

“You walk on glass if you are in that space”: Risks and harms of corruption in wildlife justice pathways in Uganda



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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Illegal wildlife trade
Corruption
Criminal justice
Red-green criminology
Uganda

ABSTRACT

Wildlife crime drives existential harms including biodiversity loss and climate change, disproportionately affecting the Global South. Criminal justice approaches dominate the public response, yet scant evidence exists on how corruption, an economic crime, undermines deterrence and exacerbates inequalities. This primary research study utilises a qualitative approach to examine the risks and harms of corruption within wildlife enforcement and justice in Uganda. Using a red-green criminological perspective and drawing upon semi-structured interviews with experts and practitioners from government and civil society, this paper identifies corruption risks in wildlife criminal justice and explores their related harms and consequences. The study finds wildlife enforcement in Uganda suffers from institutional corruption, including perverse incentives which distort targeting and resource prioritisation, leading to discrimination against low-level offenders. Furthermore, differential access to individualist corruption opportunities along the justice pathway enables wealthy or well-connected suspects to avoid sanctions, resulting in sentencing inequities. Despite resulting in differential outcomes for affluent and subsistence offenders, the study concludes that corruption in wildlife justice neutralises deterrence for both offender types. By creating impunity for elites, organised crime actors are attracted to the trade. Moreover, by amplifying sentencing inequalities, subsistence offenders are further impoverished, increasing re-offending. Corruption in wildlife justice thus drives significant long-term environmental, socioeconomic, and political harms, and erodes the rule of law.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Wildlife crime causes complex, interconnected harms, including environmental damage, biodiversity loss, zoonotic disease, economic loss, conflict, insecurity, and the acceleration of climate change (Anagnostou and Doberstein, 2022; Kahler et al., 2021). Despite challenges in its estimation, wildlife crime is commonly acknowledged as one of the most lucrative illegal enterprises, linked to transnational organised crime (TOC) (Anagnostou and Doberstein, 2022; Wyatt et al., 2020). Furthermore, illegal wildlife trade (IWT) product flows typically originate in the Global South (McFann and Pires, 2020).

Corruption is a type of economic crime (Fletcher and Herrmann, 2012) used to facilitate IWT (Baez-Camargo and Burgess, 2022; Organisation for Economic Co-operative Development [OECD], 2018; Van Uhm and Moreto, 2018). Indeed, wildlife traffickers are functionally dependent on corruption at every stage of their supply

chain (Martini, 2013a; OECD, 2018; Van Uhm and Moreto, 2018; Zain, 2020).

Wildlife trafficking threatens the biodiversity of many countries in the Global South, but Uganda plays a particularly important role in IWT, both as a regional consolidation hub in East Africa and a key transit point for transcontinental flows between Africa and Southeast Asia (Costa et al., 2021). The presence of widespread corruption and patronage has made the country a “one-stop shop” for TOC-related IWT (Haenlein and Opyene, 2021, p.14), making it an ideal jurisdiction for empirical research studies on corruption and wildlife crime.

A narrow discourse on corruption and IWT is emerging, examining corruption in illicit supply chains (see OECD, 2018; Zain, 2020), enforcement and prosecution procedures (see Outhwaite et al., 2023; Prinsloo et al., 2022; Zain, 2020). In Uganda, studies on IWT corruption have focused on the role of social norms (Baez-Camargo and Burgess, 2022; Kassa et al., 2020, 2021a, 2021b) or symbiotic and antithetical relationships between actors (Van Uhm and Moreto, 2018). Limited evidence exists on how corruption influences wildlife crime deterrence

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(Martini, 2013a; Van Uhm and Moreto, 2018). To the authors' knowledge, no study has yet considered the complex downstream impacts of corruption in wildlife criminal justice.

Using a red-green criminology framework, this study examines the environmental, socioeconomic, and political harms of corruption in wildlife justice pathways in Uganda, incorporating theories from the wider fields of traditional and critical criminology. It begins by reviewing existing evidence on wildlife crime and corruption, both globally and in Uganda. The paper then draws upon the results of semi-structured expert interviews to identify corruption risks in IWT enforcement and justice in Uganda, before exploring its central research question, 'What are the indirect and long-term harms caused by corruption in wildlife justice pathways in Uganda?'

1.2. Definitions and background

In the absence of a universal definition (Duffy, 2022), this study defines wildlife crime as "the taking, trading (supplying, selling, or trafficking), importing, exporting, processing, possessing, obtaining and consumption of wild fauna and flora ... in contravention of national or international law" (International Consortium on Combating Wildlife Crime [ICCCWC], 2021, p.5).

Wildlife crime affects thousands of species of flora and fauna worldwide (UNODC, 2024), causing – alongside timber and fishing crime – ecosystem damage valued at \$1 trillion (Kahler et al., 2021). Wildlife offending is driven by greed or need (Anagnostou and Doberstein, 2022), involving both vulnerable community offenders (Duffy and St. John, 2013; Roe et al., 2015; Travers et al., 2017; Wyatt, 2013) and profit-motivated TOC actors (Anagnostou and Doberstein, 2022; Haenlein and Keatinge, 2017; Wittig, 2016). This heterogeneity leads to distinctions between low-level offenders (LLOs), i.e., subsistence or opportunistic poachers, and high-level offenders (HLOs), i.e., commercial traffickers and corrupt officials (Haenlein and Opyene, 2021; Kahler et al., 2021; Roe et al., 2015; Wyatt, 2013).

Defined here as "the abuse of entrusted power for private gain" (Transparency International [TI], n.d.-a, para. 1), corruption causes diffuse environmental, socioeconomic, and political harms including environmental destruction (Izenman and Keatinge, 2020; OECD, 2018); acceleration of climate change (Anderson, 2021); facilitation of terrorism (Izenman and Keatinge, 2020; OECD, 2017; TI, 2017); the arming of authoritarian regimes (Vittori, 2019); criminalisation of state functions (Chêne, 2008); and political instability (Gastrow, 2011; TI, 2015). Grand or petty, active or passive, corruption includes diverse typologies such as bribery, embezzlement, fraud, extortion, abuse of discretion, nepotism, and political patronage (Langseth, 2007). It can also be characterised as institutional corruption, when it is attributed to functional distortion rather than individual morality (Thompson, 2018). Systemic but legal influences create perverse incentives which reward outcomes contrary to institutional objectives, undermining government legitimacy and distorting criminal justice (Thompson, 2018; Wakeham, 2023).

