

# Briefing

**Biodiversity, governance**

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## Policy pointers

**Corruption plays a major role** in facilitating wildlife crime: there is an urgent need to fill large knowledge gaps over its nature, extent and the actors involved.

**New partnerships** between the anti-corruption community and conservationists can help ensure interventions to combat wildlife-related corruption do not repeat past mistakes.

**Responses to corruption** need to be context-specific and informed by corruption risk assessments rather than based on broad-brush approaches.

**While broad anti-corruption measures** are needed in the wildlife sector, it is also important to strengthen criminal justice systems, increase monitoring and transparency of wildlife regulations, and reduce demand for wildlife products.

## Hard-won wisdom: what conservationists need to know about wildlife-related corruption

Wildlife crime is big business — by some estimates it is the fourth largest source of illegal trade after drugs, counterfeit goods and human trafficking. Corruption is a key enabler of wildlife crime and a new resolution passed by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Fauna and Flora (CITES) highlights the need for international, inter-agency collaboration in order to tackle it. To date, however, there has been little interaction between the conservation and anti-corruption communities, and there is a risk that developments in the anti-corruption field may be overlooked by those designing wildlife-related interventions. This briefing highlights promising entry points for collaboration for both communities to explore.

### Corruption and conservation — two separate communities of practice

Wildlife crime is at the top of the global conservation agenda and, partly as a result of this, corruption — a key enabler — is now attracting increasing attention from the conservation community. Until now, however, there have been few analyses of wildlife crime from an anti-corruption perspective. Existing studies tend to be written by conservation practitioners or commentators and discuss corruption associated with wildlife crime through a conservation lens. On the other hand, anti-corruption specialists have not, to date, paid significant attention to wildlife crime. This lack of cross-fertilisation means that the wildlife conservation community has had little exposure to the latest debates over the most effective ways to tackle corruption and vice versa. There is therefore a risk that interventions aimed at

addressing wildlife-related corruption will not incorporate important recent insights from the anti-corruption field. There is also a danger that uninformed interventions by the conservation community may displace illegality or cause harm to people without alleviating threats to species.

Responsibility for identifying and promoting effective interventions that can get to the heart of the corruption component of wildlife crime should be shared by the wildlife conservation, anti-corruption, anti-illicit trade and anti-organised crime communities. Researchers, policymakers and practitioners in each of these spheres can play a role in generating new and useful empirical evidence, in sharing lessons learnt, in proposing and helping implement innovative policies and solutions, and in monitoring and evaluating their effectiveness. The recent Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Fauna and Flora (CITES) resolution reinforces the need for such a coordinated approach by

highlighting the danger of inaction in the face of this complex problem.

### Corruption and conservation: knowns and unknowns

## *The conservation community and anti-corruption community need to foster collaborative partnerships*

Corruption is commonly categorised in three different forms: grand, petty and political.<sup>1</sup> Grand corruption consists of acts committed at a high level of government that distort policies or the central functioning of the state,

enabling leaders to benefit at the expense of the public good. Petty corruption refers to the everyday abuse of power by low- and mid-level public officials in their interactions with ordinary citizens, often as they attempt to access basic goods or services in places such as hospitals, schools, police departments and other agencies. Political corruption is the manipulation of policies, institutions and rules of procedure in the allocation of resources and financing by political decision makers, who abuse their position to sustain their power, status and wealth.

In a review of the literature, we found 60 studies exploring the links between conservation and corruption.<sup>2</sup> These studies showed that all three categories of corruption — grand, political and petty — were apparent in the context of wildlife crime. Types of corruption discussed included: bribery, rent-seeking, patronage, local elite capture, embezzlement, collusion, payoffs, false customs declarations, policy and legislative capture, kickbacks, cronyism, nepotism and fraud. An equally broad range of actors are involved, including: politicians and high-level public officials (eg members of the judiciary), law enforcement, anti-poaching and customs officers, military personnel, forest and wildlife department officials, private hunting firms, local elites, hunters, poachers, traders, farmers and pastoralists, as well as conservation organisations.

