



# Policy Brief

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## Reducing the social acceptability of wildlife trafficking through behaviour change interventions

### What should we say and how should say it?

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Behaviour change interventions aimed at reducing the social acceptability of wildlife trafficking are an important part of efforts to prevent wildlife crime. This policy brief summarises lessons learned about how to develop and frame effective messages in the context of these interventions, based on field work conducted in Uganda.

A key first step is to narrowly identify the right target audience. While a general public awareness campaign may have its merits, it may be more effective to focus on those identified as most vulnerable to participating in wildlife trafficking, namely young men, those that live around wildlife trafficking hotspots and those involved in trade.

Second, it appears most promising to formulate messages that challenge narrow utilitarian perceptions of wildlife by highlighting the hidden costs of trafficking and its negative impact on the economy and the environment. Messages that focus on legal risks should showcase successes in detection and sanctions, especially in a context in which impunity is perceived to be high. Other messages that seek to challenge the overvalued benefits of engaging in wildlife trafficking in relation to wealth and social status should be carefully nuanced to avoid rejection.

Third, how we frame such messages is equally important. The research suggests that appealing to social identity and highlighting personal consequences are the most promising frames to adopt.

Overall, practitioners are advised to develop and test messages and approaches that are personal and precise.

### Introduction

This policy brief summarises what we learned in our conversations with conservation, wildlife and anti-corruption experts in the Ugandan capital Kampala and with residents living near a wildlife habitat in Northern Uganda.<sup>1</sup> The conversations focused on the ways in which perceptions that fuel the social acceptability of engaging in wildlife trafficking could be addressed through behaviour change interventions. A specific discussion point was how to craft messages that would reduce the social acceptability of engaging in the illicit trade. The

conversations provided an opportunity to test different messages for their perceived relative appeal and effectiveness.

The backdrop for these conversations was our research on the drivers of wildlife trafficking in Uganda [3]. This research showed that individuals engaging in the first stages of the trafficking chain are driven predominantly by aspirations of wealth to overcome socio-economic hardships. This is reinforced and justified by prevailing stereotypes of wildlife and wildlife trafficking.

Commonly occurring stereotypes view wildlife as:

<sup>1</sup> 1 focus group discussion (FGD) was held with anti-corruption experts in Kampala on 18 March 2021 with 14 participants. 1 FGD with was held with wildlife conservation and environmental experts in Kampala on 8 April with 8 participants. 4 rounds of FGDs took place between 5-20

March 2021 with a total of 40 residents that live near a wildlife habitat in Northern Uganda. The location of the wildlife habitat is anonymised to protect the identity of the focus group discussion participants.

- a) not ecologically valuable but rather valuable as symbols of status and power and as commodities to be utilised and traded;
- b) just another example of state-owned resources, which being public are assumed to belong to nobody; or
- c) competing with humans over already stressed natural and public resources.

Locally, wildlife trafficking also lacks the negative connotation that those unfamiliar with the context might automatically assume it should have. Trafficking, in fact, is viewed as a benign and victimless form of informal trade that is legitimate (irrespective of its legality) and an accepted source of wealth and status.



While the perceptions about wildlife and trafficking are not necessarily a primary driver of participating in it, they do contribute to its social acceptability. Among the more immediate drivers, the pursuit of money clearly stands out. In this regard, the research discovered that there are biases at play that further incentivise involvement in wildlife trafficking. These are the fact that the impact and risks of wildlife trafficking tend to be underestimated, while the benefits associated with trafficking are in turn often overestimated.

These biases can be addressed through targeted messaging [5,1] that illuminates the hidden costs of decimating wildlife and challenges conventional wisdom on the benefits, risks and impact of wildlife trafficking. The aim of such messaging is to make engaging in it less appealing or socially acceptable. This is crucial to the success of behaviour change interventions and, if properly addressed, can provide a solid foundation for strengthening the rule of law and efforts to curb wildlife trafficking in Uganda.

## Who should hear the message?

Identifying the target audience(s) is a crucial first step. The conversations with the experts in Kampala point to target groups as identified by the following three criteria:

- **Geography:** People that reside near wildlife habitats and border areas, plus the urban middle class in major cities.
- **Profession:** People that have professions associated with trade and finance, e.g. transport, logistics, import and export, and financial institutions, as well as public officials.
- **Demography:** young men and low-income groups.

The diverse groups consulted agreed that it is important to adopt a holistic approach. This means including a component that reaches the broader public, but also tailored approaches that target each one of these groups more specifically.