Corruption enables every stage of the transnational IWT supply chain (OECD, 2018; Van Uhm and Moreto, 2018; Wyatt, 2013; Zain, 2020) and fosters long-term growth of TOC (Chêne, 2008; Izenman and Keatinge, 2020). Criminals use corruption to neutralise sanctions and undermine enforcement (Chêne, 2008; Zain, 2020), creating impunity, reducing deterrence, and eroding the rule of law (Chêne, 2008; OECD, 2014). Governance asymmetries and neoliberal geo-economic factors converge, making developing economies particularly vulnerable to this phenomenon (Chêne, 2008; Franko, 2020; Passas, 2000; Shelley, 2019).

1.3. IWT and corruption in Uganda

Uganda has a rich biodiversity (Haenlein and Opyene, 2021; Harrison et al., 2015) and relies heavily on safari tourism, making wildlife crime a national priority (Uganda Wildlife Authority [UWA],

2020). Experts typify wildlife crime in Uganda as incorporating both poaching and trafficking (Haenlein and Opyene, 2021). Drivers of poaching include poverty, injustice (human wildlife conflict or social exclusion), cultural tradition and commercial trade (local, national, or international) (International Institute for Environment and Development IIED., 2016). However, the significant transnational IWT flows with a Uganda nexus are fuelled by organised crime and corruption (Costa, 2019; Haenlein and Opyene, 2021; Titeca, 2019).

Perception-based surveys offer valuable indicators of corruption in Uganda, notwithstanding methodological limitations (Button et al., 2018). One such survey showed 70 % of Ugandan respondents believed most or all police officers to be corrupt (TI and Afrobarometer, 2019). Other studies show the normalisation of corruption results in low public confidence in government controls (Baez-Camargo, 2017; Martini, 2013b; Pasculli, 2020).

Scant evidence exists on corruption in wildlife justice in Uganda. Indeed, the literature is largely focused on corrupt facilitation of IWT supply chains, including ranger bribery (Moreto et al., 2015); fraudulent permits (EIA, 2022; OECD, 2018); stockpile leaks (EIA, n.d.; Haenlein and Opyene, 2021); corrupt border officials (Runhovde, 2017a) and politico-military patronage (Titeca, 2019). A series of texts consider the role of social norms and informal networks (Baez-Camargo and Burgess, 2022; Costa, 2019, 2020; Costa et al., 2021; Kassa et al., 2020), one of which includes only a brief analysis of corruption motives across the criminal justice system (CJS) (Kassa et al., 2020).

Research is emerging on regional corruption risks and modalities in IWT enforcement (Prinsloo et al., 2022; Zain, 2020). For example, Outhwaite et al., (2023) highlight how bribes allow suspects to flee the scene; evidence is manipulated or leaked; charges are withdrawn; cases are deliberately mishandled; defence counsels act as bribery intermediaries; court placement is manipulated; false permits are certified; sentences and rulings are irregular; cases suffer political interference and resource diversion. Several examples align with anecdotal evidence in Uganda (Baez-Camargo and Burgess, 2022; Costa et al., 2021; Haenlein and Opyene, 2021; Kassa et al., 2020), suggesting these typologies may be locally applicable. As successful deterrence is premised on punishment being swift, certain, and proportionate (Bruinsma, 2018), the impact of corruption in criminal justice can undermine its effectiveness through reducing certainty of punishment. The following section discusses core theoretical considerations, beginning with deterrence.

2. Core theoretical considerations

2.1. Deterrence and rational choice

A sub-field of green crime, conservation criminology has assimilated theories from the classical school (Lynch and Long, 2022), including deterrence and rational choice theory. Rational choice suggest offenders are logical, committing crimes when rewards outweigh the risks (Bruinsma, 2018; Cornish and Clarke, 2017; Leclerc and Wortley, 2014). Critics argue that rational choice fails to allow for emotional decision-making (Bouffard et al., 2000). Human-wildlife interaction is influenced by positive and negative emotions (Castillo-Huitrón et al., 2020) and studies in Uganda show poaching is driven by desperation, poverty, and human-wildlife conflict (HWC) (Harrison et al., 2015; IIED., 2016). Other texts show the emotive language used by Ugandan victims of HWC, who describe elephants as terrifying and chimpanzees as rapists and thieves (Naughton-Treves, 1997). IWT deterrence strategies are also criticised for not tackling poverty, a major driver for LLOs (Duffy, 2022).

Furthermore, Gore et al. (2021) note how corruption is used by wildlife criminals to evade or mitigate sanctions. Other studies speculate that individualist corruption – i.e., bribery and patronage – is a driver of the greater sentencing leniency afforded HLOs (Halliday et al., 2022; Wilson and Borratta, 2020), but empirical data is absent.

Reflecting an institutional perspective, [Hutchinson et al. \(2023\)](#) show how reliance on financial penalties unfairly favours wealthy offenders, diminishing the deterrent effect. Other publications share emerging evidence that wildlife enforcement disproportionately targets less affluent offenders ([Paudel et al., 2020](#); [UNODC, 2024](#); [Wilson and Borratta, 2020](#)). As legitimacy gaps created by institutional corruption can lead to citizen non-compliance ([Thompson, 2018](#); [Wakeham, 2023](#)), corruption in wildlife justice may increase IWT, as well as social inequity ([Moreto and Gau, 2017](#)). This raises questions around power, justice and harm, themes central to green criminology ([Westerhuis et al., 2013](#)), which are explored below.

