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Corruption in community-based conservation: A synthesis of lessons

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Key takeaways

» Community-based conservation (CBC) approaches can help achieve the sustainable management of natural resources through decentralization and participatory governance that involve all key stakeholders.

» Critical goals of CBC approaches include providing appropriate conditions for the involvement and participation of local communities in conservation decision-making, greater economic returns shared among community members on a sustainable and equitable basis, and the devolution of authority and decision-making over the use of and access to natural resources.

» But CBC approaches are not necessarily corruption-free. Power imbalances, insecure resource tenure, and governance institutions that prevail prior to implementation provide opportunities for corruption that may hamper CBC outcomes.

» To achieve desired results, therefore, CBC projects require an appreciation of and means to address power and control imbalances between different stakeholders within communities. Initiatives to strengthen institutional and regulatory capacities, social accountability processes, and/or safeguard mechanisms are all particularly important, as is a focus on equitable mechanisms for collecting and sharing revenues.

1. The challenge

Community conservation projects seek to improve the welfare and cooperation of people living in and around conservation areas with objectives such as providing local development opportunities, guaranteeing harvest rights, promoting community involvement and autonomy, and providing compensation for ecosystem services (Brooks, Waylen, and Mulder 2013). Community conservation is also increasingly tied to the importance of collective natural resource management practices and institutions and a recognition of how historical forces have disrupted local people's ability to manage the lands and resources they depend upon (Roe, Nelson, and Sandbrook 2009). Consequently, community conservation has generated much interest, given the widespread popularity of participatory approaches, especially in Africa (Galvin, Beeton, and Luizza 2018).

Within community conservation, a broad range of conservation and development actors have promoted community-based conservation (CBC), specifically, as a governance approach to achieve biodiversity conservation objectives while meeting the development needs of local communities. At the same time, many CBC projects are located in biodiversity hotspots in developing countries with high levels of political corruption, patronage networks,

and weak accountability (Fermeglia 2020, Kaufmann 1997). Competing interests within these contexts can engage in corrupt practices to capture the economic rents and commercial opportunities at both the local and national levels. This corruption can drive overexploitation of resources and create additional environmental costs such as pollution, soil erosion, and climate change (Rus 2014, Smith and Walpole 2005). It can also limit the success of CBC projects by reducing adequate funding levels, distorting project priorities (Smith et al. 2003), and hampering law enforcement and political support (Williams 2019; Leader-Williams, Albon, and Berry 1990).

This TNRC Brief examines the key design features of CBC, focusing on the impact of corruption in the establishment and operation of CBC projects, to draw out lessons for conservation and NRM practitioners. Achieving the promise of CBC requires mitigating power imbalances, securing land tenure, and equitably sharing revenue. When these features are lacking, corruption risks and impact on CBC projects grows. That corruption may take two broad forms: (i) political and administrative corruption involving the commission of corrupt practices or omission of duties by public officials, and (ii) elite capture, bribery, and collusion in the collection and investment of CBC project revenues.

2. Community-based conservation's main design features

There are three main goals of the CBC approach.

First, CBC aims to provide appropriate conditions for the involvement and participation of local communities in conservation decision-making during design, implementation, and evaluation. The "conditioning factors" for this involvement are appropriate and supportive policies and institutional arrangements, including policy and legislation formulation to create an enabling environment for increased community responsibility for resource management (Gichohi, Barrow, and Infield 2000). CBC also requires some form of ownership and tenure,

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Key terms

» **Community-based conservation (CBC)** approaches to community conservation aim to provide appropriate conditions for the involvement and participation of local communities in conservation decision-making, devolve control and authority over resources to that decision-making, and leverage economic incentives for the community to encourage continued conservation. CBC is the most dominant community conservation approach today and is widely practiced under communal tenure conditions.

