



RESOURCE GOVERNANCE & POLICY EXECUTION SERIES

Illegal Wildlife Trafficking in **Tanzania:** From Crisis to Collaborative Governance Solutions



Executive Summary

Illegal wildlife trafficking remains one of Tanzania's most persistent natural resource governance challenges. Although the country has strengthened its legal framework, expanded protected areas, and intensified anti-poaching efforts over the past decade, trafficking networks continue to exploit institutional weaknesses, porous borders, corruption, and uneven enforcement. The result is a governance problem whose consequences extend beyond biodiversity loss to undermine tourism, rural livelihoods, public revenue, community security, and confidence in the rule of law.

This Insight Brief argues that Tanzania's principal challenge is no longer the absence of policy, but the fragmented execution of existing institutions and strategies. Wildlife authorities, law enforcement agencies, prosecutors, border officials, local communities, tourism operators, and civil society often pursue the same objective through disconnected systems, limiting their collective ability to disrupt increasingly sophisticated criminal networks. While significant progress has been made in reducing elephant poaching and strengthening legal protections, implementation gaps continue to create opportunities for organised wildlife crime.

Drawing on evidence from Tanzania and broader African experience, the brief examines how illegal wildlife trafficking has evolved into a multidimensional governance issue that demands coordinated institutional responses rather than isolated enforcement actions. It highlights persistent implementation challenges, including limited institutional capacity, weak inter-agency coordination, inconsistent prosecution, insufficient community incentives, and the transnational nature of trafficking networks.

The brief concludes that durable progress depends on moving beyond reactive enforcement towards collaborative governance that aligns public institutions, local communities, the private sector, regional partners, and development organisations around shared implementation goals. Strengthening coordination, accountability, intelligence-sharing, and community stewardship offers a more sustainable pathway for protecting Tanzania's wildlife while reinforcing broader natural resource governance.

Executive Summary

- Illegal wildlife trafficking has evolved from a conservation concern into a broader governance and development challenge.
- Tanzania possesses a relatively strong legal and institutional framework, but implementation remains uneven.
- Fragmented coordination between enforcement agencies limits the effectiveness of anti-trafficking efforts.
- Sustainable success depends on communities becoming active partners rather than passive beneficiaries of conservation.
- Collaborative governance offers the strongest foundation for protecting biodiversity while strengthening livelihoods, tourism, and institutional resilience.

Introduction

Tanzania is internationally recognised as one of Africa's richest biodiversity landscapes. Its national parks, game reserves, wildlife management areas, forests, and marine ecosystems support globally significant populations of elephants, rhinoceros, lions, pangolins, and countless other species that contribute not only to ecological integrity but also to tourism, rural livelihoods, and national economic development. This natural wealth represents one of the country's most valuable strategic assets.

Yet the same abundance has made Tanzania an enduring target for illegal wildlife trafficking. Over the past two decades, organised criminal networks have exploited high international demand for ivory, rhino horn, pangolin scales, timber, and other wildlife products, transforming wildlife crime into a sophisticated transnational enterprise. Between 2009 and 2014 alone, Tanzania's elephant population declined by more than sixty per cent, while black rhinoceros populations reached historically low levels before recent conservation gains began to stabilise numbers. Although these improvements demonstrate that determined interventions can produce results, they have not eliminated the structural conditions that allow trafficking networks to persist.

Much of the public discussion surrounding wildlife trafficking continues to frame the issue primarily as a conservation crisis requiring stronger anti-poaching operations. While enforcement remains essential, this perspective captures only part of the challenge. Illegal wildlife trafficking is equally a governance problem. Criminal networks succeed where institutions operate in isolation, where intelligence is poorly shared, where prosecutions fail to deter offenders, where communities receive few tangible benefits from conservation, and where implementation cannot keep pace with increasingly organised illicit markets.