2.2. Red-green criminology and pyrrhic defeat

Green criminology considers the long-term harms and indirect victimhood of environmental crime ([Nurse, 2016](#); [Lynch and Long, 2022](#)), making it well-suited to the research question. The “red-green movement” (see [Nurse, 2016](#), p.29) marries green criminology with Marxian thinking, recognising that criminal justice systems serve elite interests ([Lynch and Long, 2022](#); [Nurse, 2016](#)). Red-green criminologists argue that “severe sanctions do not deter offenders, may instead increase offending, and can be harmful to communities” ([Wilson and Borratta, 2020](#), p.6), and that “war on conservation” fails to tackle the poverty drivers behind much wildlife crime ([Duffy, 2022](#), p.73). This echoes Marxist discourse which suggests that states use punitive sentencing to exert sovereignty, compensating for weak governance ([Garland, 2002](#)).

The Marxian context of red-green criminology reveals social inequities ([Nurse, 2016](#)). For example, Marxist conflict theory shows how the criminalisation of poaching is used to protect elite pursuits in class-based competition for natural resources ([Eliason, 2012](#)). Marxist discourse also demonstrates how traditional penalty fails to control – and can even increase – recidivism ([Cullen et al., 2011](#); [Nagin et al., 2009](#); [Reiman and Leighton, 2017](#)). [Reiman and Leighton \(2017\)](#) observe how prisons are dominated by the poor, entrenching inequalities and rewarding elites, resulting in inertia to change. They conceptualise this problem as a Pyrrhic defeat. Just as Pyrrhic victories are so costly they constitute defeat, the failure of criminal justice to curb crime benefits those in power, making it a Pyrrhic defeat.

Pyrrhic defeat theory can be applied to wildlife justice in Uganda. As elsewhere, sentencing of wildlife crime in Uganda relies heavily on penalty fines, with custodial sentences only served in default if fines are unpaid, thus discriminating against LLOs – who are likely unable to afford the fine – and, through their subsequent incarceration, escalating their impoverishment ([Harrison et al., 2015](#); [Runhovde, 2017b](#)). HLOs involved in large-scale IWT are less likely to be deterred by monetary fines ([Hutchinson et al., 2023](#)) and can more readily exploit corruption opportunities ([Outhwaite et al., 2023](#)). Coupled with prosecutors’ tendency to target easy cases for sure wins, this distorts the socioeconomic profile of convicted offenders ([Outhwaite et al., 2023](#)).

A red-green criminological framework, supported by pyrrhic defeat and deterrence theories, can therefore be used to understand corruption in wildlife justice in Uganda. Utilising this framework, practitioner interviews were used to identify corruption risks and explore the research question around the direct and indirect impacts of such risks, using the following methodology.

3. Methodology

Subject experts are popular interview targets for social studies ([Doringer, 2020](#)). [Potter and Potter \(2021\)](#) highlight that sampling only state actors can cause bias, thus the study also undertook interviews with experts from civil society. The lead author’s professional background in IWT interventions in Uganda enabled purposive sampling, allowing the identification of the most relevant participants for the research question ([McCartan and Robson, 2016](#)). By harnessing established relationships, access and authenticity challenges were also overcome ([Moreto, 2017](#); [Titeca, 2019](#)).

Semi-structured interviews were used, enabling greater flexibility in discussing sensitive matters ([Bryman, 2008](#)). An interview guide was developed, comprising standardised, open-ended questions, delivered flexibly ([McCartan and Robson, 2016](#)). Thematic analysis of interview data was subsequently conducted, identifying pertinent cross-cutting themes ([Doringer, 2020](#)). These were identified, consolidated, and prioritised using automated transcripts.

A total of 10 semi-structured interviews were conducted virtually with respondents possessing between 7 and 30 years of IWT experience in Uganda, 70 % of whom were Ugandan and all but one based in Uganda. This helped mitigate inherent risks of applying Northern epistemologies to Southern phenomena ([Sollund and Runhovde, 2020](#)). Given the centralised location of the country’s specialised wildlife court ([Agaba, 2023](#)), respondent regionality was heavily weighted to the Central region of Uganda (80 %). Targeting ensured gender and sector equity, yet 70 % of final participants were male and 80 % stemmed from civil society. As over half the civil society respondents had previously worked as police or wildlife officers, this mitigated sector bias, and the final sample reflected the male-dominated realities of wildlife enforcement (World Wildlife Fund [WWF], 2019). Nevertheless, the study’s sample size creates inherent limitations in data validity and representativity ([Robson, 2011](#)). The research adopted strict principles of anonymity and confidentiality, with responses coded to prevent identification.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Corruption risks in Uganda Wildlife Justice

“[Corruption] happens along the entire criminal justice chain ... from intelligence gathering to collecting evidence, arrests, bail, investigations, storing evidence, submitting files, feedback from prosecution, who prosecutes the case, who hears the case, which court it is tried in, all the way to the prison system. There are issues at every stage.”

(09)

As summarised above, respondents universally believe corruption to be a major factor in Uganda wildlife justice, influencing every step of enforcement and justice procedures. Some even see it as intrinsic to criminal justice. As respondent 06 states:

“Corruption exists because law enforcement and justice systems exist; it wouldn’t exist if we weren’t doing what we are doing”.

Corrupt actors may include both traffickers and officials, as highlighted below:

“The person who has been caught is looking for a way out of it. Would officials approach defendants? I’m sure it happens.”

(06)

“I need to remove this notion that corruption is always initiated by the offender: that is not true.”

(16)

Reflecting risks of elite patronage outlined in the literature ([Haenlein and Opyene, 2021](#); [Titeca, 2019](#)), respondents described how political, business, and foreign elites attempted to influence certain cases. Offender status dictates practitioner compliance with undue influence, as highlighted through the following comments:

“There is political interference. As enforcement officers, you get instructions from politicians, from your supervisor, to get off the case.”

(08)

“We’ve had that on dozens of occasions. [Investigators] will get a call. This person you’ve just arrested, he’s a close friend of mine, and so on.”

