



Transboundary Cooperation to Combat Wildlife Trafficking

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CONTRACT INFORMATION

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COVER PHOTO

Tiger wading in water: Ranae Smith, Unsplash

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INTRODUCTION

In October 2021, the United States Agency for International Development's (USAID) Combating Wildlife Trafficking (CWT) Learning Group hosted a [peer-to-peer learning exchange](#) on transboundary cooperation to combat wildlife trafficking. The webinar spotlighted VukaNow, a regional activity operating across eight countries in southern Africa to enhance collaborative efforts to combat wildlife crime by catalyzing learning, sharing, and best practices. Participants worldwide discussed their experiences with transboundary cooperation and heard from [VukaNow](#) Chief Technical Advisor Dr. Simon Munthali, and Ashley Netherton, USAID/Southern Africa. This brief summarizes the lessons from this event and knowledge harvesting sessions with four USAID staff working in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, and select USAID program evaluations. It responds to the following learning questions from the [CWT Learning Group](#) and the [LAC Environment Combating Conservation Crime Learning Agenda](#):

- *What successful examples of transboundary collaboration have resulted in increased support for combating wildlife trafficking?*
- *Under what conditions does transnational coordination improve the effectiveness of combating conservation crime?*

The illegal wildlife trade operates through value chains that cross borders and continents. Transnational organized crime is drawn to the high-value, low-risk profile of this market and skillfully exploits countries' differing legal frameworks to smuggle wildlife across borders and launder it into legal trade. Increasing digital connectivity has shifted much of the illegal wildlife trade online with the Internet's anonymity and flexibility, further enabling illicit transnational value chains. The U.S. Government's 2016 [Eliminate, Neutralize, and Disrupt \(END\) Wildlife Trafficking Act](#) addresses this threat and directs federal agencies to work to strengthen law enforcement, reduce demand, and build international cooperation and commitment. This brief consolidates key lessons on USAID's four strategic approaches to building transboundary cooperation to combat wildlife trafficking: **1) strengthening transboundary coordination institutions; 2) legal harmonization; 3) building capacity for transboundary law enforcement; 4) transboundary information sharing.** It also identifies key lessons around USAID's role in transboundary cooperation, knowledge gaps, and peer advice.

STRATEGIC APPROACHES TO BUILD TRANSBOUNDARY COOPERATION



Strengthening transboundary coordination institutions

Actions to strengthen a coordination institution's capacity to be a regional enforcement coordinating platform.



Legal harmonization

Work to harmonize policies, laws, and regulations across boundaries.



Building capacity for transboundary law enforcement

Actions to build capacity for effective detection, investigation, prosecution, and adjudication of transboundary conservation crimes.



Transboundary information sharing

Actions to identify and support the most suitable platform for information exchange. Key to this strategic approach is determining what information is needed, how it will be used, and the level of security or confidentiality required.

EXAMPLES



Through the [Association of Southeast Asian Nations-Wildlife Enforcement Network Support Program \(ASEAN-WEN\)](#) (2006–2011), USAID worked to establish a wildlife law enforcement network within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations governance structure. Through the follow-on [Asia's Regional Response to Endangered Species Trafficking program \(ARREST\)](#) (2011–2016), USAID focused on strengthening the capacity of ASEAN-WEN to serve as a regional enforcement coordinating platform.



USAID worked with ASEAN to develop the [ASEAN Handbook on Legal Cooperation to Combat Wildlife Crime through the ARREST program](#). The handbook provides a regional overview of the similarities and differences in the national legal frameworks that criminalize various wildlife and forest activities, providing easy access to understand the relevant legislative frameworks of member states.



Through the Counter Transnational Organized Crime Course, [Wildlife Asia](#) builds the capacity and skills of investigators to disrupt wildlife crime syndicates while also increasing transnational multiagency coordination.



VukaNow created the Special Platform for Action, Reflection, and Collaboration for Combating Wildlife Crime (SPARCC), a non-confidential info-sharing e-platform to identify, capture, and share best practices among implementing partners and national governments. On the other side of the confidentiality spectrum, [TRAFFIC](#) developed and manages the Southern African Development Community's (SADC) [Trade in Wildlife Information Exchange](#) system, which enables law enforcement agencies across the SADC to securely communicate with one another and access and contribute to a centralized database of wildlife seizures.



