

SNBC Guide 4

Supporting front-line wildlife defenders through social norms approaches

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About this series

This is the last in a series of four guides that provide practical guidance on the potential applications of behavioral science towards enhancing anti-corruption and conservation efforts.

This resource discusses the challenge of corruption affecting front-line wildlife defenders, namely rangers, through a social norms and behavior change (SNBC) lens. The goal is to enhance understanding of the diverse drivers of corruption among these actors and to suggest concrete SNBC approaches to address this type of corruption.

The series includes three other guides:

1. [Behavioral science introduction for addressing corruption's impact on the environment](#)
2. [Tackling Red Tape to Reduce Bribery: Anti-corruption as a problem-solving tool in fisheries](#)
3. [Addressing collusive corruption in community-managed forests](#)

What is the problem?

Studies from around the world have reported corruption among rangers working in natural reserves, parks, forests and generally in protected areas (Jagers et. al. 2021, Somerville 2016, Moreto et. al. 2015, EIA 2014, Duffy 2014). These individuals, who are formally tasked with protecting wildlife and the ecosystem, are at risk of being bribed and/or coerced into betraying their mandate by, for example, turning a blind eye to illicit activities or providing information about the location of wildlife or the schedules of monitoring patrols. The exact prevalence of corruption among this group is hard to estimate. However, in some cases, even recognizing wide margins of error, the scale of the problem is apparent. In one of the most famous national parks in Africa, for example, it is reported that between 40% and 70% of enforcement staff may be aiding poaching networks or involved in corruption in some way ([Wildlife Justice Commission 2023, p.18](#)).

Sometimes rangers are extorted into complicity, being left with no choice when criminal organizations threaten their families if they don't cooperate (Rademeyer 2023 p.9). However, it is not just organized criminal networks that pressure them. According to some estimates, over 20% of rangers feel threatened by local communities due to their role in controlling wildlife poaching, for example ([WWF 2016](#) and [WWF 2022](#)).

Why should this be the case? Most importantly, the distinction between rangers and the communities living near protected areas oversimplifies the situation. Rangers may be part of those communities, to which their families, friends and acquaintances also belong. These communities may prioritize other goals than wildlife protection, especially when poverty and unmet needs are high. In some cases, wildlife protection is even perceived to be in opposition to the community's interest. This means that rangers often face conflicting norms ([Kassa et. al. 2021](#), [Rademeyer 2023](#)).

On the one hand, rangers' professional duties require them to act with integrity in enforcing the rule of law, protecting wildlife, and arresting poachers and illegal loggers. On the other hand, their families and social networks may expect them to harness every opportunity to provide needed resources to cover essential livelihood expenses, even if that means raising funds through corrupt endeavors. Research has documented that some rangers engage in corruption to complement their existing incomes, often to pay for basic needs such as school fees for their children ([Dutta 2020](#)).

From the perspective of the communities, social norms relating to the obligation to provide for one's group may override legal considerations. This may also be related to how status and respectability can be acquired, or lost, in the community. Evidence from East Africa uncovered mental models supporting the notion that "the one who brings in resources and shares them is popular and respected (regardless of the origin of the resources), whereas the one who follows the law (in doing so foregoes opportunities for enrichment) is scorned and ridiculed" ([Baez-Camargo et al 2020](#)).

These factors illustrate why rangers might face conflicting pressures; following their official mandates may estrange them from close social relationships. This is a powerful explanation for why corruption among rangers could be not only prevalent but also resilient to conventional anti-corruption approaches.

How can social norms and behavioral insights affect options to address corruption?

Recommendations to curb corruption among rangers often involve actions such as establishing complaint mechanisms to denounce corruption and protect whistleblowers, adopting codes of ethics and conduct, increasing salaries, and investing in capacity building, integrity trainings, and awareness raising about corruption among rangers ([Belecky et al. 2021](#)). While these are all

sound recommendations in general, it is worthwhile exploring how local social norms might impact the effectiveness of these approaches.

Reporting and whistleblower mechanisms might have limited impact when those in a position to denounce corruption have few incentives to do so, and social norms can affect those incentives. When communities, and particularly the close networks of rangers, have a stake in protecting corrupt activities because they provide needed resources, it is not clear who in this setting would have incentives to report. Denouncing is further problematized by social norms that prescribe protecting one's network and by the presence of social sanctions (such as gossiping or even ostracizing) against those who infringe on those social norms.