With limited resources, it might be necessary to narrow down to key target groups. Understanding these practical considerations, the experts suggested that the most critical target group are young people and, more specifically, young men. This group was identified in the consultations as the most vulnerable to be enticed to participate in wildlife trafficking along the different stages of the trafficking chain as products move through Uganda.

Changing mindsets of young people is also promising because they can become change agents, i.e. individuals that catalyse further change in their community. In this regard, highlighting the benefits derived from wildlife (as opposed to wildlife trafficking) is important.

After identifying the target audience(s), the next step is to consider how best to reach them. Messages aimed at young people could be communicated through social media, for example, or incorporated in school curricula.

Other target audience groups identified above can be reached by organising smaller meetings within communities, or through focus group discussions with those working in transport/logistics, or public officials. A complementary approach is by working with leaders, for instance, of religious or particular cultural groups, as well as with politicians or relevant peer groups.<sup>2</sup>

Radio or TV were identified as relevant for larger public awareness campaigns.

<sup>2</sup> See the Bwindi Development Network for an example of peer-led approaches to curb poaching. [bwindidevelopmentnetwork.org](http://bwindidevelopmentnetwork.org)

## What should the message be about?

The consultations revolved around nine topics related to perceptions of wildlife (trafficking) that fuel its social acceptability. The participants were asked about the relative relevance of different messages highlighting hidden costs and contradicting conventional wisdom relating to wildlife trafficking by:

- Challenging narrow utilitarian perceptions<sup>3</sup> of wildlife by focusing on the impact of trafficking on:
  1. The economy
  2. The environment
  3. Health
  4. Corruption
- Challenging the underestimated risks and contested illegality of wildlife trafficking by highlighting:
  5. Legal risks
  6. Physical risks
  7. The disconnect between protecting tradition/heritage and the legitimisation of trafficking
- Challenging the overvalued benefits of trafficking by challenging the notion that wildlife trafficking brings:
  8. Wealth
  9. Social status

The conversations with the experts in Kampala highlighted the following findings:

First, they flagged that illuminating hidden costs and challenging conventional wisdoms associated with wildlife trafficking in relation to its negative impact on the economy would be the most promising avenue. Formulating messages along these lines could focus on the benefits that are derived from tourism, its contribution towards national income, and the potential to use this income to finance infrastructure projects and key social services such as education and health. This approach can speak both to the urban middle class and to those living in close vicinity to wildlife habitats.

To be effective, messages aimed at attitudinal and behavioural change must be precise. For instance, instead of saying that “tourism contributes 8% to national income”, state the actual income that tourism brings in and translate

it into the number of schools or hospitals that could be financed with it. Such messages, if well crafted, targeted and communicated through the right channels, are likely to make a positive impact.

Second, the consultations informed that messages crafted around the negative impact of wildlife trafficking on the environment are also promising. This is because environmental damage represents a major hidden cost that people are not normally aware of. This is true especially for those people living in close vicinity to wildlife habitats and where environmental changes have significant implications. This type of message could, for instance, spell out clear examples of the impact of wildlife trafficking on the welfare of those that rely on the natural environment for their livelihood.

Importantly, both topical areas should speak to particular interests of different categories of people and be tangible. Concrete information is key as opposed to generalities. Mentioning specific amounts of money and resources lost helps people understand the actual magnitude of the problem. For example, stating the number of malaria deaths that could be prevented with forgone public revenue from wildlife-based tourism, or illustrating examples of the impact of trafficking on the local environment by pointing to the loss of a particular type or diversity of vegetation. These specific examples are more effective than abstract explanations.

Effective messaging frames the costs of trafficking not on the animals per se but rather on people. Such messaging also does not need to be negative; priming for more positive associations can also be effective. For example, an intervention could elicit feelings of pride by referring to Uganda being the pearl of Africa and the importance of protecting its rich biodiversity.

## What should the message *not* be about?

While highlighting the hidden costs associated with wildlife trafficking on the economy and the environment were the two most promising approaches to formulating anti-trafficking messages, perhaps even more telling were the topics that the experts suggested would be least effective.

In this regard, it was noted that challenging the undervalued risks and contested illegality of wildlife trafficking would be a less useful approach. Ultimately,

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<sup>3</sup> Perceptions of wildlife that centre around their utility and value as a resource or commodity.

what matters is whether sanctions will credibly be enforced. Providing information on risks, be they legal or physical, is less useful if there is a perception of impunity for wildlife crimes or the idea that the physical risks are actually low.