Our review found studies focusing on many countries including China, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Laos, Russia and South Africa. The most frequently analysed country was Tanzania. However, this is likely to be due to sampling bias rather than a sign that Tanzania faces substantially worse problems than other countries. What does seem clear is that wildlife crime appears to be particularly prevalent in countries where corruption is widespread.<sup>3,4</sup> For example, based on data from Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) and the CITES Proportion of Illegally Killed Elephants (PIKE) index, it is clear that there is a

strong correlation between high levels of corruption and high levels of elephant poaching.<sup>5</sup>

Although African elephants were the species most frequently cited in relation to corruption in our review (in 20 out of the 60 studies), a very broad range — both of commodities and of species — can be subject to different forms of corruption. Other species (and groups of species) mentioned included rhino, tiger, buffalo, hippopotamus, bush pig, baboon, lemur, lion, tortoise, eland, leopard, crocodile, oryx, python, rat, cheetah, wild dog, hyena, parrot, squirrel, falcon and bear.

What we currently do not know, however, is how big a problem corruption really is in various forms of wildlife crime (including relative to other natural resource challenges such as the illegal timber trade and illegal fishing), and how this varies across countries, institutions, species and commodities. We lack reliable quantifiable estimates of corruption associated with wildlife crime in different countries, in terms of the different species and actors involved. We also lack a full picture of the types, mechanisms and modalities of corruption in wildlife crime in all locations. Making such information available is of critical importance for generating effective anti-corruption measures that are relevant to the problems of wildlife crime and the different contexts in which it occurs.

### What can be done to tackle corruption linked to wildlife crime?

While corruption has only recently risen up the conservation agenda, it has been a priority of development cooperation for two decades. A systematic analysis of the effectiveness of donor-supported anti-corruption interventions highlighted, however, that robust evidence for the effectiveness of most conventional anti-corruption interventions (such as supporting anti-corruption agencies and laws) was sparse.<sup>6</sup> While there was strong and consistent evidence for the effectiveness of public financial management reforms, evidence for the anti-corruption effects of budget support was weak and contested. There was also fair evidence that support to specialised anti-corruption agencies was ineffective, mostly because institutional designs were transplanted from one context to another with little regard for the underlying political economy.

These findings have helped reinvigorate academic debate on the theoretical foundations of donor-supported anti-corruption interventions, and led to the funding of programmes that aim to strengthen the

evidence base for donor-supported anti-corruption interventions (eg DFID's Anti-Corruption Evidence Programme). The most recent consolidated advice is that anti-corruption interventions must be context-specific and will probably work best when integrated with broader reforms, such as public financial management reforms. Generic anti-corruption prescriptions for conservation are thus likely to be practically meaningless — sectoral, programme-level corruption risk assessment and management is required.<sup>7</sup> Programmatic interventions alone are unlikely, however, to be able to address the broader drivers of corruption in wildlife crime, which are likely to need parallel action at national, regional and global levels.

A 2015 study<sup>8</sup> highlighted four key areas for responses to corruption associated with wildlife crime in terms of policy and practice:

**1. Strengthen broad measures to reduce corruption.** This includes interventions such as introducing or strengthening anti-corruption laws, criminalising bribery, encouraging access-to-information provisions, ensuring declarations of assets and protecting whistleblowers. The logic behind such efforts is that without broad societal approaches to mitigating corruption, narrower sectoral initiatives focused on wildlife will falter, given that they will depend on the basic functioning of laws, institutions and regulations. A fundamental flaw in this approach, however, is the assumption that reducing corruption is simply a matter of improving oversight and control mechanisms. Monitoring and evaluation regimes are also important to track implementation and enable corrective measures.

**2. Strengthen criminal justice systems.** One of the biggest dilemmas in tackling wildlife-related corruption is that the relevant law enforcement or judicial officers may themselves be implicated (see Box 1).<sup>9</sup>

Great care is therefore needed when undertaking interventions in criminal justice and law enforcement systems. This is not to say, however, that all judicial and law enforcement actors in a particular sector or country are involved. Detailed corruption risk assessments can help highlight 'islands of integrity' or, conversely, help identify the few perpetrators to minimise the risk they will undermine anti-corruption interventions.