(06)

“The status of the person will dictate the action taken. For most Ugandans, hierarchy is still very traditional, you respect the elders. If the elders say no, you don’t do it, even if it’s the wrong thing. You just comply.”

(10)

Interference also manifests as intimidation and coercion, particularly with high-value suspects, with traffickers exploiting military, political and police connections to intimidate investigators. This is illustrated below:

“They bribe politicians, senior officers and supervisors, so that you [are] intimidated, threatened, and leave the case.”

(08)

“They receive a call from someone saying they are [military]. These people are connected. They have the means to find your phone number, where you live. [Investigators] get approached in court all the time by defendants or associates of the defendants. Trying to push them into a corner saying, I know who you are, I know where you live.”

(06)

“They started targeting us through the police. They identified our office, stopped our car on the road.”

(12)

Several respondents detailed how TOC actors target entire case teams with parity bribes for each person to ensure complicity and incentivise cooperation, leading to shadow battles between honest brokers and willing bribe recipients at a targeted institution. Subsequently, whistle-blowers face professional disruption – at the individual or organisational level – and other risks. Physical violence occurs, but job transfers, or bureaucratic obfuscation, are also common, as participants explained:

“Pretty much every [investigator I know] has been assaulted. One got his hand macheted. Another got hit on the head with a weighing scale.”

(06)

“When you are strong in your work, they’ll push you to a remote area. They will cut off your powers, so you are unable to [stop] these criminals.”

(08)

“There were NGOs whose licenses were withdrawn because they overstepped the boundary. They’ve been steamrolled by certain politicians. You can’t be too visible and energetic against corruption. You can’t speak too much. You walk on glass if you are in that space.”

(10)

The CJS in Uganda, as elsewhere, follows a roughly linear but overlapping process including stages of detection, arrest, arraignment, investigation, prosecution, adjudication, incarceration, and sometimes appeal. Different corruption risks occur at each stage, as explained below. Within this paper’s scope, greater emphasis is afforded to novel findings.

4.1.1. Detection: “Targeting the Lowest Hanging Fruit”

In terms of IWT detection, respondents observed corrupt behaviours identified in the literature. These include the facilitation of poaching by

rangers and communities (Moreto et al., 2015), corrupt officers at roadblocks and borders (Runhovde, 2017a; Titeca, 2019), government stockpile leakage (EIA, n.d.; Haenlein and Opyene, 2021) and exploitation of legal enterprise (EIA, 2022; OECD, 2018).

This study also uncovered novel findings on institutional corruption around certain investigation techniques. A respondent observed how “double-dealing” criminal informants may provide mis- or disinformation (O13), by avoiding sharing evidence on senior traffickers, for fear of retaliation, and only ever sharing intelligence on low-status offenders. Additionally, some even plant evidence on unwitting victims, for motives of profit or revenge, as explained below:

“Informants get money for info and busts. Using them is very dangerous. They will make up stuff to get the money. Most are dealers themselves and know how to place product on suspects.”

(13)

Multiple respondents criticised the reliance on *entrapment* as an enforcement strategy, believing it distorts demand for IWT products, results in the arrest of innocents, and leads to discriminatory targeting of LLOs. This was related to performance pressure, echoing the literature (Duffy, 2022; Wilson and Borratta, 2020), as below:

“Because of pressure I’ve been told some agencies might be using entrapment to up their numbers. Now the statistics are really high for arrests, but the types of people arrested are very low-level. It’s easy to see the person being arrested has nothing to do with what’s happening and has just been entrapped. They’re not the targets of criminal you should be looking at.”

(09)

“We have seen informants luring [people]. They come up with all sorts of stories to tell those they want to arrest, then this person goes hungrily in search of these animals, because someone told them they have a permit and are willing to pay.”

(13)

“There is not enough emphasis on HLOs. There is too much reliance on agent provocateur approaches targeting the lowest hanging fruit.”

(06)

Lippke (2017) observes “sting” operations are a legitimate proactive policing strategy for serious crime, but their misuse is considered entrapment. Within Ugandan enforcement, entrapment is widely normalised and lacks any regulatory control (Nanima, 2018). These findings suggest the use of entrapment in Uganda results in perverse incentives, thereby constituting institutional corruption.

4.1.2. Arrest and arraignment: “When Money Has Changed Hands”

Respondents identified individualist forms of corruption around arrest and arraignment previously evidenced in the literature (Kassa et al., 2020; Outhwaite et al., 2023), including police bribery to evade arrest or obtain release; deliberate evidence tampering; and intentional arraignment delays to trigger unconditional release (Justice Centre Uganda JCU, n.d.). Respondent 12 emphasised, “this majorly happens when money has changed hands.” The findings of this study provide a deeper understanding of these typologies, with participants describing how officers who permit offenders to flee the scene, negotiate retention of exhibits to sustain legitimacy. Cloaking corruption in this way may explain why IWT investigations frequently start and end with ‘the bust’, featuring neither suspects nor arrests (UNODC, 2017). One participant explains:

“There is a tendency of suspects offering money immediately after arrest. And institutions that normally accept it say, ‘OK, but give us the products. You’re giving us the money, and you’re also leaving

the product.' Then they tell you, 'We got the suspect, but he escaped and left the products behind'."

(12)

Other novel findings include the practice of 'selling' police bonds to offenders, enabling the suspect to abscond, and of police coaching suspects for court appearances, as illustrated below:

"A police bond is free in Uganda but [in practice] it's not. He paid 5 million shillings [approximately £1081] for police bond and when he was released, he disappeared. That's how it works."

(01)

"Suspects reach police, and they are coached as to what to say."

(13)

"The police officers coach them. Of late they say, 'Say it's an entrapment case'. So, every case you hear somebody saying, 'I was entrapped'."

