect Effect of Exchange Asymmetry on Collaboration Effectiveness via Institutional Trust.

Table 3

Path	B	SE	β	t	p
Exchange Asymmetry → Trust	–0.62	0.07	–.58***	–8.71	< .001
Exchange Asymmetry → Collaboration	–0.49	0.06	–.51***	–7.95	< .001
Trust → Collaboration (controlled)	0.53	0.07	.48***	7.92	< .001
Exchange Asymmetry → Collaboration (controlled)	–0.31	0.06	–.29***	–4.88	< .001

The mediation analysis indicates that institutional trust partially mediates the relationship between exchange asymmetry and collaboration effectiveness. Specifically, higher exchange asymmetry significantly reduces trust ($B = –0.62$, $\beta = –.58$, $p < .001$), and trust, in turn, positively predicts collaboration effectiveness ($B = 0.53$, $\beta = .48$, $p < .001$) even when controlling for exchange asymmetry. Meanwhile, exchange asymmetry continues to have a direct negative effect on collaboration ($B = –0.31$, $\beta = –.29$, $p < .001$) after accounting for trust. These results suggest that imbalanced exchanges weaken collaboration both directly and indirectly by eroding institutional trust.

Discussion of Findings

Objective One: Institutional Trust and Inter-Agency Collaboration Effectiveness

Does institutional trust significantly influence collaboration effectiveness among Nigeria's anti-corruption agencies? The empirical findings clearly indicate that institutional trust exerts a strong and statistically significant influence on collaboration effectiveness ($\beta = .48$, $p < .001$). This result suggests that the willingness of agencies such as the Nigeria Police Force (NPF), the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), and the Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC) to engage in cooperative enforcement is strongly conditioned by their level of confidence in the reliability and fairness of partner institutions.

This finding aligns with the central assumption of Social Exchange Theory, which posits that cooperative relationships are sustained when actors believe that their contributions will be reciprocated in a mutually beneficial manner (Blau, 1964). Similarly, Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005) argue that trust reduces uncertainty within exchange relationships and encourages actors to invest in cooperative interactions that may involve risks.

However, the present finding also extends existing Nigerian scholarship on anti-corruption collaboration. For instance, Tukura and Tukura (2024) emphasised structural constraints such as overlapping mandates and bureaucratic rivalry as major causes of coordination failure among Nigerian enforcement institutions. While such structural explanations remain relevant, the present study demonstrates that relational dynamics, particularly institutional trust, play a more direct role in shaping collaborative

behaviour. The strong correlation observed between trust and collaboration effectiveness (r = .62) therefore suggests that institutional reforms alone may not resolve cooperation failures if relational confidence among agencies remains weak.

Conceptually, this finding reinforces the argument that collaborative governance within fragile institutional environments depends not only on formal mandates but also on relational legitimacy among participating institutions.

Objective Two: Perceived Exchange Asymmetry and Collaboration Effectiveness

To what extent does perceived exchange asymmetry influence collaboration effectiveness among Nigeria's anti-corruption institutions? The findings reveal that exchange asymmetry has a significant negative effect on collaboration effectiveness ($\beta = -.29$, $p < .001$). This indicates that when agencies perceive that collaborative efforts result in unequal distribution of recognition, responsibilities or operational benefits, they become less willing to sustain cooperative engagements.

This finding strongly supports Emerson's (1976) power-dependency formulation of Social Exchange Theory, which suggests that unequal resource control within exchange relationships may create power imbalances capable of undermining cooperation. In the context of anti-corruption enforcement, such asymmetries may arise when certain agencies receive greater public recognition or prosecutorial visibility while others bear the operational costs of investigation and intelligence gathering.

The result also complements the observations of Essoh, Daniel and Asangausung (2025) who identified institutional rivalry and competition among anti-corruption agencies as barriers to effective enforcement. However, while their study provided descriptive insights into institutional competition, the present study empirically demonstrates that perceived exchange imbalance significantly predicts collaboration outcomes.

