
Curbing wildlife trafficking in Uganda: lessons for practitioners

Dr Saba Kassa, Public Governance Specialist, Basel Institute on Governance

Dr Jacopo Costa, Senior Research Fellow, Basel Institute on Governance

Mr Robert Lugolobi, Governance and Anti-Corruption Specialist, Independent Consultant

Dr Claudia Baez Camargo, Head of Public Governance, Basel Institute on Governance

This policy brief summarises the main findings from extensive field research on the drivers, facilitators and strategies of wildlife trafficking in Uganda. The research shows that individuals engaging in the first stages of the trading route are driven predominantly by aspirations of wealth to overcome socio-economic hardships. This is reinforced by stereotypes that depict wildlife trade as benign and legitimate. The trafficking is also facilitated by weak governance systems that generate high levels of corruption and impunity. In such a context, opportunistic strategies sustain the operations of organised transnational wildlife trafficking networks, not least because of the availability of a ready pool of accomplices who can be co-opted to facilitate the effective consolidation, concealment and corrupt cover of high volumes of wildlife products. Policymakers who wish to reduce the attractiveness of Uganda for organised wildlife trafficking networks are advised to consider these factors when designing their interventions.

Introduction

Wildlife trafficking is a low-risk, high-profit trade. Yet scholars as well as development, conservation and law enforcement practitioners increasingly recognise that tackling it is not only a question of increasing the risks by passing new laws and strengthening their enforcement.

It is equally important to design context-sensitive policies and interventions that are based on an understanding of what really drives individuals to engage in the illegal wildlife trade. The first step is to understand how the local context influences the propensity of individuals to participate in wildlife trafficking, including paying attention to the influence of behavioural (social and heuristic) drivers.

Understanding the context better also sheds more insights into the strategies through which wildlife trafficking is organised. The social connections that link traffickers and their accomplices (including certain public officials) are an

important factor in facilitating the transportation of wildlife products from poachers to end buyers across vast geographical spaces.

Focusing on Uganda, a hub for wildlife trafficking in East Africa, our research¹ sheds light into why and how trafficking of wild animals takes place.

Main findings

Why does wildlife trafficking happen in Uganda? The research evidence suggests three key drivers and facilitators of wildlife trafficking in Uganda.

Wildlife trafficking is a way to meet economic needs

The wildlife trafficking supply chain starts in and around rural areas near natural habitats from where wildlife goods are transported to larger towns.² These areas are often afflicted by high levels of poverty and unmet needs, which

¹ The research is informed by 47 interviews conducted with Ugandan-based and international anti-IWT experts (IGOs, NGOs, academics and public officials); 2 focus group discussions with wildlife conservation and anti-corruption experts in Kampala; 2 focus group discussions with members of reformed poachers' networks in western Uganda; and 4 focus group discussions with individuals

living around a wildlife habitat in northern Uganda between August 2019 and April 2020.

² These larger towns are often close to the border as many of the wildlife goods trafficked through Uganda appear to originate in other countries in the region.

means that money-making opportunities are not easily passed up, even if they are illicit.

This is most vividly illustrated when focus group participants discuss an offer that the fictional “Daniel” receives to help in the transport of wildlife products (see box 1). Research participants note that most individuals (irrespective of gender) who might find themselves in the position of “Daniel” would surely take the offer.

Box 1: Would you accept an offer to participate in IWT? Focus group participants discuss the following scenario:

Daniel has a job as a daily labourer. He is a father and together with his wife, he raises his 5- and 2-year-old daughters. One day Daniel is approached by an old acquaintance named Peter. Peter asks him if he would be interested in helping his business. Peter moves wildlife goods, such as ivory and horn, from one city to another in Uganda. Peter could really use Daniel's help with different tasks, such as: packaging the wildlife goods in different boxes; stacking and organising these boxes in a local warehouse; and loading these boxes onto trucks ready for transport to other cities. The prospect of earning a substantial higher income than he has now has him interested. But he is not sure.

Because livelihood opportunities are constrained, accepting a lucrative business deal that can support both “Daniel” and his family is viewed as an appropriate decision. Adding to this, the evidence from the research suggests that social pressures compound the incentives against rejecting such an offer, even if it is known that the activities are illegal and there might be a risk of getting caught, because doing so would be considered foolish in the eyes of family and friends.