(12)

4.1.3. Investigation and prosecution: "A File Peppered with Gaps"

Participants observed how corrupt officers leak key operational or case details and deliberately weaken cases through omission, statement falsification and deliberate file misplacement. This aligns with emerging evidence in the literature (see [Outhwaite et al., 2023](#)). Case manipulation can take place prior to court or during the trial itself, and is conducted by investigators, prosecutors, or both, often under external pressure from political interference. As stated by participants:

"[Investigators] split the file selectively, ensuring the State Attorney only sees a limited amount of information – a file peppered with gaps – and thereby chooses not to sanction the case."

(09)

"The lack of sanctioning indicates corruption, but it's not clear if it's as a result of influence at the state attorney level, or gaps in the file presented."

(06)

"I know some institutions where calls have been made and files shelved."

(09)

Crucially, respondents observed that case manipulation only occurs on HLO files, suggesting a correlation between status and the ability to evade justice using corruption, as exemplified below:

"We don't see kingpins being arrested or prosecuted. If there is a [high value] case, it is a long, protracted thing that loses its momentum as it goes along [with] rumours of corruption, bribery..."

(10)

Participants identified prosecution-related corruption risks including bail abuse and charge dropping (see [Outhwaite et al., 2023](#)). Additionally, respondents reflected how *nolle prosequi* – the process by which the state withdraws their interest in a case ([Onuche, 2021](#)) – is abused for high-status wildlife defendants, attributed to political interference rather than individual prosecutor integrity. These findings are emphasised below:

"There are instances where bail is predetermined. The magistrate makes a pronouncement to go and pay this much, and the suspect is happy. They don't fear the court system. They are happy because they know what is going to happen and they have the resources to pay outright."

(12)

"When high-level cases attract interest from state actors, they turn it into an administrative matter. The letter comes from above giving a directive, and then [they] will issue a *nolle prosequi*."

(16)

This study also found novel corruption risks, including deliberate restraint by prosecutors in applying more stringent provisions, and the misuse or abuse of plea bargaining. As the prosecutorial imperative to ensure successful convictions incentivises the limitation of charges to strict liability offences, e.g., possession of wildlife, respondents observed how corrupt actors exploited this norm to cloak intentional weakening of charges against HLOs, as noted below:

"We have many interesting statutes, but they're rarely used. There is a very deliberate reason why – it is because of corruption."

(09)

"Relying on [strict liability crimes] makes cases easy, investigators lazy, and leads to greater reliance on targeting lowest hanging fruit."

(11)

Concerns also existed about the misuse and abuse of plea bargaining (PB), a closed-door negotiation in which suspects make an admission of guilt, forfeiting rights to a full trial in exchange for sentencing leniency ([JCU, 2021](#)), which is usually penalty-based. The PB approach is designed to expedite convictions, but studies elsewhere suggest it is subject to manipulation, incentivising re-offending ([Korejo et al., 2023](#)), and benefitting corrupt elites ([Aniche et al., 2021](#)). Respondents in this study observe similar dynamics in Ugandan wildlife justice:

"PB is another avenue where corruption is practiced openly. When you interview suspects, you discover they paid more money than what appears on the PB record. The difference is bribery."

(12)

"PB happens to certain people. Other people who can't afford the brown envelope [bribe] must serve their sentence."

(10)

Participants also suggested the PB process suffers from institutional corruption, as well as being a vehicle for individual malfeasance. Wealthy offenders can absorb comparatively large PB fines as a cost of business, and the speed and apparent finality of the PB process discourages enforcement scrutiny beyond the predicate offence. Similar phenomena are observed in financial crime studies conducted elsewhere (see [Aniche et al., 2021](#); [Korejo et al., 2022](#)), but are absent from IWT discourse. Ultimately, these practices further amplify the social inequities of wildlife justice, as illustrated below:

"High-value offenders will pay the fine because penalties are relatively small. If they've got money, they'll just go through the process, pay their fine and walk away."

(06)

"PB is very dangerous. You become lazy on a case. By the time it gets to the magistrate, they are not presented with the full facts and there is a danger they will not apply an appropriate sentence."

(12)

4.1.4. Judicial process: "Behind the Scenes, They Have Paid Bigger Money"

Participants observed corruption risks at the courthouse stage, including evidence destruction by court officers, interpreter mistranslation, deliberate absenteeism and bribery or coercion of judiciary to manipulate outcomes. Individualist corruption risks were considered less prevalent in the specialised wildlife court in Uganda, due to the Chief Magistrate's passionate stance on species justice ([Agaba, 2023](#)), but other courts were considered more vulnerable. Respondents held that bribes are used to negotiate more lenient penalties. For example:

“Sometimes they pay a fine, but behind the scenes they have paid bigger money. If you hear of 20 million [approximately £4379], this guy must have paid a large amount which exchanged hands before they came up with this 20 million.”

(01)

“In most cases, sentences are [corruptly] negotiated like in bail or PB. They will give a very high jail term, then a very low fine. Somebody says 6 months imprisonment or 100,000 shillings [approximately £22], and that cannot balance.”

(12)

Additionally, both exceptionally slow and excessively fast proceedings are considered red flags for corruption (Outhwaite et al., 2023), as reflected below:

“[The case has] been going on nearly 3 years no. You know, judges taking the day off. Defence barrister can't be there. The witness isn't available, you know, on and on...”

(06)

“They don't necessarily close the case. It just dies away slowly.”

(10)

“In Uganda, when the defence represent anyone with any sort of high profile, they seem able to force the prosecution to move quickly on matters.”

(06)

“Most notable is how quickly they can do the PB to get things settled.”

(10)

Finally, one participant noted that the standard two-week period between adjudication and sentencing creates a corruption window, as outlined below. The ongoing failure to address this vulnerability echoes Reiman and Leighton's (2017) Pyrrhic defeat theory:

“When it comes to sentencing the process gives room for corrupt practices. They send the [offender] on remand and come back in two weeks for sentencing. For 14 days the relatives run everywhere in the corridors of court, trying to find who they can talk to, to get a better sentence.”