**3. Improve monitoring of wildlife trade regulations.** The movement of wildlife and wildlife commodities listed in the CITES Appendices is highly regulated in order to avoid unsustainable trade in endangered species. Most countries' CITES systems are, however, poorly

### Box 1. Analysing implementation of laws with regard to wildlife crime in Tanzania

The International Union for the Conservation of Nature's (IUCN's) Environmental Law Center, with Traffic East Africa, has identified gaps and patterns in the implementation of laws with regard to wildlife crime in Tanzania. Initial results show the majority of cases are either dropped or appealed, suggesting both inadequate knowledge of wildlife crimes within the judiciary and corruption.

See: [www.wildlex.org/about](http://www.wildlex.org/about)

funded and anecdotes abound of incompetence and a lack of monitoring capacity.<sup>10,11</sup> There is also evidence to suggest corruption disrupts and distorts CITES regulatory and monitoring systems, thereby in part explaining the high levels of illegal flows of wildlife and wildlife commodities. Improving monitoring systems and enhancing overall transparency in the wildlife sector are therefore important anti-corruption measures. Recent research on multi-stakeholder transparency measures in the extractives industry highlights, however, the limitations of such approaches, particularly in terms of the effectiveness of public accountability initiatives.<sup>12</sup> Detailed assessments of contexts, including of different peoples' actual incentives, are therefore important for determining how, where, when and with whom to engage in improving monitoring and transparency in the wildlife sector.

**4. Reduce demand for wildlife products.** It has been argued<sup>13,14</sup> that when states outlaw certain goods without reducing demand, this creates asymmetries that allow corruption and black markets to flourish. Targeted campaigns aimed at reducing demand for wildlife products and changing consumer attitudes towards wildlife are viewed as potentially important anti-corruption measures given the likely reduction in incentives for engaging in corruption in the first instance. Nevertheless, there is a dearth of research on whether reducing demand for specific natural resource commodities actually leads to reductions in the prevalence of corruption in related sectors.

### Collaboration for countering corruption

Although there is an increasing recognition of the role of various forms of corruption in facilitating wildlife crime, there is still a pressing need for more empirical evidence on the prevalence and types of corruption — as well as the actors involved. In particular, the incentives and motivations for engaging in corruption, particularly among law enforcement and other public office holders charged with protecting

wildlife, need to be better understood. Pending such studies, the conservation community should draw on the experience of the broader anti-corruption community to inform a strategic approach to wildlife-related corruption.

Perhaps the most important lesson already learnt is the need to establish robust corruption risk assessment and management procedures, supported by iterative monitoring and evaluation. The conservation community and anti-corruption community need to foster collaborative partnerships in order to develop procedures specific to the wildlife sector. The results of these corruption risk assessments could then inform dialogues with national authorities responsible for governing, monitoring and enforcing laws and regulations in the wildlife sector, complementing existing reporting procedures such as those stipulated by CITES. Such results could also help identify new stakeholders or agents of change, or new ways to approach old problems.

The increased availability of context-specific information generated by corruption risk assessments could also help wildlife conservation interventions avoid pitfalls that have plagued many past anti-corruption interventions — for example, the wholesale transplanting of a particular approach (eg institutional designs of anti-corruption agencies) from one context to another, with little regard for the underlying

political economy. It may also be possible to better understand why politicians in wildlife-rich countries are not acting to safeguard their wildlife resource base to meet development targets.

Given the prevalence of various types of corruption in many wildlife sectors, it will not be feasible to address every possible risk at once. Priority areas must be identified. Therefore, one of the main principles of corruption risk assessment, identification and management should be to enable a process of choosing which corruption risks are most important to address, and devising credible approaches to manage them. A common response to complex problems is inaction. The process of identifying priorities will help ensure that, even if corruption cannot be eliminated, the most serious corruption threats to wildlife conservation goals in particular contexts can be identified and acted upon. Small steps will ultimately result in significant advances.

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WWF's mission is to build a future in which humans live in harmony with nature.

U4 is a web-based resource centre for development practitioners who wish to effectively address corruption challenges in their work. U4 is operated by the Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI) — an independent centre for research on international development and policy.

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## Notes

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