Wildlife trafficking is facilitated by weak governance

Uganda has a comprehensive framework in place to prevent and curb wildlife trafficking, including a new Wildlife Act that was passed into law in 2019. Additionally, a specialised Standards, Wildlife and Utilities Court has been set up to deal with cases of wildlife crime (a first in the continent) and a large intergovernmental committee has been tasked to co-ordinate anti-poaching activities and curb wildlife trafficking across the country.

But laws, regulations and taskforces have limited impact when there is a sizable implementation gap, as is the case in many sectors and agencies in Uganda.³ In turn, high levels of informality characterise many public sector

institutions in Uganda, including some of those tasked with enforcing sanctions for inappropriate behaviour of public officials (Scharbatke-Church, Atim and Chigas, 2020).⁴

Informality refers to the presence of powerful yet unofficial systems of governance within the public sphere. Indeed, the prevalence of informal ways of operating (through unwritten norms, understandings and even accountability relationships) is associated with high levels of corruption in many countries, including Uganda (Golooba-Mutebi, 2018).

This provides the background to understand why trafficking networks are able to instrumentally co-opt individuals in positions of public authority, building and nourishing informal relationships with officials who can help turn a blind eye to certain shipments, or who might help with the release of a detained trafficker.

Stereotypes about wildlife trafficking

People often make sense of their environment and justify their decisions based on commonly held narratives, views, or stereotypes also known as mental models.⁵ For example, mental models provide shortcuts to judge whether an action is pertinent and acceptable under certain circumstances. Mental models also shape the expectations about behaviours associated with certain roles (e.g. “all politicians are corrupt”). Stereotypes and casual narratives are always at play and at a very basic level help with making decisions, i.e. to accept or decline a lucrative yet illegal offer to support trafficking and the justifications for it. Therefore, understanding and framing the meanings ascribed to wildlife and wildlife trafficking within their broader context is important.

In this regard, it is noteworthy that many anti-poaching and trafficking campaigns often invoke the notion that it is important to care for wild animals. But the research evidence suggests that this association is perhaps too distant from the way in which wild animals and trafficking are viewed by those on the ground.

Rather, the research suggests that wildlife is frequently characterised as not ecologically valuable. Frequent stereotypes involve wildlife being seen as commodities to be used, as resources that are owned by the state (and

³ See for instance the Uganda Bureau of Statistics (2017) National Governance, Peace and Security Survey. Kampala, Uganda & Transparency International (2015). *The East African Bribery Index Trends Analysis 2010-2014*. Nairobi: Transparency International

⁴ Scharbatke-Church, C., Atim T and D. Chigas (2020). *Understanding the Underlying Values, Norms and Behaviors Constraining the Implementation of*

Administrative Sanction in the Ugandan Public Service. Massachusetts: Tufts University

⁵ World Bank (2015) *World Development Report 2015: Mind, Society, and Behavior*. Washington DC: World Bank

therefore belong to nobody), or competing with humans over already stressed natural and public resources.

Wildlife trafficking also lacks the negative connotation that those unfamiliar with the context may automatically assume it to have. Wildlife products are viewed very positively, as valuable, rare and as symbols of status and power. Trafficking, in turn, is viewed as a benign form of informal trade that is legitimate, whether legal or not, and a source of wealth and status.

The perspectives of focus group participants regarding the fictitious business man “Peter” who offers “Daniel” a business opportunity by transporting wildlife products are indicative. He was not characterised as a criminal but as a wealthy and generous individual who provides opportunities for the needy.

Utilitarian perspectives of wildlife, alongside characterisations of wildlife trafficking as a benign, legitimate form of informal trade that brings wealth and status, fuels the social acceptability of wildlife trafficking (see box 2). Such sentiments can provide the justification needed to accept opportunities to support illegal activities. These range from citizens who transport products across the border to public officials who look away for a small fee.



How does wildlife trafficking happen in Uganda?
The research evidence suggests that coordination, concealment and corruption are the three basic ingredients of the trafficking networks’ modus operandi in Uganda.

