

Social Norms and Behavior Change

This document is a printable version of the introductory guide on the [Social Norms and Behavior Change \(SNBC\)](#) topic page of the Targeting Natural Resource Corruption (TNRC) [Knowledge Hub](#). It provides information, guidance, and tools for practitioners who seek to integrate social norms and behavior change approaches into their context-specific programming responses.

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Key takeaways

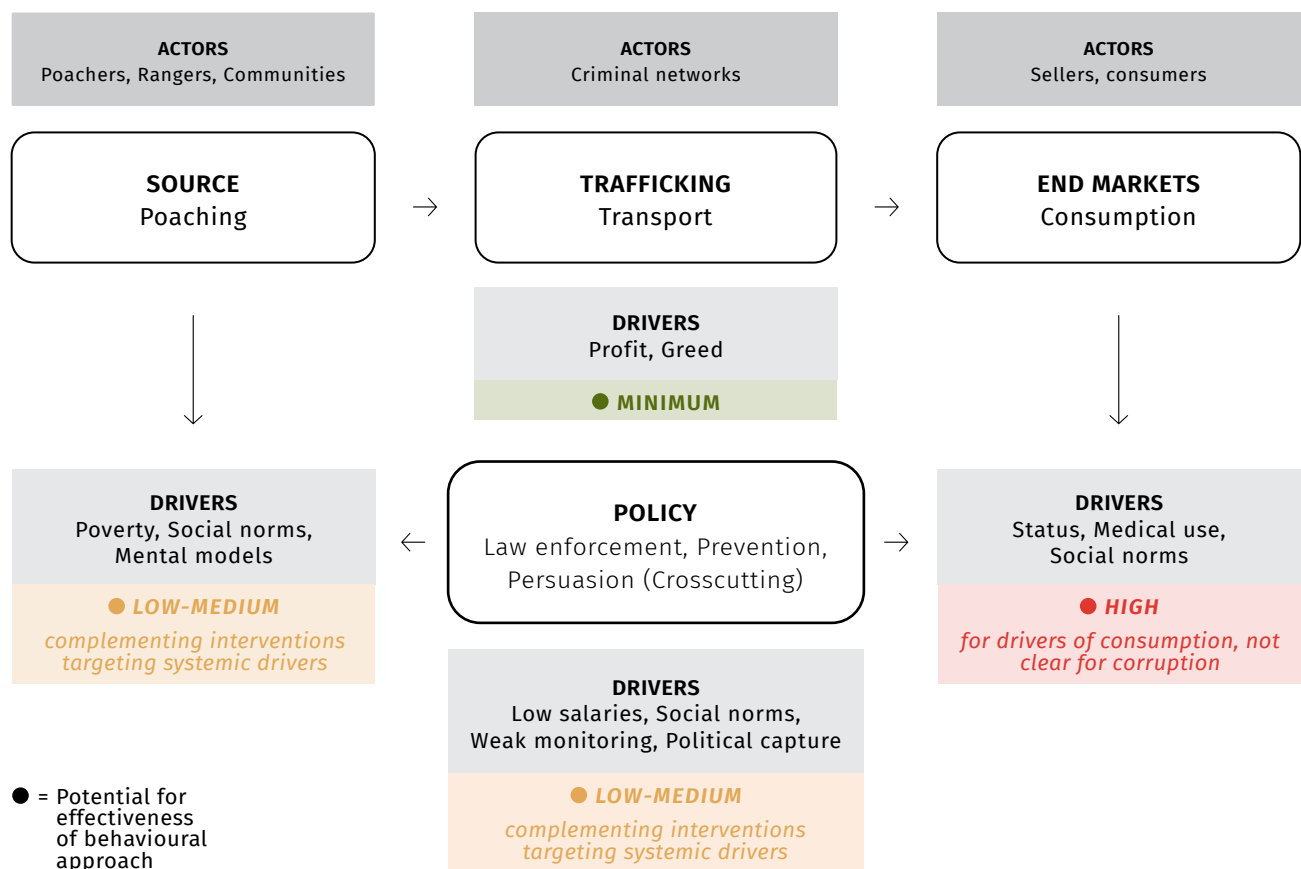
- » Corruption is a complex phenomenon that involves human motivations and expectations, and is based on assessments of what behaviors are considered acceptable and unacceptable in a given context.
- » Anti-corruption interventions informed by social research and behavioral insights can be an important part of a package of initiatives to address the negative impact of corruption on natural resources and conservation outcomes.
- » The design of a “social norms and behavior change” intervention to address corruption is a process, informed by understanding both the specific situation and the drivers behind individual actions. This understanding should include the wider social and cultural dynamics that impact people’s perceptions, attitudes and actions.
- » Selection of priority audiences and identifying exactly which corrupt behaviors, perceptions and attitudes need to change, along with understanding the social expectations, tolerances and normative pressures that influence the environment in which corruption occurs, is the start point for a behavior change strategy.
- » Choice of message, the mode of delivery (including appropriate use of media), pre-testing and ongoing evaluation are essential elements of an SNBC intervention.