(12)

4.1.5. Incarceration: “Even in Prison, there is Sheraton”

Despite the absence of evidence on IWT corruption risks in prisons in the wider discourse, respondents observed how bribery of prison officers enable suspects to escape or secure early release, comfortable living quarters or otherwise favourable treatment. Jail monitoring is seen as effective in mitigating these risks, as highlighted below:

“In the past somebody would ensure the suspect escaped. You go to prison, and they let you go. But with frequent jail visits it is not happening now.”

(12)

“The convict was sentenced to 6 months, but we found [he] only spent one month in prison. Jail visits are key: they help monitor who is spending time in prison, and who is not.”

(13).

“Even in prison, there is Sheraton, for the high-class people. You will be put in a good place. You will not go to the farms for hard labour. For as long as you have money to continue giving to prison officers.”

(12)

4.2. Inequitable outcomes and social harms of Wildlife Justice Corruption

4.2.1. Distortion of targeting and resources

In terms of this study's research question, these findings show how institutional corruption in Uganda drives indirect harms such as inequitable IWT enforcement outcomes. Perverse incentives evolve via the use of certain investigation strategies, such as informants and entrapment, resulting in the inequitable targeting of low-status offenders because their cases are easier, distorting resource prioritisation. For example:

“It's relatively easy to arrest people in possession of small amounts of wildlife poached from parks. They're trying to make a few bucks or feed their family.”

(06)

“Targeting [HLOs] needs more resources, equipment, time for surveillance, financial investigation, greater inter-agency cooperation; defendants use talented private lawyers etc.”

(16)

“Enforcement of wildlife crime in Uganda is just about lower hanging fruit: anything requiring additional work does not happen, there's no motivation.”

(12)

Lippke (2017, p.294) claims that entrapment of poor offenders is ‘like shooting fish in a barrel,’ because they are motivated by need. This aligns with both participant responses and the literature (Harrison et al., 2015; IIED., 2016). Just as policing the poor is easier, policing high-status offenders is harder, as they benefit from systemic inequities and can exploit individual corruption opportunities. Targeting and resources are distorted by several factors, including officer morale, the perversion of budgets, and reluctance to use strategies which reveal upstream actors, such as financial investigation. The presence of high-status offenders turns cases toxic or obliges honest brokers to pursue HLO targets clandestinely. As participants explained:

“If you're going after people [with] influence and power and money, no one wants to put their head above the parapet. When they get arrested, that's when our issues start. There will be money to the police or influential friends will put pressure on every stage of the process.”

(06)

“[On certain cases] investigators will claim they have no money for transport to conduct investigations, blocking progress.”

(16)

“When agencies get a [big] player, things do not move. You have fantastic meetings, but things will never happen. When you start talking about bank accounts and asset identification, they don't want you to go there.”

(09)

“No one wanted to touch this case – that was our struggle all along.”

(10)

4.2.2. A two-tier justice system

Findings have shown how HLOs intrinsically benefit from the systemic distortion of the CJS and can manipulate outcomes along the justice pathway through differential access to corruption opportunities. Respondents universally observed how this creates a “two-tier system”, driving inequitable sentencing outcomes:

“It becomes a two-tier system where low-level poachers – who can't afford proper defence lawyers or to bribe whomever they want – get dealt with and go to court. But anyone with any influence or money can put

pressure on the system at any stage to alter the outcome, no problem at all.”

(06)

“Your ordinary guy obviously can’t pay these bribes. So, most that go to jail are the ordinary guy.”

(10)

“Wildlife offenders have variable degrees of leverage or opportunity for corruption, depending on resources and connections. The higher value the offender, they will always have freedom his or her way.”

(16)

As stated by respondent 06, “all the damage has been done before [they reach court]”, implying the only offenders who face trial are those without the means to have engineered their escape from the system earlier on. The net effect is that only the poorest wildlife offenders are imprisoned.

In line with the literature (Harrison et al., 2015; Runhovde, 2017b), participants observed how less affluent offenders and their families are also victimised through a ‘Catch-22’ situation which arises when corruption in normalised within punitive justice. If such offenders go to jail, they risk impoverishing their families who depend upon them, so entire families impoverish themselves to raise funds to prevent their imprisonment, as below:

“They’re the breadwinners for that village; if they can’t afford to pay the fine, then they’re out the picture for 5 years or so. It has a massive impact on local communities.”

(06)

“Corruption of the system drives further impoverishment: These ones with nothing will look for other means to pay off to get lenient sentences. They will sell their land, their cattle, their chickens, to raise money to pay for freedom. Arrests cause chaos in families as people look for money to pay fines and corruption.”

(13)

4.2.3. Officer morale and resilience

All corruption typologies, whether individualist or institutional, impact negatively on officer morale. Disproportionate targeting of LLOs distresses investigators and prosecutors. Respondent 06 stated, “we use the word ‘icky’- the prosecutors and investigators feel very bad about what’s happening”. This lessens individual morale, reducing resilience to future corruption, as further illustrated below:

“It’s not what we’re about, chasing people with no shoes and no watches.”

(06)

“I have arrested nearly 1000 traffickers and keep asking myself, have I solved the problem?”

(12)

“There’s no morale for enforcement to do the work if court fails their efforts. You feel you wasted your time. Then next time, you let [the suspect] bribe you with the money he would have given the court...it fuels bribery. It is a continuous cycle.”

(08)

4.3. Long-term impacts of Corruption in Wildlife Justice

4.3.1. Legitimacy gaps: justice as ‘Window Dressing’

In line with the research question, multiple participants observed how inequitable outcomes caused by corruption in wildlife justice

create a convenient façade, masking the failure of authorities and the conservation sector to stem more serious IWT offending. These observations echo scholarly concepts where criminal justice outcomes provide the illusion of a functioning state, including in discourse on compensatory sovereignty (Garland, 2002), legitimacy deficits (Thompson, 2018; Wakeham, 2023), securitisation of conservation (Duffy, 2022) and Pyrrhic defeat theory (Reiman and Leighton, 2017). Wilson and Borratta (2020) outline how increased advocacy for stronger wildlife enforcement is linked to performative justice. Such systemic distortion may explain the sentencing disparities observed in Uganda by Jayanathan (2022). For example, participants stated:

“It allows [GoU] to say they’re dealing with the issues. It makes them look good and they can ignore the consequences of [the corruption].”