Tanzania does not lack legislation. It has established a comprehensive legal framework, specialised wildlife institutions, and national strategies to combat wildlife crime. It also participates in regional and international agreements designed to strengthen cross-border cooperation. The more difficult challenge lies in translating these policies into consistent action across multiple institutions, jurisdictions, and stakeholders. In practice, the effectiveness of wildlife governance depends not on the strength of any single agency but on the quality of coordination among them.

This Insight Brief argues that the next phase of Tanzania's response should move beyond viewing wildlife trafficking primarily through the lens of enforcement and instead strengthen collaborative governance. Effective implementation requires closer coordination between wildlife authorities, law enforcement agencies, prosecutors, customs officials, local governments, communities, tourism operators, civil society organisations, researchers, and regional partners. Wildlife crime thrives where these actors work separately; it becomes substantially more difficult where they operate as an integrated governance system.

The analysis examines the scale and consequences of illegal wildlife trafficking, explores the institutional and implementation challenges that continue to undermine existing responses, and identifies practical opportunities for strengthening collaborative governance. Rather than advocating entirely new policies, the brief focuses on improving how existing institutions work together to protect Tanzania's natural heritage while advancing broader development and resource governance objectives.

The Governance Challenge Behind Wildlife Trafficking

Illegal wildlife trafficking is often portrayed as a conservation problem centred on poaching. In reality, poaching is only the most visible stage of a far larger illicit economy. Behind every illegally killed elephant, pangolin, rhinoceros or shipment of protected timber lies a coordinated network of recruiters, financiers, transporters, brokers, corrupt officials, processors, exporters and international buyers operating across multiple jurisdictions.

These networks thrive because they exploit weaknesses that no single institution can address alone. Wildlife authorities may strengthen patrols within protected areas, yet traffickers adapt by shifting routes, bribing officials, falsifying permits, exploiting border vulnerabilities or coordinating across neighbouring countries. The challenge therefore extends beyond protecting wildlife. It is one of governance, institutional coordination, intelligence sharing and sustained implementation.

Tanzania's wildlife resources remain among the most valuable on the African continent, supporting globally significant populations of elephants, black rhinoceros, lions, pangolins and numerous endemic species. Yet their ecological value is matched by their commercial value within illegal international markets. High demand for ivory, rhino horn, pangolin scales, rosewood and other wildlife products continues to incentivise organised criminal activity despite improvements in domestic enforcement. Criminal syndicates increasingly employ sophisticated logistics, communications technology and financial networks that allow them to operate with considerable flexibility while remaining difficult to dismantle.

Viewed through this lens, illegal wildlife trafficking is not simply an environmental offence. It represents a test of institutional resilience. Where governance systems are fragmented, criminal organisations become more adaptive than the institutions pursuing them. Where governance systems operate collaboratively, the space within which traffickers function becomes progressively narrower.

The Cost of Fragmented Implementation

The consequences of illegal wildlife trafficking extend far beyond declining wildlife populations. Every successful trafficking network extracts value not only from natural resources but also from institutions, communities and the national economy. The cumulative impact weakens development outcomes in ways that are often considered separately but are, in practice, deeply interconnected.

Tourism illustrates this relationship clearly. Wildlife-based tourism contributes substantially to Tanzania's economy, generating employment, foreign exchange earnings and investment across hospitality, transport and local enterprise. The continued presence of healthy wildlife populations underpins the country's international reputation as a premier safari destination. When trafficking reduces populations of iconic species or damages Tanzania's conservation reputation, the economic effects ripple well beyond protected areas into businesses, workers and communities whose livelihoods depend on a thriving tourism sector. At the same time, governments must devote increasing public resources to anti-poaching operations, investigations and prosecutions, diverting scarce funds from other development priorities.

The impacts are even more immediate for communities living alongside protected areas. Reduced wildlife abundance often translates into declining tourism opportunities, shrinking household incomes and fewer local economic benefits derived from conservation. As wildlife populations become disrupted, incidents of human-wildlife conflict may also increase, particularly where predators turn towards livestock after natural prey populations decline. Such experiences can gradually erode public support for conservation if communities perceive themselves as bearing its costs while receiving few of its benefits.