» **Corruption** in the context of NRM is here defined "as the use or overuse of community (state, village, city, etc.) natural resources with the consent of a state agent by those not legally entitled" including "the extension of existing non-economic relationships (family, 'friendship', and other socially obligating relations) to determine access to these use rights through normative systems of expected exchange" (Robbins 2000, 425). In CBC projects, this corruption might take the form of awarding tenure rights to relatives or those who pay a bribe, as well as elite capture, bribery, and collusion in the collection and investment of CBC projects' revenues.

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described as "the rights of secure, long term access to land and other resources, their benefits and the responsibilities related to these rights" (Burrow and Murphree 2001, 29). CBC approaches often also require recovery and rebuilding of customary, collective resource management institutions (Leach, Mearns, and Scoones 1999).

Second, CBC projects focus on economic incentives – greater returns shared among community members on a sustainable and equitable basis (Burrow and Murphree 2001). While CBC approaches incorporate economic incentives to promote local support, the

shared rationale is that promoting socio-economic benefits is essential in its own right and is a critical strategy for slowing biodiversity degradation (Brooks, Waylen, and Mulder 2013).

The third feature involves the devolution of authority and decision-making over the use of and access to natural resources to communities. The premise behind this devolution is to create a sense of proprietorship and an incentive framework favoring sustainable use (Hackel 1999).

While CBC has generally corrected some of the weaknesses of other conservation approaches, critics have noted failures, particularly in how some projects are implemented. These weaknesses can be found in how "community" is defined and operationalized (Agrawal and Gibson 1999), in the design and implementation of means to distribute benefits (Pascual et al. 2014), and in the flexibility of decision-making processes (Wegner 2016). Despite their emphasis on participation and benefit-sharing, some integrated conservation and development programs, for example, have been criticized for entrenching intrusive reforms (Nelson and Agrawal 2008), along with replicating "more coercive forms of conservation practice and often constitut[ing] an expansion of state authority into remote rural areas" (Neumann 1997, 559). Other CBC approaches have been criticized for effectively supporting state interests and entrenching the assumption that pre-existing subsistence livelihoods need to be sedentarized and modernized (Dressler et al. 2010). Such outcomes would clearly contradict the very objectives of CBC: to bring about more locally relevant and equitable forms of conservation (Berkes 2004).

3. Risks and forms of corruption in CBC approaches

While CBC approaches are typically desirable for their better conservation outcomes than alternative conservation models (Campbell and Vainio-Mattila 2003), their planning and implementation cannot be assumed to be corruption-free. Corrupt practices

in CBC projects manifest at different stages, and the specific context will shape what problems appear. Recognizing these basic points, it is still possible to identify four broad corruption risk areas in CBC: land rights and tenure; political and administrative issues; the level of community engagement; and revenue collection, management, and investment. See Table 1 for a summary.

a) The linkages between communal land tenure and corruption

Ownership and tenure, or "the rights of secure, long-term access to land and other resources, their benefits and the responsibilities related to these rights" (Burrow and Murphree 2001, 29), are a key element of community conservation. As a result, the weak legal status of communal rights is the most pernicious enabler of corruption in CBC. In the absence of secure tenure and consistent and objective land ownership information, land officials and the courts have broad discretion when mediating land disputes, increasing their potential susceptibility to improper influence (Bajpai and Myers 2020). This is especially true in countries where untitled lands and lands under indigenous or customary regimes are legally the property of the state (Wily 2011), where land is administered according to traditional norms and practices that vary from place to place, and where people typically do not have legal titles for their land (Wadström and Tetka 2019).

While addressing tenure security and improving land administration as one of the sources of corruption can be transformational, corruption can still progressively erode local resource management rights, accountability, representation, and voice (Bajpai and Myers 2020). Indeed, recent history has shown that CBC projects implemented in contexts dominated by civil servants susceptible to manipulation, corruption, and exclusion of less powerful land users often lead to inequitable resource management rules, including risks of vesting or concentrating all rights in one group or another (Rugadya 2020).