STRENGTHENING TRANSBOUNDARY COORDINATION INSTITUTIONS

Actions to strengthen a coordination institution's capacity to be a regional enforcement coordinating platform

Challenges

- Balancing national interests with transboundary interests—everyone is parochial (i.e., concerned with their national interests first).
- The wildlife enforcement chain is complex and consists of many actors within each country. Therefore, coordinating across the various agencies across countries becomes even more difficult.
- Building political will while navigating different political systems, political structures, and decision-making processes across countries can take time and extensive knowledge of the political system.
- Governments are often unwilling to share information with other governments.
- Each country is on its own path to addressing wildlife trafficking. Consequently, it is challenging to find transboundary approaches when nations are at different stages in addressing wildlife trafficking.
- There is a perception of a lack of inclusivity due to an uneven distribution of development assistance across countries.
- The mandate of regional coordinating bodies tends to focus on policies, not implementation. Therefore, collaborating on implementation can be difficult.
- Ensuring the sustainability of the regional coordinating bodies, financially and through a sense of ownership after the program ends.



STRENGTHENING TRANSBOUNDARY COORDINATION INSTITUTIONS

Actions to strengthen a coordination institution's capacity to be a regional enforcement coordinating platform

Lessons Learned

- Although overwhelming, coordinate at the national level first. Once the national level is functioning, move to the international level. ASEAN-WEN had an impact through forming interagency working groups and communication networks to support the creation of national level WENS.
- Have one agency or organization with clear authority bring all the actors together. ARREST worked to link a regional WEN to ASEAN. USAID/Kenya built their regional program under the East Africa Community.
- Coordinate across different political systems and varying capacities to combat wildlife crime:
 - Conduct a political economy analysis to understand the governance systems of the regional organization and the member states.
 - Develop and implement a diplomatic engagement strategy. [USAID's Regional Development Mission for Asia](#) developed a diplomatic engagement strategy to work with U.S. Department of State leadership in the Bureaus of [Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs](#) and [International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs](#), U.S. Ambassadors in Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Malaysia, and the ASEAN Ambassador to raise the importance of wildlife trafficking and get Malaysia to vote to include it on the ASEAN Chiefs of National Police's list of high priority organized crime in the region.
- Employ stakeholder consultations at the design stage of a coordinating program to build political goodwill, align regional and country priorities, increase the legitimacy of subsequent activities, and build a sense of ownership among partner states. This recommendation comes from the [Planning for Resilience in East Africa through Policy, Adaptation, Research, and Economic Development](#) (PREPARED) and the [United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime Regional Programme for Southeast Asia](#).
- Be deliberate about building toward institutional sustainability from the start. This is a key recommendation from the PREPARED performance evaluation. The ASEAN-WEN Program attempted to give the WEN an institutional home and support the ASEAN-WEN Program Coordination Unit to develop a sustainability and operational plan. However, sustaining the ASEAN-WEN through the financial support of member states remains a challenge.



LEGAL HARMONIZATION

Work to harmonize policies, laws, and regulations across boundaries.

Challenges

- Wildlife laws are nuanced and distinct across countries. In addition, un-harmonized wildlife crime penalties create loopholes for wildlife criminals.
- Wildlife legislation is diverse and cuts across multiple laws, such as money laundering, smuggling, anti-corruption, tax evasion, or extradition frameworks.
- Even when regional CWT-related protocols and policies have been domesticated into member states' legal frameworks, agencies responsible for their implementation, such as the police, wildlife prosecutors, and ministry of justice officials, may be unfamiliar with how to respond to international requests.
- The establishment of regional wildlife laws lags. There are only international conventions (e.g., the [Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna of Flora](#) (CITES)) to support wildlife law enforcement at a regional level. Typically, laws only apply to national boundaries.