Illegal wildlife trafficking further undermines governance by introducing organised criminal influence into rural communities. Poaching networks frequently rely on intimidation, corruption and informal recruitment to secure local cooperation or silence. These dynamics weaken trust in public institutions, distort local economies and make long-term development interventions more difficult to sustain. Wildlife crime therefore creates social vulnerabilities alongside ecological ones, reinforcing cycles of insecurity that extend well beyond conservation itself.

Taken together, these consequences demonstrate why illegal wildlife trafficking should not be understood solely as a biodiversity issue. It is equally a development challenge, an economic challenge and, fundamentally, a governance challenge. The degradation of wildlife resources represents only one manifestation of deeper institutional weaknesses whose effects are felt across multiple sectors.

Why Existing Responses Continue to Fall Short

Tanzania has made significant progress in developing the institutional architecture needed to combat wildlife crime. The country has enacted comprehensive legislation, established specialised agencies, adopted national strategies and committed itself to regional and international agreements aimed at strengthening wildlife protection. These measures provide an important foundation for enforcement and demonstrate sustained political recognition of the issue.

Yet implementation continues to lag behind policy ambition.

The challenge does not lie primarily in the absence of institutions but in the connections between them. Wildlife authorities, law enforcement agencies, prosecutors, customs officials, immigration services and local governments each possess distinct responsibilities within the enforcement chain. However, illegal wildlife trafficking operates across these institutional boundaries rather than within them. When information is not shared efficiently, investigations remain fragmented, prosecutions become inconsistent and enforcement loses its cumulative effect. (Mwambi, 2023).

Capacity constraints continue to limit operational effectiveness. Rangers and investigators often operate across vast landscapes with limited equipment, insufficient technical training and constrained financial resources. Prosecutors and judicial officers may lack specialised expertise required to prosecute increasingly sophisticated wildlife crimes, reducing the deterrent value of successful arrests. At the same time, criminal networks adapt rapidly, exploiting jurisdictional gaps, corruption and uneven enforcement capacity across borders.

These weaknesses reinforce one another. Limited investigative capacity produces weaker evidence. Weak evidence reduces successful prosecutions. Reduced prosecution lowers perceived risk among traffickers, encouraging further criminal activity. Fragmented coordination then allows those networks to reorganise faster than institutions can respond.

The result is a governance system in which individual institutions may perform their mandates competently while the overall system delivers inconsistent outcomes. Addressing wildlife trafficking therefore requires more than strengthening individual agencies. It requires strengthening the relationships between them. That is the central challenge of collaborative governance.

From Fragmented Responses to Collaborative Governance

Illegal wildlife trafficking is sustained by systems. It follows that lasting solutions must also be systemic. While Tanzania has strengthened its legal framework and invested in specialised conservation institutions, trafficking networks continue to exploit the spaces between agencies, jurisdictions and communities. Collaborative governance offers a practical framework for closing these gaps by shifting the focus from individual institutional performance to collective implementation.

Collaborative governance does not diminish the responsibilities of government agencies. Rather, it recognises that wildlife crime intersects with customs administration, financial intelligence, border security, tourism, local government, community development and international cooperation. Success therefore depends less on how effectively individual institutions perform independently and more on how effectively they coordinate their actions, share intelligence and align their objectives.

This shift represents an evolution from reactive enforcement towards integrated governance, where prevention, enforcement, community participation and institutional learning reinforce one another

Strengthening Institutional Coordination

Wildlife trafficking investigations frequently span multiple agencies before reaching prosecution. Rangers gather field intelligence, police conduct criminal investigations, customs officials monitor ports of entry and exit, immigration authorities track cross-border movement, prosecutors prepare cases, and courts determine outcomes. Weakness at any stage undermines the effectiveness of the entire enforcement chain.