Table 1. Risks and types of corruption in CBC projects

Risk Area	Risk factors	Corruption type	Example
Land tenure	» Inadequate laws and regulatory procedures » Lack of legal recognition and delineation of customary land, insecure land rights » Non-transparent land registration process » Lack of adequate complaint, grievance, and oversight mechanisms » Irregularity of land processes for transfer of rights and acquisition titles by third parties	» Political influence over CBC projects » Local elite capture » Regulatory corruption (unprocedural transfer of land and award of permits)	Elites can profit from grabbing community-owned lands and extracting a protected resource
Administration and policy	» Unclear institutional responsibilities and decision mechanisms » Lack of adequate, complaint, grievance, and oversight mechanisms » Discretion in planning and design processes » Non-transparent CBC project funding » Lack of legal and policy frameworks for community engagement	» Policy update » Bribery in planning and setting up of CBC projects » Preferential treatment of commercial tourism operators » Collusion in approval of CBC projects » Inter-agency or interdepartmental collusion over resource mapping	Corrupt decision makers may collude with private interests to guide CBC projects away from high conservation value areas
Defining the "community"	» Marginalized groups and special groups not engaged (e.g., minorities, women, youth, people with disabilities) » Economic and cultural differences and variation in expectations among community members » Insufficient safeguard processes and protections	» Local elite capture » Exclusion from decision making	Members of a community who rely on a resource may be unable to get their livelihood needs included in the CBC planning
Economic incentives	» Absence or lack of clarity on revenue collection and management regulations » Unclear institutional responsibilities and decision mechanisms between CBC project management, conservation organizations, and local government » Slow and bureaucratic benefits payment systems » Lack of appropriate oversight over CBC project management	» Revenue leakages » Local elite capture » Bribery in the procurement of high-value capital projects in revenue investments » Embezzlement of CBC revenues	Political leaders can capture project benefits for themselves and/or family and friends, undermining community commitment to the program

A related issue is the specific case of land corruption, which has been generally characterized as pervasive and without effective means of control (TI 2011). Land investors (both local and international) can target countries with weak governance, or local elites can manipulate their country's land governance systems for their own benefit through opaque deals between private investors and local authorities. Other examples include bribes during land administration processes, unaccountable urban planning, or customary laws that deny marginalized groups and minorities their land rights (Tetka and Sorensen 2019).

b) Political and administrative corruption in CBC projects

Contemporary power relations and the history of resource governance arrangements, along with the geography and biodiversity of specific sites, play a critical role in explaining the causes and manifestations of corrupt practices in CBC projects. Even generally legitimate institutions for managing resources can create conditions for corruption, especially where officials have broad discretion (Williams 2019b).

Beyond land disputes (see above), corruption in CBC projects can occur across policy, planning and engagement processes. Political influence and elite capture in the selection of CBC projects (Andersson, Gibson, and Lehoucq 2004), as well as the irregular transfer/conversion of land, and "predatory" relationships between CBC project management and the central state and district governments have been documented in CBC projects (Brockington 2007, Mrema 2017, Thompson and Homewood 2002). In East Africa, for example, state licensing bodies, private entrepreneurs, and local elites have captured benefits from wildlife tourism (Thompson and Homewood 2002). Corruption can also be exacerbated by the "low salaries paid to wildlife personnel and the lack of transparent and accountable oversight processes" (Barnett and Patterson 2006, iii). A legal framework for successful decentralized natural resource management must balance individual rights with broader societal interests, and in doing so it must set

clear rules for interaction between community-based actors and others, along with the limits of state power in those interactions (Lindsay 1999). Such a framework must also be resourced and implemented effectively.

c) Stakeholder engagement and the definition of "community"

Inadequate engagement of stakeholders can lead to the exclusion of less powerful voices and elite capture of CBC initiatives. A realistic appreciation of "community" is needed as a strong foundation for appropriate CBC policies (Little 1994; Barrow and Murphree 1998). Defining "community" as a simple spatial unit, social structure, or set of shared norms often misses "the divergent interests of multiple actors within communities, the interactions or politics through which these interests emerge, and different actors interact with each other, and the institutions that influence the outcomes of political processes" (Agrawal and Gibson 1999).