According to the experts consulted, and as is the case in many countries, in Uganda there is a prevailing understanding that those with money or connections can evade justice. Unless such a perception can be countered with compelling evidence about increased risk of detection, investigation and prosecution, simply flagging the issue that wildlife trafficking may result in high fines or jail time is likely to remain relatively ineffective in changing attitudes and behaviours.

This illuminates that one needs to craft messages around legal risks not just by saying “this is the potential consequence” but by giving information on actual convictions and showcasing law enforcement successes.

The same lesson applies to messages that target increased efforts to address corruption as a facilitator of wildlife trafficking.

## What needs careful nuancing?

A final finding is that challenging the perceived associated benefits of wildlife trafficking in relation to wealth and social status is complicated. This is associated with two factors.

The first is that wealth, whether obtained through legal or illegal means, is still considered to be a source of status. A wealthy person is respected, cherished and admired. Secondly, whatever the messages say, the reality is that wildlife trafficking is and remains a low-risk and high-profit venture – and the target audience knows that.

Messages around this topic could address the negative impact of high fines and jail time on wealth (e.g. consequences on the family deprived of an income earner) or status (social standing derived from illegal activities fading away when arrested and sanctioned). But the reality of the situation will clearly influence how such statements are perceived and accepted.

## How should we frame the message?

After identifying the target audience and most relevant content for the messages, the next step is to consider how to frame them in order to achieve the most impact. Informed primarily by resources on applying behavioural

insights to curb the illicit trade in wildlife [6, 4], the research participants discussed three approaches to framing messages that seek to reduce the social acceptability of wildlife trafficking [6, 4, 5, 1]:

### Framing messages

**Highlighting personal consequences:** framing the message around the short-term personal consequences (focused on self-interests and hidden costs) of a potential action.

⇒ *The message highlights individual costs and costs to those that engage in trafficking.*

**Humanising the message:** framing the message around the costs to others, the victims and their plight and contradicting conventional wisdom.

⇒ *The message highlights costs to communities residing around wildlife habitats and costs to the families of those that engage in trafficking.*

**Appealing to social identity:** framing the message around social identities to increase resonance, relevance and acceptance (harnessing pro-social motivations)

⇒ *The message appeals to Ugandan social identity and reframes the social identity of traffickers as businessmen/traders.*

As a potential target group of such a message, the conversations with the residents that live near a wildlife habitat in Northern Uganda were insightful. The participants discussed the same nine topics related to the perceptions of wildlife and wildlife trafficking. But this time, each topic was articulated using the three message frames highlighted in Box 2. The participants discussed all three frames and then selected which frame appealed to them the most for each topic.

The discussion suggested that messages framed to appeal to social identity resonated the most with the participants. Prototyped messages appealed either to Ugandan social identity or reframed the conventional narrative of small-scale traffickers as businessmen/traders to depict them as criminals. One explanation for why framing messages around social identity appealed to the participants is that this approach aids in increasing resonance, relevance and acceptance. Interestingly, appeals to social identity

resonated the most when challenging the undervalued risks and contested illegality of wildlife trafficking.

Messages phrased to highlight personal consequences focused on short-term individual costs and costs to those that engage in trafficking. This type of formulation was the second most appealing frame to the participants. Highlighting personal consequences was the most effective frame to challenge existing perceptions about the impact of wildlife trafficking on the economy, environment and health.

Perhaps surprising was that “humanising” the message, by drawing attention to the costs to the families of traffickers or to those living near wildlife habitats, was the least appealing frame. It was only chosen for one out of the nine topics discussed. One explanation could be that speaking about the costs to families and others in the community is not credible; as the previous research showed, engaging in trafficking to generate wealth to support one’s family is a prominent incentive.

## Conclusion: Designing messages that work (and testing to check)

Our research in Uganda supports the growing recognition that behavioural insights and approaches can complement more traditional efforts to curb wildlife trafficking. Among other benefits, behavioural insights aid in closing the gap between the legal framework and the practical implementation on the ground and aligning interventions more closely with local conditions and context-specific drivers of the trade. A behavioural lens helps practitioners to consider how social beliefs help fuel the behaviour in the first place.

What is evident is that what we say and how we say it matters. Messages should be targeted to appeal to specific audiences (e.g. young men) and to address specific behaviour (e.g. the likelihood of accepting an offer to participate in wildlife trafficking).

Consideration should also be given to the fact that some social beliefs are more ingrained than others. In our case study, challenging conventional wisdoms about wildlife trafficking bringing social status generated resistance, because beliefs on this issue are linked to a broader narrative about wealth and respectability in Uganda. In such cases, making use of narratives and storytelling could be useful to reduce the likelihood of receiving a negative reaction [6].

