SNBC Guide 1

Behavioral science introduction for addressing corruption's impact on the environment

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About this series

This is the first of 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 provides an introduction to behavioral science and why it might be relevant to anti-corruption and conservation practitioners, along with concrete guidance for practitioners on how to get started in applying social norms and behavior change insights to efforts to reduce the impact of corruption on conservation.

The series includes three other guides:

2. [Tackling Red Tape to Reduce Bribery: Anti-corruption as a problem-solving tool in fisheries](#)

3. [Addressing collusive corruption in community-managed forests](#)

4. [Supporting front-line wildlife defenders through social norms approaches](#)

This TNRC Guide shares practical knowledge for program designers and implementers to reduce corruption's impact on conservation.

Why should conservation and anti-corruption practitioners care?

Behavioral science is relevant to practitioners who aim to develop initiatives that address the impact of corruption on natural resource management (NRM) and conservation objectives because it can give insights about:

» the barriers to desired actions to prevent, denounce and fight corruption when individuals, in spite of having enough information, and awareness, fail to make the decisions they know are better for them, their communities, and the environment.

» how individuals may react when they are confronted with changes in their context, which can help practitioners assess the likely effectiveness of policy and programmatic actions against corruption.

» how to use behavioral insights to design anti-corruption projects and activities that will help overcome barriers to change by making desired changes easier to adopt and embrace by target groups and beneficiaries.

What is behavioral science?

Behavioral science studies the manner in which people make decisions, and ultimately behave, in the real world. It employs insights from social and clinical psychology as well as economics. Notably, behavioral science has produced ample evidence that people often make decisions based on different types of biases[1] and social pressures rather than by assessing the expected costs and benefits (and associated probabilities) of different possible choices. In other words, people do not always behave rationally.

What is a "behavior," exactly?

In line with Ajzen (2011),[2] a behavior is comprised of an action, a target, a context, and a time. For example, an illegal logger could give a border guard (target) a bribe (action) to allow illegally sourced timber (context) to transit a checkpoint for shipment (time). The four elements highlight the importance of carefully identifying the behavior we are aiming to change. The target, context and/or timing might significantly change the meaning of the same action, which might be corrupt in some cases and not in others. Furthermore, different behavior change approaches might be needed for addressing the same action in different contexts or where different stakeholders are involved.

By understanding the nature of the biases that impact decision-making and behaviors, which often represent intangible but formidable barriers to change, practitioners can obtain useful information to develop innovative approaches to address pervasive and resilient forms of corruption. (See Burgess 2023 for related guidance on conducting research identify social norms and opportunities for behavior change efforts.)

Examples of frequent behavioral barriers to change

Present Bias: People tend to prefer present or short-term gains and underestimate the impact and costs that decisions will have in the future. For example, present bias might explain why people don't realize that engaging in corruption erodes state institutions and trust in government, which generates negative social outcomes for everyone. Present bias can also be at play when corruption in community-managed natural resources leads to over-exploitation without notice of the long-term damage to the communities from environmental damages (see Guide 3).

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[1] These are known as cognitive biases, which can be defined as "a systematic thought process caused by the tendency of the human brain to simplify information processing through a filter of personal experience and preferences." (see https://www.techtarget.com/searchenterpriseai/definition/cognitive-bias)
[2] As referenced in Sánchez-Mercado, A., et. al (2023). Understanding your Audience and their behavior. Provita.

Confirmation bias: People tend to give more weight to information that confirms their previously-held beliefs than to information that contradicts them. Individuals who benefit from corruption that facilitates wildlife crimes, for example, might give little credence to data about the environmental consequences and costs from the loss of wildlife. Confirmation bias can also come into play when the belief that government agencies are corrupt and not trustworthy makes small fishers unwilling to process permits and licenses and keeps them operating in informality (see Guide 2).

Empathy gap: The empathy gap refers to a mismatch between how people rationally think they will behave when confronted with a particular situation and how they actually behave when that situation arises. The empathy gap is relevant for anti-corruption efforts because it can hamper the impact of integrity trainings (like a code of conduct training) when public officials are confronted with social pressures to participate in corruption (see Guide 4).

