

Communities and Inclusion

This document is a printable version of the introductory guide on the [Communities and Inclusion](#) topic page of the Targeting Natural Resource Corruption (TNRC) [Knowledge Hub](#). It provides information, guidance, and tools for practitioners who seek to integrate anti-corruption approaches into their context-specific programming responses to address the threats of corruption in community-based work and inclusive conservation efforts.

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Key takeaways

- » Communities are key allies in conservation, but corruption can be a major obstacle to their effective inclusion in defining and implementing conservation projects and objectives.
- » The impact of corruption on community-based projects can be exacerbated by their remoteness, limited access to information, and the complex web of policies, laws, and customary rules that govern them. Tenure, resource usage, access rights, and benefit sharing are all subject to corruption risks.
- » Reducing corruption risks and impact at the community level requires a collaborative, context-sensitive approach. Elements of such an approach can include focusing on human rights, acknowledging the role of Indigenous Peoples (IPs) and local communities (LCs), strengthening tenure, promoting openness and accountability, and ensuring effective free, prior, informed consent.

1 Corruption and community-based conservation work

[Local leadership in governing natural resources is a critical solution for both people and nature. Community-Based Natural Resources Management \(CBNRM\) approaches](#) promote that local leadership.¹ [Local communities and/or Indigenous Peoples have rights and connections to, knowledge about, and interests in the natural resources](#) they live within and around. In addition, promoting socio-economic benefits, either directly or by compensating the costs associated with conservation, is [essential in its own right and as a critical strategy for slowing biodiversity loss](#) and climate change.

CBNRM approaches can help address the underlying structural problems that lead to corruption, environmental crime, and biodiversity loss by providing [appropriate conditions for the involvement and participation of local communities](#) in conservation decision making and [building trust and legitimacy of NRM initiatives at the local level](#). However, corruption can be a real barrier to sound, effective CBNRM. Local leaders may [lack commitment to address environmental crime, for example, due to corruption and collusion with politicians and criminals](#), or corruption at higher levels may effectively take power out of local hands and preempt local decision making. Corruption can foster [conflicts about benefit sharing among communities, and it creates opportunities for appropriation or diversion of benefits by elites](#).

Several risk factors account for the increased vulnerability of CBNRM outcomes to corruption.

- » CBNRM often takes place [in contexts of weak legal recognition of communal rights to natural resources](#) and consequent inadequate governance arrangements that leave room for favoritism, clientelism, political capture and interference, conflict of interest, bribery, and other corrupt practices.
- » Weaknesses in the legal and judicial system may create conditions in which [informal networks of corrupt politicians, officials, and traffickers allow perpetrators to evade justice](#) and [undermine governments' capacity to detect, prevent and sanction natural resource crimes effectively](#).
- » The day-to-day management of communally-owned natural resources and land in many developing countries remains dominated by customary norms unsecured by contemporary land laws. [Historical land injustices, unclear or disputed land tenure](#), and the [participation of authorities either directly or through neglect](#) help [smooth and legitimize the involuntary loss of lands to local elite and international interests](#).
- » Marginalized communities are more likely to encounter corruption due to their restricted access to information and justice, and often [in a manner that scapegoats them for poor governance or sows division as a smokescreen for political corruption](#).

Understanding and addressing corruption risks related to CBNRM is therefore fundamental to reducing the threats that corruption poses to conservation and natural resource management (NRM) objectives and ensuring meaningful participation from Indigenous Peoples, local communities and/or community-based organizations.

¹ [CBNRM](#) is used here as an umbrella term for approaches that engage local community members as active stakeholders and build local capacities to conserve and/or manage natural resources such as land, forests, wildlife, and water by local institutions for local benefit.

2 The nature and types of corrupt practices impacting community-based conservation and NRM work

Corruption that impacts CBNRM projects involves a [range of stakeholders](#), varies by a multitude of factors, and occurs through a series of interactions related to [land administration](#), [community engagement](#), [collecting and managing revenues](#), and [distributing shared benefits](#). This section overviews the corruption risks in CBNRM, organized by two main categories and summarized in Figure 1.

2.1 Tenure and resource use and access rights

Tenure administration and regulation forms the context for CBNRM. Weak tenure rights can lead to corruption, allowing [public officials and private interests to collude](#) to ignore controls on the use of, access to, and extraction of resources from land and water. Fragmentation, lack of uniformity, and overlapping mandates and responsibilities in tenure claims and administration processes can increase corruption risks by [making the procedures hard to navigate and involving a high number of duty bearers](#). Corruption examples include influence trading, bribery to secure favor for private companies seeking to extract natural resources, and public officials taking bribes to undervalue land or speed up environmental and social impact assessments. Women are often [particularly vulnerable](#) to [certain forms of land corruption](#) because [women's land and property rights are often not respected due to customary patriarchal norms and other factors](#).