Showcasing the legal risks incurred for engaging in illegal wildlife trade is only a relevant approach when the perceptions about the likelihood of detection and sanctioning make it credible. In fact, this is a key insight from behavioural science – that people tend to systematically underestimate future risks in favour of short-term benefits. It is therefore important to be precise, because people will otherwise automatically default to their biased judgement about the risk.

Thus, the content of the message should harness cognitive biases, providing concrete information that debunks the default assumptions and stereotypes by making the message personal and precise.

A key insight for practitioners is that developing messages geared at promoting attitudinal and behavioural change is not an exact science. It is difficult, even after conducting thorough research, to anticipate what type of messages will be most effective. It is therefore important to test different messages for appeal and impact amongst the intended target audiences before rolling them out to the wider community.

### Lessons for practitioners

- **Who should hear the message?** Those most likely to engage in wildlife trafficking, namely young men, those living near wildlife trafficking hotspots and those that have functions associated with finance and trade, as well as public officials. The role of youth as change agents should be explored.
- **What should the message be about?** Effective messages focus on the impact of wildlife trafficking on the economy and environment. If a message focuses on legal risks, it is important to include statistics of convictions as opposed to general risks. In a context where impunity is high, the likelihood of a consequence needs to be clarified.
- **How should a message be framed?** Messages that appeal to social identity and highlight personal consequences are most salient. Humanising the message by emphasising the costs to others, the victims and their plight, was the least salient frame.
- **Harness known biases** in human decision making by making the message personal and precise. Testing the message for appeal and impact among target audiences is key.

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# Annex 1: Tested messages and associated frames

This annex provides further background on the content and outcomes of the focus group discussions. We hope this can be a reference point for practitioners interested in applying behavioural insights to fight the illegal wildlife trade. The aim is to support discussions around topics and frames that can be used to tailor messages to the target audiences in the particular context.

## What should the message be about?

In Kampala, focus group discussion participants suggested that the following two topics are most promising:

Wildlife trafficking is bad for the economy:

*Without wildlife there will be fewer tourists and less money coming to Uganda and to our communities.*

The message seems to be particularly appealing when it is formulated to highlight personal consequences:

*Wildlife brings in trillions of shillings per year through tourism. This money could be used to build hospitals and schools around the country and in your locality.*

Wildlife trafficking is bad for the environment:

*Without wildlife our natural environment changes for the worse. Animals are important for healthy ecosystems.*

## How should we frame the message?

Conversations with residents near a wildlife habitat in Northern Uganda suggest that the following frames are most salient to them:

### 1. Economy

*Wildlife brings in trillions of shillings per year through tourism. This money could be used to build hospitals and schools around the country and in your locality.*

*Frame 1/highlighting personal consequences*

### 2. Environment

*Wildlife trafficking contributes to the destruction of natural habitats, including land and water resources that we need to survive.*

*Frame 1/highlighting personal consequences*

### 3. Health

*The illicit wildlife trade promotes the spread of disease. The COVID-19 pandemic shows that if we do not stop the killing and trafficking of animals the consequences come back to hurt each and every one of us.*

*Frame 1 / highlighting personal consequences*

4. Corruption

*Wildlife traffickers colluding with public officials not only do not act as Ugandans but are hurting all Ugandans who want a clean, safe, peaceful country.*

*Frame 3 / appealing to social identity*

5. Legal risks

*Wildlife traffickers are not traders or businessmen. They are criminals who will end up spending long periods in jail.*

*Frame 3 / appealing to social identity*

6. Physical risks

*Wildlife traffickers are not traders or businessmen. They are criminals that engage in dangerous activities.*

*Frame 3 / appealing to social identity*

7. Tradition

*Ugandan traditions promote respect for nature and love of our land. Wildlife trafficking destroys our cultural heritage.*

*Frame 3 / appealing to social identity*

8. Wealth

*One might believe that wildlife trafficking makes you rich. In fact, traffickers do not lead a glamorous lifestyle, but risk jail time, large fines, violence and diseases.*

*Frame 1 / highlighting personal consequences*

*Wildlife traffickers are not traders or businessmen. They are criminals and risk large fines.*

*Frame 3 / appealing to social identity*

9. Social status

*Wildlife traffickers are not social role models, they profit from suffering and destruction and their families are punished when they lose their bread winner to jail or violent crime.*

*Frame 2 / humanising the message*