Conformity bias: Conformity bias refers to the tendency for individuals to adopt the behaviors, attitudes and opinions of those in their social group. Conformity bias arises when individuals are trying to fit into a social group or act in accordance with perceived social norms, or when they feel peer pressure. This can prevent people from denouncing cases of corruption amongst their peers, for example (see Guide 4), and it plays a big part when people justify engaging in corruption because "everyone else is doing it."

Social Norms: Social norms are closely associated with the conformity bias. They are unwritten rules about what individuals believe most people in their peer or community reference group think, believe, and do. Social norms provide powerful signals about "group belonging," and breaking closely-held norms can have significant implications for reputation, status, and respectability. For these

reasons, social norms might have an overwhelming influence on a person's choices, even if they contradict personal beliefs. For example, when a personal conviction against bribery is overpowered by family or community expectations that a public position should be used to support one's social network, a strong social norm might be at play (see Guide 4).

Sludge: "Sludge" refers to situations where many challenges or frictions complicate a particular decision or behavior choice (see, for example, Sunstein 2019). Sludge makes something unnecessarily effortful, tedious, or inconvenient and therefore, most people will tend to avoid pursuing that option. "Red tape" is a common example of how sludge incentivizes corruption: dealing with bureaucratic requirements may be so onerous that someone may feel it makes better sense to give a bribe to achieve the same objective without the complicated procedures (see Guide 2).

How to get started?

Programming that addresses social norms and targets specific behavior changes to reduce corruption range across two key dimensions:

» the targeted "actors," which may be individuals or a broader collective, and

» the approach used, which may be prevention or persuasion.

Figure 1 includes examples of programs that take these different approaches. It also reminds that SNBC approaches are usually not the only element involved in trying to stop a problematic behavior or affect an attitude that has negative impact on environmental goals.

With these broad dimensions in mind, using a "Benefits and Barriers" framework can help practitioners identify entry points for adding an SNBC lens to programs that seek to address the impact of corruption on environmental objectives.[3] This approach involves three steps:

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[3] This model is based on Burgess, G., et. al (2022). Guidance for CITES Parties to Develop and Implement Demand Reduction Strategies to Combat Illegal Trade in CITES-listed Species. CITES.

Figure 1. SNBC amidst other solutions

	Prevention	Persuasion
Self		
Society		

Source: TRAFFIC.ORG

1. **Define your behavioral goals:** It is important to be as concrete as possible in the type of corruption that the intervention is targeting and the concrete behaviors you are seeking to change. For example, in tackling bribery of public officials tasked with issuing fishing permits, be clear about the details:

   a. **What?** What specific types of permits are at stake?

   b. **Who?** Who participates in the bribery transaction? Are several public officials colluding? Are brokers involved? What profile of service seeker is most likely to bribe or be bribed? What are their socio-economic and psycho-demographic traits, characteristics and signifiers?

   c. **How?** Is it typically the public official who extracts extortive bribes from users, or do users tend to offer bribes proactively?

   d. **When?** Are there particular circumstances or contexts that trigger bribery, or is it a more routine or regular practice?

   e. **Why?** Are users bribing because red tape is too time consuming? Are public officials demanding bribes because their salaries are too low? Is there a social norm indicating the "normal" way to obtain a permit?

2. **Clarify who are the persuadable people:** Who are the possible agents of change whose incentives and motivations might be suitably targeted to encourage change in their behaviors? Who among the participants in the bribery transaction may have incentives to change their behaviors?

3. **Develop approaches based on insights** into benefits, barriers, needs and wants associated to the targeted behavior. A template such as the one in Table 1 can help.