When these dynamics are not clearly identified and addressed in the design and implementation of CBC initiatives, elites and powerful state or local leaders can more easily exploit the existing legal and social order for their benefit, without regard for target groups and their perceptions of corruption (Burai 2020). Inadequate stakeholders' engagement can result in the exclusion of less powerful stakeholders, elite capture of community engagement processes, and interagency/interdepartmental collusion over resource mapping. Corrupt interactions between local elites and local government officials have been found to occur mainly via patronage and collusive networks in land transfer and resource mapping (Mrema 2017). Other identified corrupt practices concern the predatory relationship between CBC project management and the central state and district governments (Brockington 2007).

Because these dynamics may be hard to see from the outside, NGOs and donor risk perpetuating existing inequalities by reinforcing the role of traditional elites and/or individual-driven, unaccountable local NGOs in CBC projects (Baruah 2017). Safeguards must assess specific local dynamics and center the interests

of marginalized groups to prevent undermining democratic governance and fair distribution of benefits in CBC projects (García-López 2019).

d) Corruption in collection and investment of revenues

Corrupt practices in CBC projects' revenue collection and investment are perhaps the least publicized but most common problem in CBC projects. They can take two main forms. First, revenue leakage may result from ineffective partnerships with private entrepreneurs operating conservation tourism activities within CBC projects (Mbeche and Gargule 2022). This can occur in private-community partnerships, for example, that seek to address communities' lack of business skills and access to international tourism markets (Spenceley and Snyman 2012). Second, local and national elites may perpetuate an unequal distribution of benefits within CBC projects. These elites may seek to receive disproportionate benefits for themselves or their group and engage in exclusionary membership practices like "elite dominance," which "entails actively blocking non-elites attempts to use acquired financial capital to improve their economic position and social standing" (Silva and Motzer 2015, Hoole 2009).

4. How has corruption been addressed in CBC approaces

Corruption is generally difficult to deal with because it is either hidden and hard to identify or ignored or accepted as a means to get around certain policies (Smith and Walpole 2005). As a result, corruption in CBC approaches has generally been addressed through initiatives to strengthen institutional and regulatory capacities, social accountability processes, and/or safeguard mechanisms:

» **Institutional reforms:** CBC projects benefit from parallel investments in good governance, like improved public financial management, transparency, and land management reforms.

These broader anti-corruption policies would also include proposals for a well-paid and motivated workforce, increased penalties for corruption supported by an enforcement system, and streamlined policies that reduce discretion (Williams 2019b, Tacconi and Williams 2020).

» **Participation, engagement, and social accountability:** Strong, supported local participation can allow anti-corruption initiatives to circumvent corrupt state actors and build trust and local legitimacy in on-the-ground anti-corruption efforts (Klein et al. 2021). Social accountability tools such as community monitoring or participatory budgeting can help reduce the harmful impact of corruption and help improve institutional performance (Fox 2015). However, social accountability mechanisms may be less successful "on forms of corruption that are rooted in higher-level political and economic dynamics or driven by criminal actors" (Hart 2022). As a result, in authoritarian settings without elections or other mechanisms for peoples' voices to affect change, community-based approaches may not be as effective (Schatz 2013). As a concrete example, in some contexts, a promising anti-corruption strategy might be empowering those most affected by corruption's negative effects to openly and collectively name and contest it, such as providing anti-poaching intelligence at the boundaries of conservation areas (Smith and Walpole 2005). However, in "some situations, community engagement in anti-poaching and anti-trafficking efforts creates an unacceptable risk," and may not improve outcomes if a community does not trust law enforcement or have significant levels of cohesion and trust (Wilkie, Painter, and Jacob 2016).