Addressing corruption through social norms and behavior change interventions

Natural resource [corruption](#) is complex and multifaceted, and addressing it requires innovative approaches. Social Norms and Behavior Change approaches use behavioral and social science insight and evidence to influence the motivations, attitudes, values, and actions of those engaged in corrupt practices. They can also address wider community perceptions, expectations of, and actions around natural resource use and related corruption.

SNBC approaches can be a key contribution to the overall package of measures to address natural resource corruption. SNBC approaches have already been used in [health](#), [development](#), and [environmental](#) projects. For the illegal wildlife trade, SNBC approaches can complement other forms of more traditional anti-corruption actions and [provide valuable entry points for intervention](#).

Figure 1. Identifying entry points for anti-corruption behavioral interventions to counter wildlife trafficking



Source: [Baez Camargo and Burgess \(2022\)](#)

This guide provides an overview and map of guidance and research for applying an SNBC strategy to natural resource corruption. While this resource is not a how-to guide, it does describe the high-level process for developing an SNBC strategy. It also presents some examples of frameworks, research methods, and considerations for important elements of SNBC strategies like messaging and learning.

1 Social norms and corruption

SNBC work in the environment sector typically draws on a model that considers how factors at the personal, social, community, and environmental levels influence the way a person thinks and acts.¹

Social norms are one of those factors. [Social norms are unwritten, shared standards about what behaviors are expected and/or accepted](#). They are a powerful influencer because they call upon people's desire or need to belong within the wider community, which may be more influential than personal attitudes or morals in determining behaviors. Such a community may be as broad as a country, industry, or ethnic group, or as narrow as a professional cohort or small village.

If corrupt practices are or [become socially accepted or expected](#), they can become “the norm,” leading to [collective corrupt behavior](#). People may engage in corrupt actions because they believe (correctly or not) that “everybody does it,” and they will lose out if they don't do the same. Or people may engage in a corrupt activity because, according to their “[mental models](#),” the activity is considered socially appropriate or expected. The norms of political behavior, for example, may justify—even mandate—overriding environmental legislation in return for campaign donations, or taking kickbacks in order to bring gifts and money back to one's community.

Breaking social norms can lead to significant personal costs such as shaming, social [ostracization](#), and loss of [status](#). Resisting these “norms” can also lead to diminished opportunities (for example, promotion), and even reprisals. Establishing new standards of behavior therefore requires overcoming or changing existing norms.

2 Elements of an SNBC strategy

2.1 Formative research and developing the baseline

The starting point for any anti-corruption intervention and any SNBC approach is a [situation analysis](#) of the sector, [institution](#), [value chain](#), [process](#), [company](#), or physical space/jurisdiction of concern. A situation analysis can take several forms, and different types will provide important insights on the corruption risks, corrupt actions, target groups, and power relationships that will influence the opportunities and constraints for anti-corruption responses. Once those who are engaging in corrupt behaviors or influencing and condoning such behaviors [have been identified](#), the next step is to understand the *drivers* of those behaviors. This formative research provides the human and social insight essential to the design of an effective intervention strategy.

Getting started:

- » This [paper](#) and this [101 guide](#) provide good overviews of the basics of a behavioral approach and methods to investigate social norms, with an excellent framework for leading questions to explore.
- » At the country level, resources like the Corruption Barometers from Transparency International provide high-level insight around existing social norms and citizens' perceptions and tolerances around corruption.
- » This [detailed research protocol](#) provides a step-by-step guide to gathering baseline data and formative insight around corruption behaviors and norms that facilitate the illegal wildlife trade.

¹ The “Socio-ecological Model” is probably the most important [theoretical backing](#) to SNBC approaches in the environment sector. USAID's illegal wildlife product [Demand Reduction Guidebook](#) draws from the Socio-ecological Model. This [overview](#) summarizes other relevant approaches related to SNBC in natural resource management. Similarly, RARE's synthesis of [Behavior Change Interventions in Practice](#) summarizes six approaches based on a review of thirty organizations across different industry contexts.