(06)

“You’ve effectively created a window dressing system that has zero impact on fighting wildlife crime. Statistics in, statistics out.”

(09)

“I sometimes wonder if people are genuinely motivated to solve the problem or if it is just a charade for donors to keep the money flowing.”

(12)

Respondents also observed that individualist corruption in wildlife justice was rooted in elite patronage systems that lead over time to the emergence of “untouchables”. This creates a system where “rich people get away with stuff and poor people go to prison” (06), further aligning the issue with Reiman and Leighton’s (2017) Pyrrhic defeat theory. Participants stated:

“Certain people become untouchable. I went to one of our partners with intelligence [on a senior state actor], and he said, ‘If you want us to continue as an NGO, then give that intelligence to someone else’. I went to another body. Nobody wanted to do anything about it.”

(10)

“This class-based [justice] system is as much about politics as it is about money. It’s about keeping this regime functional.”

(16)

4.3.2. Failure of deterrence and erosion of Rule of Law

One long-term impact of corruption in wildlife justice is the neutralisation of deterrence, for both HLOs and LLOs. Respondents intrinsically understood that the effective impunity of HLOs incentivises re-offending and lures others to wildlife crime, reflecting the discourse on how corruption distorts risk/reward structures and undermines deterrence, attracting organised crime actors to the trade (Chêne, 2008; OECD, 2014). As participants stated:

“Because the big people have resources at their disposal, if they cannot be prosecuted and sentenced, crime will be on the rise.”

(01)

“[Corruption] encourages those who are highly involved to continue committing crime, knowing they’ll not be successfully prosecuted. The result? They’ll keep depleting [wildlife].”

(12)

“That’s how it embeds within society: if he can get away with it, I can also get away with it.”

(10)

Respondents rarely drew direct causal links between corruption and subsistence re-offending, yet clearly identified corruption as a driver of legitimacy deficits leading to the long-term erosion of the rule of law,

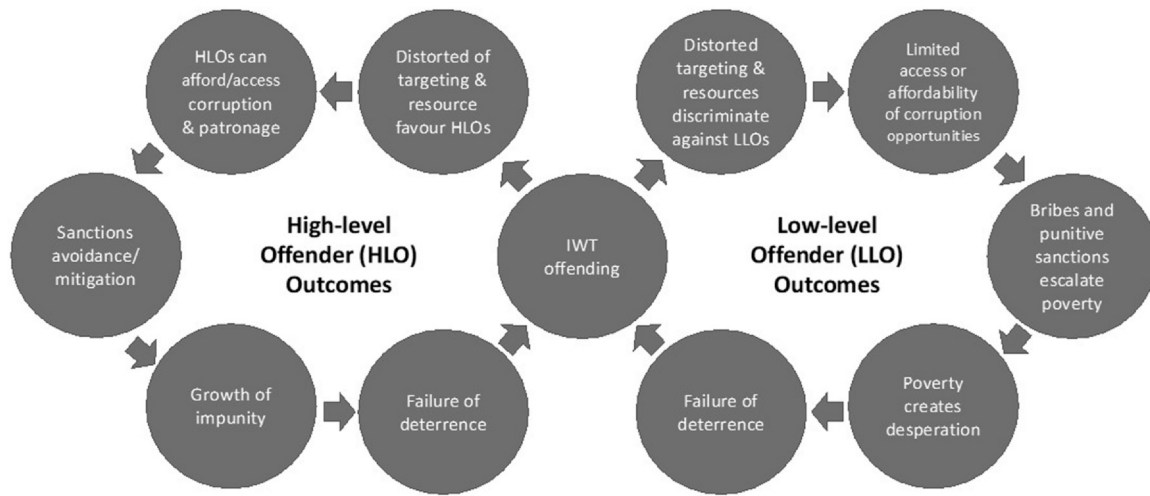


Fig. 1. Causal Relationship Between Corruption in Wildlife Justice and the Failure in Deterrence.

the risk of which is accelerated (for one respondent) by technology. For instance:

“If the small fish is the only one being sentenced, there will be questions about the credibility of the courts and law enforcement.”

(01)

“It will create serious enmity between wildlife authorities and communities.”

(12)

“So far, there has been a lack of coverage of state interference and high-value offenders who manage to neutralise their sanctions. BUT with social media, new technologies and activism today, there is a risk that lawlessness could erupt. For wildlife, this could mean mass poaching or trafficking activity.”

(16)

4.3.3. Environmental, economic and political harms

Corruption (Fletcher and Herrmann, 2012; TI, n.d.) and green crime (Nurse, 2016; Lynch and Long, 2022) are characterised by long-term and indirect victimhood and harms. Similarly, respondents in this study observed the far-reaching victimisation caused by corruption in wildlife justice, as below:

“The individuals arrested are collateral damage. The real impact is at an economic and governance level.”

(09)

“We are all victims. The law enforcement officer, the criminals, the court system, and the society as well – we are all victims.”

(08)

“In the longer term, it is our wildlife that is being affected. They will continue killing our wildlife, our elephants, our pangolins. Corruption is going on, crime is going on. It is impacting our environment, our wildlife, our society.”

(12)

Generally, respondents viewed the environmental harms caused by corruption in wildlife justice with an anthropocentric mindset, linking them to tourism sector decline and climate change impacts on humanity, such as:

“If this wildlife goes extinct, we will lose income and jobs from tourism.”

(16)

“Eventually it will affect our environment. We are seeing a lot of heat, a lot of rain, all this is rotating around wildlife crime. At the end of the day,

it impacts the way we live. Our tourism industry is being affected, our lions are being killed, elephants are being eliminated.”