Lessons Learned

- Dig into the relevant legislation and identify specific articles to prioritize and harmonize. For example, VukaNow focused on mutual legal assistance and amending legal frameworks to enable easy movement of law enforcement personnel and their equipment across international boundaries in pursuit of poachers and wildlife traffickers, easing extradition of fugitives who commit wildlife crimes, and standardizing penalties for wildlife offenses.
- Engage parliamentarians in the process of harmonizing legislation. For example, Wildlife Asia successfully brought together parliamentarians from Africa and Asia to identify the legal basics that all countries should have to harmonize their legislation to avoid leakages of people moving from one country with strong regulation to another with weak regulation. However, assuring that follow-up action is taken to implement the recommendations requires long-term sustained support.
- High-quality data and research findings can help convince policymakers to harmonize policies at a regional level. For example, PREPARED participated in a workshop led by the Kenyan Government to develop its [National Wildlife Strategy 2030](#) and provided input on how PREPARED's mobile application, Wildlife Information Landscape Database (WILD), can be used to address poaching.



BUILDING CAPACITY FOR TRANSBOUNDARY LAW ENFORCEMENT

Actions to build capacity for effective detection, investigation, prosecution and adjudication of Transboundary Conservation Crimes.

Challenges

- Staff turnover in host country law enforcement institutions can make capacity building endless.
- Understanding the historical context and likeliness of governments to cooperate is integral to a transboundary approach. SCAPES found that historical border disputes and political issues between governments can block joint planning among rangers and conservation officials across borders.
- The multiple law enforcement agencies within each country have different reporting channels making coordination difficult.
- Networks built through multi-country law enforcement trainings are often unstable. A key informant shared that training law enforcement officers from different countries together enables trust and relationship building; however, it is at an individual, idiosyncratic level, not at a systematic, institutional level.
- U.S. Government Agencies provide multiple trainings. A key informant stated that U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services, Homeland Security, the Department of Justice, and USAID all provide law enforcement training and use different approaches (case-based vs. examining wildlife trafficking as a systemic issue).



BUILDING CAPACITY FOR TRANSBOUNDARY LAW ENFORCEMENT

Actions to build capacity for effective detection, investigation, prosecution and adjudication of Transboundary Conservation Crimes.

Lessons Learned

- Political economy analysis can provide insight into historical animosity and political roadblocks. SCAPES suggests utilizing a political economy analysis that reviews historical disputes as part of project design.
- Cross-border cooperation on CWT operations is more successful when working with implementing partners who have a deep history of working in the border region. SCAPES found that the implementing partner needs to have trust on both sides and be accepted by governments as a neutral body.
- Community-led cooperation approaches among similar ethnic groups on both sides of the border can encourage cross-border cooperation between national law enforcement agencies and aerial wildlife monitoring programs. For example, SCAPES found the community-led cooperation approach encouraged the Kenyan and Tanzania governments to ease impediments to cross-border aerial surveillance and resulted in the governments allowing rangers to pursue suspects across borders under certain circumstances.
- Enhance coordination of transboundary law enforcement at the provincial level. Although agreements for cooperative transboundary law enforcement are at the ministerial level, coordination often happens at the local, prefecture level. Workshops should emphasize participation from provincial governments in addition to central government agencies.
- Establish alumni associations that organize periodic reunions to make relationship-building more systematic. The Law Enforcement trainings conducted through the [Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs](#) and the [U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service](#) have alumni associations.
- Ensure the correct people are attending the training. A key informant suggests that to overcome the idiosyncratic nature of who attends the trainings, formally ask customs departments or police academics to nominate people rather than simply asking known contacts to participate in the training.
- Develop wildlife crime courses targeted to the specific needs of prosecutors and judges rather. ARREST found that sometimes courses serve as deterrents and have not always been successful because judges and prosecutors were invited to attend the same class that law enforcement officials were attending, which was not relevant to their job.



TRANSBOUNDARY INFORMATION SHARING

Actions to identify and support the most suitable platform for information exchange. Key to this strategic approach is determining what information is needed, how it will be used, and the level of security or confidentiality required.

Challenges

- Governments often fear sharing data with other countries or actors. This fear stems from mistrust or worry of being compared to other countries.
- Data can be proprietary or contain sensitive information that is not easily shared.
- Data is not collected and measured standardly, making it difficult to aggregate or compare across sources. There are also varying data standards across actors.
- Multiple data-sharing systems focus on specific locations, threats, or strategic approaches. A centralized database is lacking.
- Maintaining data platforms is an ongoing task, and the maintenance must be sustained and consistently funded.
- If the data is shared, there is often a lack of clarity on who owns the data.