Corrupt practices can also occur in **enforcing rights to participation in resource decisions**. Corruption risks include deliberately excluding individuals, communities, and other resource users from participating in the decision making process of CBNRM projects. Corrupt practices can also occur during the planning and consultations, where power often rests with government officials and private companies engaged in natural resource extraction. Examples include bribes to circumvent participation, as well as government officials using their positions to grant and refuse community participation as a means of securing political support.

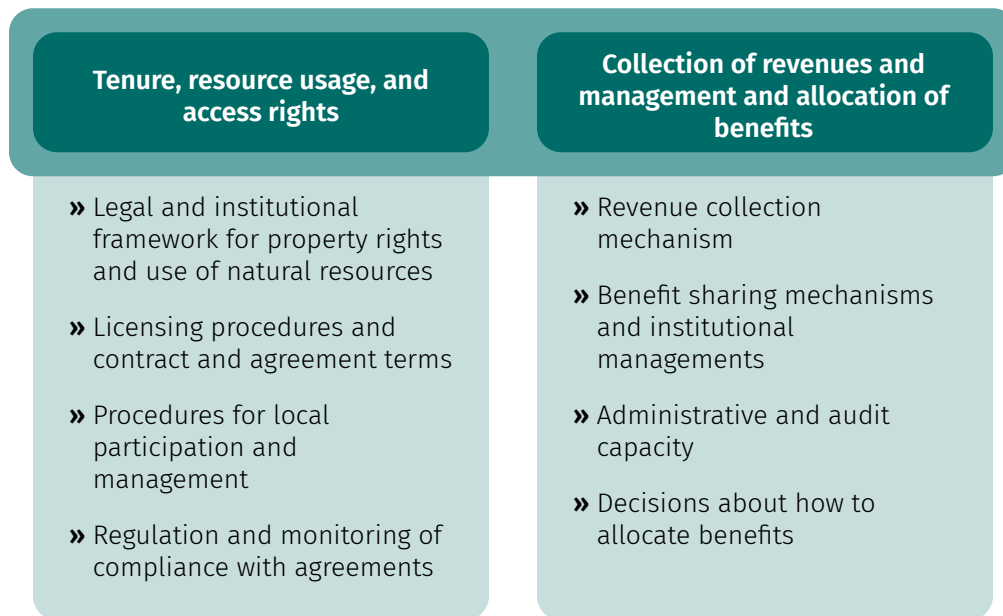
2.2 Collection of revenues and benefit sharing

Collecting revenues from natural resource use, and **equitably sharing benefits with community rights holders**, can be particularly vulnerable to corruption. This is especially true where there is [uncertainty around the specific rights of community members to benefits](#), low transparency and oversight, and weak enforcement of local accountability mechanisms. Forms of corruption [include diversion of conservation funds for private use, systemic bribery, and rent-seeking](#) in natural resource contracts. Companies and community leaders may collude to reduce the benefits to communities in exchange for kickbacks and bribes, helping companies maximize their revenues from natural resource exploitation.

Corruption can also undermine **compensation schemes for Indigenous Peoples (IPs) and/or local communities (LCs)**, for example, when land is purchased or in human-wildlife conflict management. Indigenous Peoples, ethnic minorities, and women in particular are often excluded from negotiations on land deals and are therefore less likely to receive their due share. Where deal making processes and compensatory programs are unclear, unfair, opaque, or complex, elites may secure disproportionate benefits and [key stakeholders may "lose faith" in the programs](#). Powerful interests may purposefully design the system with these weaknesses, or they may be a side-effect of higher-level corruption.

Finally, corruption in **sustainable livelihood interventions** is particularly relevant to CBNRM. Such projects [are fraught with corruption risks that can sabotage the project or contribute to social and environmental damage](#). Corrupt practices can occur in [payments for ecosystem services \(PES\)](#), [carbon co-benefits linked to conservation](#), and [benefit sharing arrangements from protected areas \(PAs\) and other effective conservation measures \(OECMs\)](#). Corrupt behaviors associated with sustainable livelihood interventions are usually driven by the large amounts of money involved, unclear and evolving rules governing the programs, inadequate monitoring, and complex institutions and disbursement mechanisms.

Figure 1. Points of corruption vulnerability in community-based conservation and NRM work



3 Tackling corruption in the CBNRM sector: strategies, initiatives, and interventions

While [no single measure can address all the different forms of corruption on its own](#), several different approaches to reducing the impact of corruption on community-based efforts can be effective.