The impact of **codes of ethics and integrity capacity building** can be limited by the empathy gap. When rangers come under pressure, such as social pressure from family and acquaintances to deliver resources beyond what they can afford with their salary, their decision making will inevitably be affected by strong emotions. Under such circumstances, their ability to make the decision to follow the formal rules they learned in training may be considerably challenged ([Baez Camargo 2023](#)).

There are some indications that a strong **law enforcement action** against corruption among rangers might produce a deterrence effect. In a case in South Africa, for example, arrest and prosecution of two rangers implicated in corruption, money laundering and fraud were associated with a sharp decline in poacher activity in the park ([Rademeyer 2023](#)). However, reducing corruption on the basis of fear is hardly a sustainable, or even desirable, approach. In fact, a strong punitive approach targeting rangers might doubly punish them, as they are often not only working under strenuous conditions with inadequate pay (Anagnaostou et al. 2022), but they can also be the most vulnerable to

pressures from organized crime networks and may be extorted into supporting criminal acts.

Furthermore, when strong social norms and social ties with nearby communities are at play, as described above, a punitive approach can backfire. Some evidence suggests that prosecution of rangers might lead some to actually join poaching units and collude with poachers against their own colleagues ([Dutta 2020](#)). Other [cases](#) suggest that those who are responsible for enforcement (making arrests and seizing illicit wildlife products), themselves sometimes misuse the seized assets and goods for their own gain.

These scenarios clearly illustrate why applying a strong law enforcement approach without addressing the underlying incentives and drivers is only likely to displace, rather than eradicate, corruption. As a case in point, a study in Nigeria identified four variables as the most relevant in impacting the propensity of rangers to engage in corrupt behaviors: fear of community-level sanctions, average monthly income, number of dependents, and having a complicit family member or friend ([Atuo et al. 2020](#)). Notably, two of the four are related to social norms, and none of them involved fear of apprehension by law enforcement.

Finally, social norms may also affect efforts to address corruption that rely on **changing economic conditions**, such as increasing ranger salaries (in the absence of other changes). Empirical evidence from Ghana suggested that salary increases to police may have actually increased bribery (Folz and Opoku-Agyemang 2015) in an experiment. These findings are consistent with the qualitative findings from Baez Camargo et al. (2020), which suggest that increasing the salaries of public officials might be met by an increase in the demands and expectations of the officials' social networks, neutralizing or even overpowering the effect of the policy on the prevalence of corruption.

What can be done through the application of behavioral insights?

The examples above illustrate the fact that anti-corruption approaches must address the underlying drivers, and not just the manifestations, of corrupt behaviors if they are to be effective and sustainable. In formulating anti-corruption efforts, a key goal should be closing the gap between conflicting norms as much as possible in order to relieve pressure to engage in corruption ([Jackson and Köbis 2018](#)). In this respect, it is crucial to assess which norms can be shifted and how.

An example from Rwanda indicates that alignment of professional and social norms is indeed possible. Public administration reform in Rwanda has emphasized, among other things, increasing the salaries of public officials *and* enforcing a strict anti-corruption policy. Those who are implicated in acts of corruption face severe consequences, starting with loss of their job. Because of the higher salaries, families of public officials recognize the value of the employment, and systematic enforcement efforts mean there is a high threat of losing the breadwinner's ability to provide if implicated in corruption. This combination has worked to shift the social norm to the effect that families pressure public officials toward NOT engaging in corruption ([Baez Camargo et al. 2017](#)). A particularly notable aspect of this experience is that the strict approach works because underlying drivers (low wages and unmet needs) have been addressed. By starting with an understanding of the full range of incentives and expectations that may drive corrupt actions, this approach appears to have closed the gap between conflicting social norms, instead aligning various expectations so they support *refraining* from corrupt activities instead of engaging in them.

These considerations also highlight how an SNBC lens can promote sustainability in corruption prevention activities. Using an SNBC perspective informs practitioners of ways that incentives can

be aligned with, and ideally account for, legitimate demands underpinning the social pressures rangers might be exposed to. There is no one-size-fits-all solution on how this might best be achieved. For instance, reliable supplies and equipment, access to health care for rangers and their families, or leaders who model integrity could all contribute to aligning rangers' social and material expectations with a standard of resisting corruption.