Lessons Learned

- Establishing shared interests across countries and supporting countries to recognize that collaboration will advance mutual interests can overcome mistrust and build willingness to share information.
- Demand-driven platforms are more likely to be used. VukaNow's SPARCC learning platform had successful engagement because it captured and disseminated best practices focused on challenges identified by the partners themselves. Support for the East African Association of Prosecutor's platform successfully facilitates the exchange of sensitive information on a closed platform for prosecutors on cases and how they are tried.
- Inventory and analyze regional communication platforms and databases to identify the most suitable platform for secure communication on intelligence exchange and avoid duplicating efforts. Support the strengthening of the most suitable platforms and provide training for information sharing. This is the approach [United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime](#) will use to facilitate secure information sharing among the governments of the Amazon region through its USAID partner activity [Combating Transnational Conservation Crimes in the Amazon](#).



USAID'S ROLE

- USAID's strength is a holistic, systems approach to strengthening governance, supporting communities, improving livelihoods, raising awareness, and working with the private sector building relationships on the ground.
- USAID is unique among the Interagency in being highly decentralized with an extensive, expert field presence.

- USAID is well placed to support the institutional development of wildlife authorities that can provide long-term support for protected areas and capacity building for law enforcement (e.g., training for border control agents, etc.).
- USAID can also play a critical role by sitting on steering committees and participating in working groups addressing issues of transboundary wildlife crime.
- Diplomacy plays a vital role in addressing the global challenge of wildlife trafficking. USAID can bring in ambassadors and Department of State staff. However, the power of diplomacy often exceeds and complements the success of activities funded by USAID.
- USAID is well-placed to support networks and convene the community of people working on law enforcement and conservation.

KNOWLEDGE GAPS

- The right balance of personality-driven versus institutionalized approaches to cooperation.
- How to design transboundary cooperation activities to build toward the sustainability of regional institutions and networks through adequate financing, capacity, and a sense of ownership.
- Effective approaches to engaging parliamentarians to address CWT through their national governments.
- How USAID can support successful transcontinental cooperation connecting Asian, Latin American, and African countries and regions.
- It is unclear if it is USAID's role to support transboundary law enforcement operations or if USAID should leave this to U.S. Agencies better suited to this work, like U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service or Customs and Border Protection

CLOSING ADVICE

- Identify champions, whether in the U.S. Government or host country governments and do everything possible to set champions up for success.
- Understand the landscape of donors and other organizations working in CWT in a program's context to counteract silo-ing and build on existing initiatives to avoid replicating efforts.
- Broaden beyond law enforcement as the solution to wildlife crime to use various approaches.
- Anticipate and dedicate a significant investment of time and diplomacy skills to establish, maintain, and grow transboundary cooperative networks.

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- [Ghosts of the Mountains, Guardians of the Headwaters and the Global Snow Leopard and Ecosystem Protection Program \(GSLEP\) Final Report: Mid-Term Evaluation of Conservation and Adaptation in Asia's High Mountain Landscapes and Communities](#)
- [Midterm Performance Evaluation of Asia's Regional Response to Endangered Species Trafficking Program \(ARREST\)](#)
- [Midterm Evaluation: Phase III USAID Central Africa regional program for the environment](#)
- [Performance evaluation of USAID Oceans and Fisheries Partnership Final Report](#)
- [USAID Wildlife Asia FY 2020 Quarter Two Report](#)
- [Second Assessment of USAID Wildlife Asia Law Enforcement Training Support](#)
- 2020 RDMA CWT Assessment

Interviews

- Melody McNeil, USAID/Central Africa Regional Program, November 18, 2021
- Craig Kirkpatrick, USAID/ RDMA November 22, 2021
- Mikala Lauridsen, USAID/Kenya and East Africa, December 1, 2021
- Danielle Tedesco, USAID/Colombia, December 28, 2021

Webinars

- [“Transboundary Cooperation Knowledge Harvest,”](#) October 19, 2021
- [“Interagency Coordination Best Practices,”](#) November, 16, 2021

A close-up photograph of a green leaf, showing a dense network of fine, parallel veins that curve slightly across the surface. The leaf is a vibrant green color, and the veins are a lighter shade, creating a textured, wavy pattern. The lighting is even, highlighting the natural structure of the leaf.

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