- » [These resources provide social norm-based examples](#) from WWF experience on tackling red tape, addressing collusive corruption, and supporting first line defenders.
- » [This model results chain](#) illustrates how conservation and natural resource management practitioners could integrate SNBC into a conservation activity.

2.2 Types of SNBC messages and good practices

A number of potential SNBC approaches are available to address different types of corruption challenges. The key differences, once the target audience has been defined, relate to the way the message is formulated and the style or tone of delivery. Some key approaches include:

- » Leveraging [positive recognition](#) and triggering positive emotions, like pride of conduct.
- » Providing information that challenges collectively held views, such as publicizing survey data that shows that people don't actually approve of corruption, even where it is seen to be the normal state of affairs.
- » Providing [clear alternatives](#) to the “[function](#)” that the negative / corrupt behavior is serving, making it easier to change.
- » [Highlighting the impacts of corruption](#), especially for a specific group you are targeting or people that group may care about, and the unequal distribution of corruption's costs.

Though experience and research on corruption messaging are still limited, [evidence suggests](#) some preliminary recommendations for practitioners to bear in mind. These include:

- » Emphasizing that corruption is widespread typically backfires. Part of the reason is that this message does not provide any new information and simply validates the belief that most people engage in corrupt actions and it is therefore inevitable.
- » Messages that are tailored to a narrow target audience may be more effective than generic messaging diffused to a wider, less defined audience.
- » Messages highlighting that corruption is wrong (illegal, unethical, immoral) are also mostly ineffective, but messages that appeal to a target group's sense of professional identity or pride, especially when delivered by people who target group members know and respect, can be more effective.

Beyond these, there are [common principles](#) about the quality, tone, and frame of especially persuasive [messaging](#), as well as the character and personality traits of impactful messengers.

2.3 Workplace interventions

Changing culture and attitudes within a workplace environment is akin to changing norms at the community or wider societal level. Specific anti-corruption management tools (ranging from disciplinary action and stringent auditing, to [whistleblowing procedures](#)) may be introduced, but a fundamental shift in organization culture may be needed to create an enabling environment for individual change. Establishing [codes of conduct](#), [codes of ethics](#), or a “code of integrity”² can serve as an expression of the ethical values promoted by the organization, and strong leadership and example from senior managers can help set the parameters for what is considered acceptable behavior within the workplace. Such codes can be helpful to clarify an organization's position about giving and receiving gifts, for example.

² Many examples exist across the private sector, like [here](#) and [here](#).

Evidence of impact is mixed, however, and [some research](#) suggests that codes of conduct or integrity, as a type of SNBC message, need to be tailored to the sector in which the organization works and should be accompanied by rigorous and effective disciplinary codes. In every case, integrity codes should be just one part of an integrated program of rules and [incentives](#) encouraging ethical behavior.

2.4 Pre-testing

Any form of SNBC communication (whether a campaign or more focused messaging) should be [pre-tested](#) at concept stage, *before* materials are developed and diffused. Focus groups with the target audience, or quantitative approaches such as a randomized controlled trial of alternative messaging, are often used. Broad campaigns typically should be piloted at a smaller scale, for example at a regional level or through limited media, before being rolled out to reach wider target audiences. Feedback from test audiences will enable refinement of the creative style, message, and credibility of the material.

2.5 Media strategy and media planning

While recognizing that the lessons on anti-corruption messaging may point to targeting narrower audiences, some SNBC strategies may involve the use of media (conventional and/or social media). In these cases, it is important to give early thought to the [media plan](#), as this will influence the degree of [complexity and sensitivity of creative content](#). A [well-executed media plan](#) will ensure the most appropriate channels/vehicles are used to reach the target audience(s) with maximum cost efficiency (looking at reach, opportunity to see, number of impacts, etc.).

2.6 Evaluation of impact

Evaluating the success of the SNBC campaign requires [different approaches](#), based on the method for delivering messages. Pre- and post- surveys, or exit surveys, are often used to assess whether attitudes have changed. For media campaigns, the effectiveness and efficiency of the selected media or vehicle of delivery, and the effectiveness of the creative content and messaging, should be assessed. At the project level, a number of quantitative and qualitative tools can be used to conduct monitoring and impact evaluation, relevant to corruption behaviors and norms that facilitate illegal wildlife trade.

Find all [resources on social norms and behavior change](#) on the [TNRC Knowledge Hub](#).

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