Table 1. Approaches based on insights

	CURRENT BEHAVIOR (giving and receiving bribes)		DESIRED BEHAVIOR (replacing bribery with legal management and enforcement practices)	
	Benefits	*Barriers*	*Benefits*	*Barriers*
INTRINSIC FACTORS *(e.g., capability, need, motivation)*	- Bribes received provide a vital supplement to already stretched household income - Taking bribes conforms to the professional norm and expected practice	- Fear of new management practices being introduced and exposing historic wrongdoing - Fear of the risk of penalties from anti-corruption crackdowns, and whistleblowers amongst new staff	- Increases professionalization and modernization of the workforce - Engenders personal pride that practice aligns more with individual moral compass/ values	- Increases paperwork and process management/ decreases efficiency - Reduces household income and other personal benefits (e.g, prestige) for a few key players
EXTRINSIC FACTORS *(e.g., Opportunity, enabling environment)*	- Bribery reduces bureaucracy and frictions imposed by authorities perceived to be far from and out of touch with realities on the ground	- Increasing international scrutiny on scarce fishing resources - Moving away from traditional practice and time-honoured systems in an "informal economy"	- Enables more sustainable management of fisheries resources and equitable distribution of proceeds for community benefit	- Social or peer pressure, perhaps even ridicule, from those resistant to change

Guiding considerations for designing behavior change programming

Once the benefits and barriers to change have been identified, the next step is to formulate an adequate intervention to encourage the adoption of the desired behavior. While interventions must be tailored to each context and specific corruption problem, the three companions to this guide provide some concrete examples of ways to incorporate SNBC insights to address three types of corruption that are often encountered in the NRM sphere.

At the same time, regardless of the specific contexts and chosen approaches, some broad considerations should be applied to every proposed design to ensure rigor. Ten "*Benchmarks for Behavior Change*" developed by TRAFFIC (Burgess 2021) can help practitioners to quality assure their approaches, ensuring they are effective and building on evidence from fields where the application of behavioral science is more established - such as public health and human and social development. The Benchmarks operate as a "checklist" for ensuring the best likelihood of impact.

1. The initiative should be **insight-led and evidence-based**, including steps such as pre-testing and experimental design where possible and necessary.

2. The initiative should be **targeted**, addressing its audience's desires and motivations, focusing on a high-priority group, and designed to change a specific behavior.

3. The initiative should be informed by **up-to-date and culturally appropriate behavioral theories**, frameworks, and models of change.

4. The initiative should **change what people do**, not just what they know or feel – going beyond awareness raising to focus on changing attitudes and actions.

5. The initiative should be **led from within** the communities being targeted, to ensure an approach that is culturally appropriate and sensitive. Co-design can also help promote the sustainability of the intervention.

6. The initiative could **embed messaging** in existing popular communications or appeals, employing creative approaches that inspire change, if there is a good fit with existing campaigns.

7. The initiative should **engage multiple stakeholders**, with a focus on those who are *persuasive* - not just popular – when used as "messengers."

8. The initiative's design should consider the **benefits of, and barriers to, adoption of desired behavior(s)**.

9. The initiative should involve **repeating and reminding** the target audience of the behavioral goal, **recognizing and rewarding progress and including refinements over time**.

10. The initiative should include a **robust evaluation of impact**, including processes to share success factors, lessons learned and adaptive management treatments.

The Benchmarks can also be condensed into *five core principles*:

1. **Enabling Environment:**
Behavior change efforts need a conducive environment, usually a mix of incentives for the "good" behavior, alongside controls for the "bad" one. In relation to corruption, this could include for example, anti-bribery legislation that is visibly enforced, including for high-level officials, alongside cultural intolerance of corrupt acts, and community confidence in tools available for those trying to avoid corruption – such as anonymous incident reporting hotlines, national whistle-blower schemes, coaching and scenario-building / role-player training for judiciary, prosecutors and PEPs. Creative communications initiatives such as the zero rupee note in India, which could be handed over instead of real money to enable those asked to pay a bribe to avoid doing so, if they are widely adopted, can also be part of a conducive enabling environment.