Despite important progress, institutional coordination often remains constrained by fragmented information systems, differing operational procedures and limited mechanisms for routine collaboration. Intelligence collected by one agency may not be rapidly accessible to another, while operational planning frequently occurs within institutional silos rather than across them. These constraints reduce the speed and effectiveness of enforcement responses, particularly when confronting highly organised criminal networks operating across several jurisdictions.

Addressing this challenge requires more than periodic inter-agency meetings. It calls for permanent mechanisms that facilitate intelligence-sharing, joint operational planning, interoperable information systems and clearly defined institutional responsibilities. Developing centralised intelligence platforms, common investigative protocols and multidisciplinary task forces would significantly improve the state's ability to identify, disrupt and prosecute organised wildlife crime.

The objective is not merely better communication. It is creating an enforcement system capable of acting with the same coordination and adaptability demonstrated by the criminal networks it seeks to dismantle.

Placing Communities at the Centre of Conservation

Communities living alongside protected areas occupy a unique position within wildlife governance. They are often the first to observe illegal activities, the first to experience the consequences of declining wildlife populations and, in many cases, the first targets for recruitment by trafficking networks.

Historically, conservation initiatives have sometimes viewed local communities primarily through the lens of compliance, expecting them to support conservation objectives without consistently sharing the economic benefits that wildlife generates. Such approaches risk weakening local ownership of conservation efforts, particularly where communities experience persistent poverty, limited livelihood opportunities or increasing human-wildlife conflict.

Collaborative governance requires a different relationship.

Communities should be recognised not as passive beneficiaries of conservation programmes but as active partners in protecting natural resources. Community-Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) initiatives have already demonstrated that when communities possess meaningful decision-making roles, equitable benefit-sharing arrangements and viable economic alternatives, support for conservation becomes considerably stronger. Revenue-sharing, community monitoring programmes, alternative livelihood initiatives and local stewardship mechanisms can simultaneously improve conservation outcomes and strengthen rural resilience.

Equally important is ensuring that community engagement extends beyond project implementation to include participation in policy design, local planning and monitoring. Sustainable conservation depends not only on protecting wildlife but also on building long-term trust between institutions and the communities that live alongside these resources.

Building Partnerships Beyond Government

No government possesses sufficient resources to address wildlife trafficking alone. The complexity of modern trafficking networks demands broader partnerships that leverage the comparative strengths of different actors.

The private sector, particularly tourism operators, has a direct interest in maintaining healthy wildlife populations and secure conservation landscapes. Tourism businesses can support conservation through investment in anti-poaching initiatives, public awareness campaigns, responsible tourism practices and partnerships that strengthen community livelihoods. Their participation helps reinforce the economic incentives that underpin long-term conservation success.

Civil society organisations contribute in complementary ways by conducting research, facilitating community engagement, supporting institutional capacity-building and promoting public accountability. Academic institutions strengthen the evidence base through research and policy analysis, while development partners provide technical assistance, financial resources and opportunities for knowledge exchange across countries facing similar challenges.

“The strength of collaborative governance lies precisely in this diversity of actors. Each contributes capabilities that no single institution can fully provide on its own.”

Strengthening Regional and International Cooperation

Wildlife trafficking is inherently transnational. Illegal products frequently cross multiple borders before reaching international markets, while the criminal organisations coordinating these activities operate across countries rather than within them. National responses, however robust, remain limited if neighbouring jurisdictions do not maintain comparable levels of cooperation.

Regional organisations, international conventions and bilateral partnerships therefore play an essential role in strengthening intelligence-sharing, harmonising legal frameworks and coordinating enforcement operations. Tanzania's participation in CITES, the East African Community and the Southern African Development Community provides important foundations for this cooperation, but sustained collaboration must extend beyond formal agreements to include routine operational coordination, joint investigations and timely exchange of intelligence.

As trafficking networks continue to evolve, institutional responses must evolve with equal speed. Strengthening regional cooperation is therefore not simply an external policy objective but an essential component of effective domestic wildlife governance.