» **Safeguards:** Anti-corruption safeguards are necessary for successful CBC, especially for avoiding elite capture and ensuring safety of project stakeholders. Without mechanisms to guarantee the rights of participants, ensure inclusive participation, and report irregularities

or abuses, "corruption can become part of the project culture…" (Burai 2020). Specific safeguards will depend on context, and most major CBC partner organizations likely have some project safeguards in place. Many organizations follow the Global Environmental Facility, for example, which requires safeguards around stakeholder engagement, fiduciary standards, gender, Indigenous Peoples, environmental and social impact monitoring, accountability mechanisms, and more. However, safeguards alone will not necessarily be sufficient, especially in cases where corruption is an accepted, normal form of behavior or "standard operating procedure" (Williams and Dupuy 2017).

5. Lessons for conservation and NRM practitioners

While there are undoubtedly many more lessons from CBC implementation in various contexts, three significant areas of anti-corruption learning emerge from the preceding analysis.

1. Examine assumptions about what constitutes a "community" and the impact of power and exclusion on effective community participation.

The task of appropriately defining "communities" and designing their "participation" in conservation is fraught with conceptual and operational challenges. CBC projects must address core questions of power and control. The challenge for planners is to ask who should be part of the debate in particular places and at particular times, who should set the objectives for CBC projects on the ground, and how should trade-offs between the diverse objectives of different interests (e.g., biodiversity preservation and local livelihoods) be negotiated (Adams and Hulme 2001). CBC activities should define critical stakeholders in terms of their dependence upon the resource in question and the extent of the human impact of the conservation activity. The absence of a clearly defined mechanism to protect and prioritize

community participation in conservation can lead to poor governance of natural resources dominated by, for example, state officials' and politicians' desire to retain distributive powers of patronage (Jones 2010). CBC project planning and implementation therefore should be based on a thorough understanding of localized power relations. Asymmetries in access to information and resources by local elites and political leaders, if left unaddressed by a project, generally lead to capture and embezzlement.

2. Examine how efforts and strategies that rely on local land tenure rightswould interact with existing land uses, informal institutions, and subgroups of interest.

Land tenure and devolution of the use and management of natural resources provide a "foundation for local governance, the stewardship of the land and natural resources, local livelihoods including benefit-sharing, and empowerment and human rights" (Larson and Springer 2016). But the strength and autonomy of local land and natural resources governance institutions – including clearly defined institutional roles and responsibilities – are critical for better outcomes for both conservation and local livelihoods. Local institutions may struggle to preserve their autonomy and control in the face of limited funds, unclear rights and tenure upon which to base decisions, increasing external resource use constraints, and unsupportive and, at times, corrupt national institutions (Hayes and Persha 2010). In planning CBC interventions, conservation and NRM practitioners need to recognize the challenges of historical land injustices and unclear or disputed land tenure and support legal attempts to clarify them.

3. Strengthen benefit-sharing arrangements and empower communities for their interactions with outside actors.

Benefit sharing is a key success factor for CBC (Brooks, Waylen, and Mulder 2013), and success facors for benefit sharing include supportive legal and policy environments for community management of natural resources, tenure security

and management rights, and external financial support to community institutions (Roka 2019; Dahal et al. 2017). However, in contexts of only partial devolution of management rights, more powerful actors within communities can manipulate devolution outcomes, including influencing benefits in managing natural resources, inefficiencies, and corruption (Agrawal and Gibson 1999; Shackleton et al. 2002). CBC projects should seek to improve management rights in these cases. For example, with the rise of privately run tourism enterprises and partnerships with communities, uneven powers exacerbate local elites' capture of benefits (Mbeche and Gargule 2022; Hoole 2009). Setting up transparency rules and disclosing revenue information can empower communities to resist such capture.

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