(08)

Participants also believed corruption in wildlife justice indirectly contributes to increasing “the wealth gap between corrupt actors and the rest of society” (16), and drives macroeconomic risks around foreign and domestic investment, resulting in long-term economic blight. These are outlined below:

“If corruption is on the rise, donor funding will stop. No donor would want to put money where it is going to be misused.”

(01)

“People are not keen on investing into [Uganda]. I've seen a number of international retailers pulling out, [as] a direct result of [not] doing anything about corruption.”

(10)

“[The corrupt] make distortionary economic decisions. To hide ill-gotten money, they invest in real estate. And because the money is a windfall, they can't maintain them. So, you find suburbs with empty commercial buildings, schools that are below standard.”

(09)

Finally, while the wider literature laments how corruption undermines democracy and causes political unrest (see Gastrow, 2011, TI, n.d.; TI, 2015), several participants envisaged long-term corruption acting as a trigger to unleash the civic momentum necessary to catalyse democratic change. This is best explained through the following comments:

“With time – we are already seeing it – we have a huge gap between the haves and have nots. The ones who don't have will eventually get back at the ones who have.”

(08)

“Remember, mob justice is also a form of justice – that is why it has that word. If the wider community get frustrated by the corruption of a particular public official, the community will eventually take action.”

(16)

“[I]f there's no benefit to the government to share the wealth and make people better off and better educated then people will call them out on their “fat cat” behaviour.”

(06)

5. Conclusion

The pernicious nature and scale of wildlife crime demands an appropriate public response. Yet offending typologies are diverse, with variable motives of need or greed, making a homogenous approach inherently problematic. Deterrence and rationalist theories of crime form the basis for many counter wildlife crime interventions, yet these are inadequate for tackling the emotional factors driving low-level offending. Neither do they allow for understanding the impacts of different types of corruption in wildlife justice, which formed the central research question for this study.

Based on the results of expert interviews, this study found different types of institutional and individual corruption risk exist at every stage of the wildlife justice pathway in Uganda, including detection, arrest and arraignment, investigation and prosecution, judicial process, and incarceration. The research showed how affluent or well-connected offenders can differentially exploit individualist forms of corruption, such as bribery and patronage, to manipulate or evade criminal justice outcomes. Thus, corruption in wildlife justice drives inequitable sentencing outcomes.

Institutional forms of corruption exacerbate these sentencing disparities and social harms, with perverse incentives distorting suspect targeting and resource prioritisation. Discrimination against LLOs is intrinsically rooted in various practices, including a preference for penalty fines over imprisonment, sanctioning of 'easy wins', and the misuse of entrapment, criminal informants, and plea bargaining. The subsequent impact on officer morale is significant, with increasingly reduced resilience to corruption over time.

By contrast, HLOs can easily absorb the cost of official penalty fines or bribes, effectively defanging enforcement attempts for the most prolific and harmful offenders. This study also found that the long-term impacts of corruption in wildlife justice included the gradual decline of government legitimacy, the failure of deterrence, and the erosion of the rule of law, with serious environmental, economic, and political consequences. Aspects of corruption in wildlife justice in Uganda were found to have echoes of Pyrrhic defeat theory, as benefits flow to (criminal and political) elites, creating inertia to change. The reliance on prosecuting LLOs provides a façade of justice, creates untouchable criminal elites, entrenching the involvement of organised crime in IWT, and neutralising deterrence for such actors. In response to the research question, the study found the combined impact of institutional and individualist corruption results in a two-tier justice system, reflected in the disproportionate imprisonment of subsistence offenders and their further impoverishment (and that of their families), as they either serve time or sell assets to raise funds to avoid incarceration.

The failure of deterrence due to corruption is not limited to organised crime or corrupt actors who can afford a bribe, or who may be able to leverage patronage networks to neutralise sanctions. As the disproportionate treatment of less affluent offenders causes poverty and social injustice, both of which are drivers of low-level criminal activity, corruption in wildlife justice also increases the motives for wildlife crime conducted by subsistence offenders. Thus, corruption in wildlife justice does not simply result in 'justice denied,' but becomes counterproductive to the very object of enforcement itself, by driving re-offending for all types of offenders.

Based on this study's fulfilment of the research question, a homeostatic model may be constructed of the causal relationships between corruption in wildlife justice, the failure of deterrence, and the subsequent impacts on recidivism for both HLOs and LLOs (see Fig. 1). These twin cycles of deterrence failure were found to have a broad victimisation, with continued wildlife offending driving long-term species depletion, environmental degradation, and climate change acceleration, as well as economic effects such as the loss of tourism revenues, a decline in direct foreign investment, and the distorting impacts of wildlife-related illicit financial flows. Whilst this study aligned with the discourse in finding that corruption in criminal justice may drive

civil unrest, it also suggested that enduring corruption could potentially trigger political change.

Whether institutional or individualist by nature, corruption in wildlife justice is undoubtedly deleterious. Despite the limitations of this study, its findings have implications for policymakers and practitioners. Heterogenous enforcement approaches to wildlife crime should be developed to suit differential offender culpability, with proactive policing strategies – i.e., network analysis or financial investigation – adopted for incisive targeting of HLOs, and novel alternative justice models may provide a more equitable strategy for handling LLOs (see Hübschle et al., 2021). Regulation and promotion of best practice policing should be encouraged to prevent distortion of legitimate methods such as plea bargaining and sting operations. Sentencing requires greater proportionality, underpinned by the development of guidelines, and kept accountable through independent court and jail monitoring. Finally, for deterrence of HLOs to succeed, anti-corruption measures should be integrated along the wildlife justice pathway, incorporating technical methods to combat petty corruption as well as political or social solutions which can strengthen resilience to patronage and grand corruption.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Anne-Marie Weeden: Writing – original draft, Visualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Nicholas Pamment:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare the following financial interests/personal relationships which may be considered as potential competing interests: Anne-Marie Weeden reports a relationship with Royal United Services Institute that includes: consulting or advisory and employment. If there are other authors, they declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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