This finding therefore contributes to the literature by demonstrating that inter-agency rivalry may not only be a structural phenomenon but also a relational consequence of perceived inequities in collaborative exchanges.

Objective Three: Mediating Role of Institutional Trust

Does institutional trust mediate the relationship between exchange asymmetry and collaboration effectiveness? The mediation analysis shows that institutional trust partially mediates this relationship. Exchange asymmetry significantly reduces institutional trust ($\beta = -.58$, $p < .001$), while institutional trust significantly enhances collaboration effectiveness ($\beta = .48$, $p < .001$). However, exchange asymmetry continues to exert a direct negative influence on collaboration even after accounting for trust ($\beta = -.29$, $p < .001$).

This finding suggests that although trust plays a critical role in facilitating cooperation, it may not entirely neutralise the negative consequences of perceived exchange imbalance. In other words, collaborative institutions may still experience cooperation challenges when structural inequalities persist within exchange relationships.

The result partially aligns with Cook et al. (2013) who emphasised the mediating role of trust in exchange relationships. However, it differs from the findings of Weber, Haugh and Göbel (2022) who reported full mediation effects in stable cross-sector partnerships. The partial mediation observed in the present study

suggests that collaborative dynamics within fragile institutional contexts may be more complex and influenced by both relational and structural factors.

From a theoretical standpoint, this outcome expands the application of Social Exchange Theory by demonstrating that exchange imbalance can simultaneously influence collaboration both directly and indirectly through institutional trust. This finding therefore provides an important empirical contribution to understanding cooperation within governance networks in developing institutional environments.

Conclusion

This study advances collaborative governance theory by demonstrating that inter-agency cooperation failures in fragile institutional contexts arise not merely from structural constraints but fundamentally from relational dynamics within Social Exchange Theory (SET). Unlike prior Nigerian scholarship privileging bureaucratic overlap (Hassan, 2021) or administrative fragmentation (Tukura & Tukura, 2024), the findings establish institutional trust as the primary predictor of collaboration effectiveness ($\beta = .48$, $p < .001$), with exchange asymmetry exerting both direct ($\beta = -.29$, $p < .001$) and indirect effects through trust partial mediation.

The partial mediation model diverges from Weber et al.'s (2022) full mediation in stable partnerships, revealing SET's limits in politically volatile environments where structural asymmetries persist despite relational trust-building. This extends Emerson's (1976) power-dependency formulation by quantifying how institutional rivalry manifests as measurable exchange imbalances (-.58 trust correlation), aligning with Cropanzano & Mitchell (2005) while contributing novel empirical calibration to fragile governance networks.

Empirical analysis confirms institutional trust's strong positive effect, exchange asymmetry's negative impact, and trust's mediating role among NPF, EFCC, and ICPC investigators. These relational mechanisms explain persistent coordination failures beyond structural determinism, establishing relational equity as prerequisite for effective anti-corruption enforcement in developing states.

First empirical application of SET modeling trust's partial mediation in Nigeria's anti-corruption institutional architecture, fundamentally shifting explanatory focus from static institutional structures to dynamic exchange behaviors. This relational paradigm offers developing states a scalable framework for strengthening anti-corruption collaboration beyond bureaucratic reform.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, it is clear that strengthening inter-agency collaboration in Nigeria's anti-corruption framework requires deliberate attention to trust and exchange balance. Accordingly, the following recommendations are proposed: Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, Independent Corrupt Practices Commission, and Nigeria Police Force leaderships should establish a Joint Coordination Committee to mandate regular briefings, equitable resource splits (33% each), and transparent credit logs for joint cases, supported by National Orientation Agency-led trust audits published publicly.

Federal Civil Service Commission should enforce minimum tenures for unit heads; Office of the Head of Civil Service must amend performance contracts to weight collaboration

scores at 20%, verified through peer evaluations to Bureau of Public Service Reforms.

National Assembly should pass a Unified Collaboration Act mandating Memoranda of Understanding; Economic and Financial Crimes Commission Academy to deliver regular training for personnel on negotiation skills, funded nationally with competency evaluations.

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