Poverty and weak rule of law generate incentives for diverse groups of people to respond to the demand for

⁶ The conversations with the interviewees suggest that one major contributor to this is when high-level seizures and arrests take place in a particular port, country or region. This can provide the impetus to adapt strategies, find new routings, use different points of exits and establish a new set of collusive connections to facilitate these endeavours. Therefore, it is important to

wildlife products. And while the supply of wildlife products can be established opportunistically from the bottom up, this is not the predominant characterisation of how large volumes of products are sourced in the region. Rather, the findings suggest that wildlife products are procured, handled and transported through a top-down, orchestrated and organised supply chain.

Four key functional roles sustain this supply chain in Uganda and the region, connecting poachers and local middlemen around wildlife habitats to urban middlemen and buyers in the larger towns and cities. While at its higher echelons there is a need to develop long-term relationships of trust, as one moves to the grassroots the trafficking networks can rely on a large supply of willing accomplices to support their operations.

The number of network members, their relative roles, the nature of the collaboration, the relative distance between them and their physical bases can all differ. The research suggests that this fluid shape and dynamic structure of the network forms the backbone of a strategic infrastructure of cooperation that facilitates wildlife trafficking.

Hidden in backpacks, back seats of cars, inside fuel trucks and military trucks or whatever other creative strategy is employed, wildlife products can enter Uganda both through official and unofficial border crossings. The wildlife products find their way from border towns to Kampala where they are consolidated, concealed and cleared for export in preparation for long-haul transport. The research suggests that products most frequently are trafficked out of Uganda via road towards the port of Mombasa in Kenya or via air out of Entebbe Airport. At the same time, the attractiveness of particular routes is not static but changes and adapts to the conditions on the ground.⁶

Along the chain, the trafficking networks are frequently aided by private sector agents, from customs clearing agents and freight forwarders, who help cover up their illicit transport activities, to individuals working at banks and other financial institutions, who work to keep their ill-gained profits from being detected.

While concealment is necessary, it is not sufficient to manage the trafficking of high volumes of wildlife products out of Uganda. It is here where corrupt relationships with public officials come in.

acknowledge that while the information presented here reflects the knowledge gathered at the time of writing, it is possible that other routes and ports of exit in the region have gained prominence.

Such relationships are varied and multifaceted, as the research suggests. For instance, corruption can be a one-off problem-solving strategy, for example to secure the release of a trafficker who has been caught red-handed. However, public officials are not only bribed when the network hits a snag in their operation. In other cases, they may be proactively and strategically co-opted to prevent the law enforcement chain from being activated in the first place.

The research evidence suggests that this selective co-optation of useful and strategic individuals into the trafficking network – alongside elaborate concealment techniques – facilitates the trafficking of large volumes of wildlife products into, through and out of Uganda.

The research evidence is not strong enough to establish how widespread such bribery practices are. However, indications that trafficking networks strategically target and co-opt key public officials through bribes shed light on some of the factors undermining the effectiveness of important enforcement measures in place to fight wildlife trafficking.

Trafficking networks therefore capitalise on a governance context with high levels of corruption that offers opportunities for illegal activities to flourish. As box 3 illustrates, the law enforcement system offers many entry points to opportunistically corrupt public officials and thereby cripple its operation along the trafficking route.



Corruption therefore undermines a crucial first step to fighting wildlife trafficking, namely, the *detection* of wildlife animal trafficking. According to the research findings, the reasons why those with monitoring powers might turn a blind eye are varied. They might have been bribed to do so

but they might also decide not to seize illicit or suspect shipments if they believe that a powerful figure is involved.

Such elements can impact the entire law enforcement chain, from border police, wildlife authority staff, customs officials and prosecutors to judges. Furthermore, without detection, there is no investigation, arrest, prosecution or sanctioning.

In sum, the strategic use of corruption to evade the law enforcement framework and facilitate the trafficking of high volumes of wildlife products make Uganda, in the words of many research participants, the "path of least resistance".

Policy recommendations

Turning wildlife trafficking into a high-risk, low-profit trade is challenging. This research on why and how wildlife trafficking happens in Uganda gives some insights into the factors that sustain the supply of large volumes of wildlife products moving from wildlife habitats in Africa to the hands of consumers all over the world.