Recommendations for Strengthening Collaborative Wildlife Governance

Moving from policy ambition to measurable implementation requires coordinated action across institutions, communities and international partners. While Tanzania has established an important legal and institutional foundation, greater impact will depend on strengthening how these actors work together rather than expanding the number of policies alone.

1. Prioritise implementation over policy expansion

Tanzania has developed a comprehensive legal framework to address wildlife crime. The immediate priority should therefore be improving execution through adequate financing, institutional accountability and regular performance monitoring rather than creating additional legislation. Measuring implementation outcomes alongside policy commitments will provide a clearer understanding of where institutional bottlenecks continue to exist.

2. Strengthen institutional coordination and intelligence sharing

Wildlife trafficking investigations should operate as integrated enforcement systems rather than isolated institutional processes. Government agencies responsible for wildlife management, policing, customs, immigration, financial intelligence and prosecution should strengthen routine intelligence-sharing, joint operational planning and interoperable information systems. Establishing permanent inter-agency coordination mechanisms would improve both investigative efficiency and prosecution outcomes.

3. Build specialised institutional capacity

Responding effectively to increasingly sophisticated trafficking networks requires continuous investment in people as much as infrastructure. Rangers, investigators, prosecutors and judicial officers should receive specialised training in wildlife crime investigations, intelligence analysis, evidence management and financial crime. Equally important is ensuring that frontline institutions possess the equipment, technology and operational resources necessary to perform these responsibilities consistently.

4. Strengthen community stewardship

Communities living alongside protected areas should be recognised as strategic partners in conservation rather than beneficiaries of externally designed programmes. Expanding Community-Based Natural Resource Management initiatives, strengthening benefit-sharing mechanisms and supporting sustainable livelihood opportunities can reduce incentives for illegal wildlife activities while reinforcing local ownership of conservation outcomes. Community participation should also extend to planning, monitoring and decision-making processes wherever appropriate.

5. Deepen partnerships beyond government

Addressing wildlife trafficking requires contributions from multiple sectors. Tourism operators, research institutions, civil society organisations and development partners each possess knowledge, resources and networks that can strengthen implementation. Structured partnerships that combine technical expertise, public awareness, research, community engagement and operational support can significantly improve conservation outcomes while reducing duplication of effort.

6. Strengthen regional and international cooperation

Because wildlife trafficking operates across national borders, domestic enforcement must be complemented by sustained regional collaboration. Expanding intelligence-sharing, joint investigations, harmonised legal responses and cooperation with international enforcement agencies will improve Tanzania's ability to disrupt trafficking networks throughout the supply chain rather than only at points of origin.

Conclusion

Illegal wildlife trafficking represents one of the clearest examples of the relationship between natural resource governance and national development. While its immediate consequences are visible in declining wildlife populations, the deeper costs are borne through weakened institutions, reduced tourism revenues, diminished rural livelihoods and growing opportunities for organised transnational crime.

This Insight Brief argues that Tanzania's principal challenge is no longer the absence of policy. Over the past two decades the country has developed robust legislation, established specialised conservation institutions and strengthened its international commitments. The greater challenge now lies in ensuring that these institutions function as a coordinated governance system capable of responding to increasingly sophisticated criminal networks.

Collaborative governance offers the most credible pathway towards that objective. By strengthening institutional coordination, investing in implementation capacity, empowering communities, expanding partnerships across sectors and reinforcing regional cooperation, Tanzania can move beyond reactive enforcement towards a more resilient model of natural resource governance.

The protection of wildlife should therefore be understood not only as an environmental responsibility but also as an investment in institutional effectiveness, economic resilience and long-term national development. Sustainable conservation ultimately depends on the quality of governance that supports it. Where institutions collaborate effectively, communities become genuine partners and implementation remains consistent, conservation outcomes become significantly more durable.

For Tanzania, the opportunity is not simply to reduce wildlife crime but to demonstrate how collaborative governance can transform natural resource management into a driver of inclusive development, stronger public institutions and lasting environmental stewardship.

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