



RECOGNIZING LOCAL LEADERS AS AN ANTI-CORRUPTION STRATEGY

POLICY BRIEF

This brief highlights key takeaways and recommendations of “Recognizing Local Leaders as an Anti-Corruption Strategy: Experimental and Ethnographic Evidence from Uganda” (2022), a published as GI-ACE Working Paper No. 17 by Mark Buntaine, Alex Babago, Tanner Bangerter, Paul Bukuluki, and Brigham Daniels. It is one of two studies designed and implemented as part of the project “Can positive public recognition lead to good governance?” funded as part of the Global Integrity-FCDO Anti-Corruption Evidence Program (2019-2021).

Most corruption research focuses on the power of detection and punishment to reduce corruption. This study takes a different approach and offers the promise of positive public recognition for officials who demonstrate excellence in their official duties. While very few studies have focused on using positive recognition in the public sector, rewarding excellence is commonplace in other aspects of life, ranging from employee-of-the-month awards to outstanding community service medals.

SETTING

Working with a government partner, Bwindi Impenetrable National Park, this project tested whether rewarding good governance by local leaders improved delivery of a park program that funds local development projects. Through revenue-sharing, a portion of park gate fees are transferred to the 94 villages that border the national park. Villages elect committees to propose and oversee the projects. Revenue-sharing funds pass through several layers of local government, and in the past, in doing so a significant share of these funds has been lost to corruption or misdirected to other projects.

STUDY DESIGN

The study focused on training all village committees on the national guidelines for the management of these funds and then offering a randomized subset of these villages the opportunity to earn a public recognition award, consisting of a roadside sign posted in the village and broadcasting of radio ads highlighting the excellent work of those serving on the committees, if they adhered to the guidelines. To measure the effectiveness of positive recognition for the control of corruption, we compared the outcomes of projects in villages that were offered the possibility of recognition to those not offered recognition. We also measured whether the offer of recognition changed anti-corruption norms and attitudes. After the projects had been implemented, we tested whether telling members of the public and local leaders about the committees that earned recognition by following the project management guidelines changed perceptions about corruption and governance.

KEY FINDINGS

The main finding of the experiment is that the offer of recognition did not change leaders' behaviors or attitudes about corruption and governance. Nor did the offer of recognition result in better project outcomes. Given the modest amount of effort and cost involved in offering symbolic recognition, these efforts are likely to continue. However, our study suggests that these efforts will not easily alter behaviors and nor are they likely to change more fundamental norms that operate within public life. It is possible that these kinds of changes will occur only over longer periods of time than could be measured in our study.

As for the second experiment we ran to determine whether telling residents about the existence of the awards changed public attitudes about governance, we again found it did not.

To help understand our results we also relied on qualitative surveys, interviews, and focus groups with both leaders of villages and residents who are supposed to benefit from projects. **These qualitative measurements explored three main questions:**

(1) What were local expectations for the role that symbolic recognition might play in shaping project outcomes?

Interviews conducted before launching the experiments revealed that both village members and committee members would greatly appreciate social recognition, including announcements in public events and radio announcements. Participants were optimistic recognition could motivate action and deter corruption.

(2) How did community members and leaders react to the opportunity to earn recognition while implementing projects?

Although the idea of community recognition was welcomed within the communities, there was a general feeling during and after implementation that the recognition approach did not focus enough on tangible benefits to leaders or residents of communities. Even though the recognition had individual components, committee members felt that their effort was not recognized as much as they wanted and that instead, they preferred "tangible" benefits for their effort that went to individuals, rather than symbolic benefits or collective recognition that was directed to whole communities.

(3) Why did the recognition produce limited results both during implementation and after the roll-out of the recognition?

One of the themes that came out of the research is that the committee members – even those who were promised recognition – often felt powerless. Because they were embedded in a complex system of governance that they did not fully control, recognizing their efforts, even when projects failed for other reasons, proved less effective.

Discussions also revealed how low education levels among community and committee members were a key challenge in fulfilling the standards for excellence in revenue sharing. Another common explanation for the lack of impact of the offers of recognition was the voluntary nature of committee service and the significant economic stresses faced by committee members in daily life. These stresses were more severe during the COVID-19 pandemic.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Our main recommendation is to understand that positive recognition alone might not generate anti-corruption results. We believe that recognition might help bolster other strategies, particularly those that are also designed to change entrenched social norms and expectations.

Though we did not see positive results, particularly given the powerlessness felt by those in our study, it still may be worth exploring positive recognition as a way to motivate good governance at other levels of government where officials have significant control over outcomes and have the education and tools to more easily perform with excellence. Recognition may be most effective in settings where the people targeted have more agency.

The promise of recognition as a tool to address corruption is that, as compared to transparency and punishment, it is much easier for non-governmental actors to provide the recognition and less politically challenging for governmental actors to do so as well. We find no evidence that offering recognition harmed anti-corruption efforts and even some evidence that recognizing officials set new benchmarks for future rounds of revenue sharing. Under the circumstances, we recommend that the program be adapted and tested over longer periods of time.

Given our results, we identified **a number of hypotheses that are worth exploring** in future studies and programs:

First, a more promising direction may be the selection of public agents who are predisposed to act with integrity in the public sector, rather than trying to change norms of existing officials.

Second, recognition might include more focus on tangible benefits. For example, positive recognition may need to be linked with more instrumental concerns of the officials who are being recognized, such as access to promotion, salary increases, election, or favorable staffing rotations.

Third, recognition might be used in tandem with other anti-corruption strategies like providing transparency. Since the cost of providing recognition is generally low, adding recognition as an additional component is generally within the reach of most studies where monitoring is already occurring.

Fourth, longer-term, sustainable programs seem more suited to address societal entrenched problems like corruption. Though an initial offer of recognition did not motivate action, this is not reason to conclude that a longer-term strategy might not work.

FURTHER READING

Buntaine, Mark T., Alex Babago, Tanner Bangerter, Paul Bukuluki, Brigham Daniels. 2022. Recognizing Local Leaders as an Anti-Corruption Strategy: Experimental and Ethnographic Evidence from Uganda. GI-ACE Working Paper No. 17. Available at: <https://gint.info/BuntaineWP17>

AUTHORS

MARK BUNTAINE

University of California, Santa Barbara, buntaine@bren.ucsb.edu



ALEX BABAGO

Makerere University, alexbabago20@gmail.com

TANNER BANGERTER

Brigham Young University, tannerbangerter@gmail.com

PAUL BUKULUKI

Makerere University, pbukuluki@gmail.com

BRIGHAM DANIELS

Brigham Young University, danielsb@law.byu.edu