Elite ranger units and/or pay-for-performance schemes are also ways of offering rewards to address underlying reasons why corruption is instrumental to rangers and their social networks. Linking status in an elite unit or meeting clear performance criteria to benefits like receiving scholarships for children, for example, raises the stakes of abiding by integrity codes not just for the rangers but also for their families and communities. A central element in any approach along like this is that clear rules for identifying rule-breaking, along with close monitoring and enforcement, are needed.

Because such monitoring and enforcement can be challenging, especially when dealing with remote stations and limited communications, it might be desirable to complement material benefits with other types of incentives that can help reinforce the desired norms and behaviors. One example is positive recognition, whereby trained and compliant rangers are given public visibility and showcased as role models in order to create and prime new roles and identities around which to build social status and incentivizing rangers and their networks to wish to maintain it. Priming new identities by creating highly rewarded roles where professional ethics and high integrity are key defining characteristics can be effective, especially when complemented by responses to the material needs of rangers ([Buntaine 2022](#)).

The goal of combining material and social recognition incentives is to make refraining from engaging with corruption a desirable behavior, one that is responsive to social needs, so that

maintaining the job and associated status become something rangers and their family and community networks will want to preserve. What will constitute meaningful incentives and motivations will likely be different in every case, so it is essential to start with [research](#) to understand the needs and motivations of the people whose actions we desire to change.

Table 1 shows how the elements involved in this case can be translated into the five core principles for designing SNBC interventions described in [Guide 1](#).

Table 1. Principles for SNBC to combat corruption among front line defenders

Behavior Change “Principle”	Illustration of how this factor can be assessed
Enabling Environment	<p>An understanding of the prevalence of bribe taking among the ranger force in a certain area is key, as well as past efforts to address the problem, including introducing additional oversight or controls. Reported levels of police corruption in the relevant area is also important information.</p> <p>Similarly, because social norms and social pressures can play a role in driving bribery, a clear understanding of motivations and needs of rangers and their social networks is essential. (See guidance here).</p>
Insight and Targeting	<p>Conducting social research – including among rangers serving custodial sentences (e.g., criminal profiling such as those undertaken in the KAZA region by TRAFFIC). This serves the purpose of acquiring a deep understanding of the views, narratives, and expectations surrounding bribery held among rangers and the communities they belong to/ where they work. This builds a foundation towards engaging communities in constructive discussions on needs, expectations and relationships with conservation actors.</p>
Frameworks and Theory	<p>The concepts of social recognition, reciprocity and reward seem central and should be considered comprehensively. Frameworks for understanding social norms and corruption can be taken up to find concrete intervention themes and entry points. A good resource is this guide on Anti-Corruption Through a Social Norms Lens.</p>
Messages and Messengers	<p>Community leaders, local officials or representatives, and/or religious institutions may play a part. For rangers, appealing to professional ethics can be primed by involving ranger federation leaders.</p>
Repetition, Adaptation, Reward	<p>Scaling up regional communication channels between rangers to connect champions and cultivate new social norms and a sense of community among them. This can be pursued through initiatives led by bodies such as African Parks, so that rangers feel connected outside of the village.</p>

Table 2 illustrates how corruption among rangers can be addressed through interventions aimed at prevention and persuasion at the individual and institutional levels.

Table 2. Mixed Methods for SNBC to combat corruption in front line defenders

	Prevention	Persuasion
Individuals	Address the factors that drive rangers to engage in corrupt actions, in particular low incomes, poor or inadequate equipment, low respect for the role, poor professionalism or recognition, combined with high personal risk factors (e.g., being shot at by poachers the police have overlooked).	Engage rangers in scenario- and role play-based training so they feel more confident and capable of getting out of potential corrupt situations / away from corrupt individuals. Enable whistleblowing schemes and anonymous corruption reporting hotlines. Consider rotating team leaders regularly to destabilize corrupt habits or networks in high-risk areas.
Institutions	Investigate and criminalize / prosecute extortive pressures where these are found – ensure high visibility for cases to increase the perception that there are risk factors for engaging in corrupt behaviors such as bribe taking. Ensure independent watchdogs and increased scrutiny on codes of integrity or conduct.	Work with village elders and other community leaders to shift social expectations and norms and to support community stewardship schemes, whereby the assets arising from wildlife protection are distributed more evenly across local populations rather than being the sole responsibility of rangers to secure (e.g., People Not Poaching Toolkit). Consider use of media edutainment programmes (see PMC’s “Pambazuko” radio series in Rwanda); also RARE’s “Principles of Pride” initiatives .

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