The research shows that structural drivers of weak governance systems and constrained socio-economic contexts provide the macro-level conditions for illegal activities, such as wildlife trafficking, to flourish in Uganda. Attempting to curtail wildlife trafficking should therefore also consider, account and address the underlying structural foundations of high levels of poverty and corruption that provide a conducive environment for illicit activities and economies.

Practitioners working on developing approaches to fight wildlife trafficking and the associated corruption should consider the following:

- Although the Ugandan governance context certainly presents significant challenges, it also provides examples of how it is possible for "islands of effectiveness" to emerge. This term refers to institutions which, despite being embedded in challenging contexts, manage to implement reforms and mechanisms that allow for meaningful improvement in institutional performance and control of corruption outcomes. From this perspective, promoting stronger performance in preventing wildlife trafficking would require attention to working with and incentivising anti-corruption and wildlife "champions" and leaders. It also means closely aligning approaches with national priorities such as the economy, social welfare, corruption and financial crime, natural resource management, environment and peace and security.
- The development of sustainable schemes to generate alternative economic opportunities for vulnerable groups will be needed to make it less attractive for individuals to support wildlife trafficking. Experiences of reformed poachers confirm that providing alternative livelihood sources or income-generating activities

associated with wildlife habitats is an effective deterrent to becoming involved in wildlife trafficking.

- Tackling adverse mental models involves utilising behavioural insights to develop effective information or edutainment campaigns that challenge conventional wisdoms. Public awareness campaigns could disseminate stories and illustrative examples that challenge prevailing beliefs about wildlife and make it less socially acceptable to support wildlife trafficking. The messages could potentially be reinforced through positive role models and could also be tailored to expose the hidden costs of wildlife trafficking and corruption that hurt communities and individuals.

Holistic approaches that tackle both the supply and demand for wildlife products are important. Equally important is to put the spotlight not only on poachers but on the organised criminal networks above them and equally the consumers of wildlife products at the end stage of this illicit market.

As part of a holistic approach, it is crucial to not only focus on punishment but also prevention. Programmes should consider the drivers, facilitators and functionality of participating in wildlife trafficking.

Moreover, it is essential that high levels of political support and strong (regional) collaborative law enforcement measures converge with conservation efforts at the grassroots level. This should translate into tangible improvements in the lives and livelihoods of those living near wildlife habitats.

All of this would contribute to Uganda becoming the path of *most* resistance for wildlife trafficking.

Lessons for practitioners

- Understanding and addressing context-sensitive drivers of wildlife trafficking can complement traditional approaches to curbing the trade.
- Incorporating insights from behavioural theory about how to challenge prevailing stereotypes and bring to light hidden costs associated with the illegal wildlife trade can provide more grassroots legitimisation for the fight against it.
- Wildlife trafficking does not operate in a vacuum. It therefore can only be addressed holistically, considering the larger macro-level conditions of weak governance that provides the background for all sorts of illegal activities to flourish.
- Wildlife trafficking networks operate via informal structures of social connections between poachers, middlemen and buyers across vast geographical spaces. The networks are organised yet fluid and dynamic at the same time. Shedding more insights into the invisible social infrastructure that sustains the illicit trade can provide key insights into ways in which to disrupt these networks.
- Corruption too often is seen as a tactic - a financial exchange that facilitates the evasion of the law enforcement system. But corruption involves relationships too, social bonds through which public officials are co-opted into the social infrastructure of the network. Insights into the role of public officials in the trafficking networks are crucial to understanding the ways in which rules and regulations are undermined.
- “Lack of political will” is a catch-all phrase to explain why laws are in place but systematically undermined. Understanding the particular behaviours that facilitate wildlife trafficking and the incentives that give rise to them can shed light on institutional junctions and processes where corruption risks are highest and which explain why an implementation gap is persistent. This more precise understanding of the problem should be the starting point to develop better interventions.

About this report

This report was funded by PMI IMPACT, a grant award initiative of Philip Morris International (PMI). In the performance of their research, the authors maintained full independence from PMI. The views and opinions expressed in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of PMI. Neither PMI, nor any of its affiliates, nor any person acting on their behalf may be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained herein.



The Basel Institute on Governance is an Associated Institute of the University of Basel.