3.1 Connecting human rights with anti-corruption

[Human rights-based approaches](#) help build an understanding of corruption and its effects as a public issue and bring attention to its harms to individuals, communities, and wider society. Human rights-based approaches can be used to hold companies and governments accountable for environmental harm, including harms that arise from corrupt actions, and ensure that those affected receive compensation and protection. In addition, these approaches [can help build the capacity of environmental defenders to address corruption and protect them from further abuse and harassment](#). The international human rights mechanisms and processes, such as [UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders](#), provide a range of entry points for high-level human rights-based approaches.

3.2 Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities

Human rights-based approaches specifically focused on IPs and LCs can be important frameworks for raising the profile and legitimacy of anti-corruption efforts in natural resource management. IPs and LCs are critical custodians of biodiversity and partners in restoration, conservation, and sustainable use. Often [at the frontline of external threats to sustainable resource management](#), IPs and LCs “[know the natural environment and are best positioned to ensure their resources are secured into the future](#),” but they are often the most disempowered actors in the system. Corruption leverages power for private gain, and the most destructive forms of corruption are those that leverage power to constrict or nullify the rights of the less powerful. Seen in this light, redressing this imbalance of power by “[supporting duty-bearers to meet their obligations, and rights-holders to claim and exercise their rights.... requiring proactive, concrete measures to ensure full and effective participation of rights holders....](#)” is an important human rights imperative as well as an essential element of accountability and anti-corruption efforts.

3.3 Strengthening natural resource tenure and institutions

Given the central role of tenure to CBNRM, [strengthening tenure regimes and the institutions that govern natural resource management](#) is directly related to reducing corruption that impacts CBNRM. IPs and LCs often [have contested or unrecognized tenure rights](#), so laws governing communally-owned resources should adequately protect customary and traditional rights, and procedures for documenting and asserting these rights should be clear, accessible, and reasonably simple.² Other strategies for strengthening institutional and procedural aspects of CBNRM governance include [building the capacity of governance and justice systems](#), [addressing government complicity in organized crime](#), and strengthening the [detection and suppression of illegal natural resource use through law enforcement](#).

3.4 Openness and transparency

As a necessary, but not sufficient, core of open governance, transparency mechanisms are critical foundations for reducing the risk of corruption and preventing illegality. Digitalization and transparency [can reduce government corruption](#) by empowering reform-oriented actors, limiting officials’ opportunities for discretionary behavior, and enhancing access to information about government processes. Transparent, [auditable catch documentation and traceability requirements, for example](#), help improve management and accountability in the fisheries sector and reduce the pressure on artisanal fishers to pay bribes. [Digital PES](#), replacing cash with electronic payments, can be more efficient, transparent, and less susceptible to leakage and local elite capture.

3.5 Social accountability, media, and civil society organizations (CSOs)

[Social accountability mechanisms](#) help prevent corruption by creating a greater risk of detection and likelihood of consequences for corruption, strengthening a sense of collective agency, and changing norms and attitudes in productive ways. Similarly, active and knowledgeable journalists and media alert the public to corruption, helping to ensure that communities and other stakeholders have access to the truth and build pressure for formal investigations of corruption. In these ways, social accountability and other CSO initiatives [can reinforce formal accountability](#) and can specifically help [redress marginalization and improve inclusion](#). However, these strategies need to be contextualized, with assessment of institutional trust, social capital, community values, and other norms as [the starting point for effective social accountability](#).

² Adequate protection may be defined as [non-discriminatory, equitable, and sustainable access to, use of, and management of land and natural resources for all people with community claims](#).

3.6 Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC)

CBNRM relies on the full consultation and meaningful participation of IPs and LCs in project design and natural resource decisions. FPIC is a framework for ensuring that the rights of IPs are guaranteed in any decision that may affect their lands, territories, or livelihoods. By [enabling communities to safeguard their rights and interests](#), FPIC can also be an essential tool against corruption. However, FPIC processes themselves are [not free from corruption risks](#); a [“poorly implemented FPIC process itself can be captured or wielded by powerful interests to accomplish their own goals. In such ‘false FPIC’ processes, local elites or intervention proponents may manipulate or intimidate stakeholders, take decisions before the process to create inevitability, or inflate benefits or downplay costs.”](#) FPIC processes therefore have to take local context into account and be [properly resourced](#), ongoing, [inclusive](#), and verified.

Find all [resources on communities and inclusion](#) on the [TNRC Knowledge Hub](#).

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