2. **Insight and Targeting:**
Those designing behavior change interventions need to understand the triggers and drivers for corrupt behavior when it occurs and tailor approaches accordingly. Initiatives should be targeted to what the most persuadable segment of the high-priority group "thinks, believes, feels and does" (see WWF 2020). For example, introducing a timber-tracker app that personnel at all nodes along timber export chains—from the loggers through company drivers and customs officials—have to use, but then understanding where the risk points are for inspectors "forgetting their phone" or not charging the battery, and setting training and professional conduct standards in place, alongside risk-mitigation strategies and additional independent oversight, to ensure adherence and utilisation by all (see Mgaza 2022).

3. **Frameworks and Theory:**
Behavior change initiatives should draw on a strong basic framework and include clear theories or models of change. For example, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Model (or [Socio-Ecological Model](#)), illustrates the influences on an individual's decision-making across intrinsic (e.g., attitudes, values, experience); peer-reference group (e.g., family, colleagues, friends); community (e.g., local neighbourhood, workforce) and extrinsic (e.g., government /society) levels, and has informed [actions in Viet Nam](#) to reduce the use of illegal wildlife products for gifting to influence public sector governance or corporate decisions.

4. **Messengers and Messaging:**
Messengers must be appropriately influential with the target audience so the initiative can ensure resonance, not just reach. For example, the CITES Secretariat and UNODC are extremely influential with government departments responsible for international trade in their natural resources and have promoted messages to prevent document fraud in the issuance of CITES permits.[4,5,6,7] This is reinforced through the CITES Resolution on Anti-Corruption ([Res Conf. 17.6](#)), which sets an expectation of reporting and mutual accountability of all CITES parties.

5. **Repetition, Adaptation, Reward:**
Finally, behavior change initiatives need to assess what is working and what isn't and use those insights to refine and adapt their approaches where necessary. Repetition of successful messages and "rewards" or recognition for those engaging in the positive behavior are also influential in ensuring enduring behavior change. For example, when initially rolling out the Chi initiative in Viet

Nam, part of which aimed to reduce corporate influence peddling through gifting of illegal wildlife products, a key lesson was that the target audience would ignore or dismiss messaging from conservation organisations, as they were seen to be irrelevant. An adaptation was to remove all NGO branding from the campaign imagery and visual assets and make them look more like corporate marketing materials instead ([See World Social Marketing Conference Case Study 105, p. 115](#)).

By applying the Benefits and Barriers framework to identify intervention entry points and following the Benchmarks for Promoting Behavior Change spanning the Five Core Principles to develop tailored intervention approaches, practitioners can be guided to address problems of corruption by emphasising prevention and/or persuasion at the individual and/or collective levels.

Please refer to the companion guides in this series for more examples of ways SNBC perspectives can be applied to conservation and natural resource management programming.

For more information on behavioral science and its applications see:

» [Rare and BIT's Behavior Change for Nature](#)
» [TRAFFIC's Social and Behavioral Change resources](#)
» [OECD Library on Behavioral Insights](#)
» [The United Nations Behavioral Science Report and Practitioner's Guide to Getting Started with Behavioral Science](#).

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4 [https://cites.org/eng/news/sundry/2007/fraud_warning.shtml#:~:text=However%2C%20it%20is%20becoming%20increasingly,capacity%20to%20engage%20in%20trade](https://cites.org/eng/news/sundry/2007/fraud_warning.shtml).

5 [https://cites.org/eng/news/sundry/2007/fraud_warning.shtml#:~:text=However%2C%20it%20is%20becoming%20increasingly,capacity%20to%20engage%20in%20trade](https://cites.org/eng/news/sundry/2007/fraud_warning.shtml).

6 https://www.traffic.org/site/assets/files/12675/topic-brief-addressing-corruption-in-cites-documentation-processes.pdf.

7 [https://cites.org/eng/news/sg/Links_between_corruption_wildlife_crime_highlighted_UN_anti-corruption_conference_06112017#:~:text=Among%20other%20things%2C%20this%20resolution,appropriate%20penalties%20under%20national%20legislation](https://cites.org/eng/news/sg/Links_between_corruption_wildlife_crime_highlighted_UN_anti-corruption_conference_06112017).

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