The much-repeated justification for conservation initiatives, especially those in developing countries, is that they have the potential to improve the welfare of local people. Yet, many schemes that are intended to equitably distribute the benefits from conservation are subject to misdirection, capture by elites, and corruption, limiting their ability to achieve welfare gains for local people. We study this problem in the context of revenue sharing at Bwindi National Park, Uganda. While a portion of gate fees from tourists are channeled to community-driven development projects in the villages around the park, audits find that most funds are lost to misdirection or corruption. To address this problem, working together with the Uganda Wildlife Authority, we collected the mobile phone numbers of approximately 4,000 residents in all 91 frontline communities near Bwindi National Park. We created a reporting platform available to residents in half of these villages assigned randomly. For residents in treatment villages, we collected status updates over four months and on a bi-weekly basis through an automated voice-response system about the implementation of revenue-sharing projects. We forwarded the information in reports to nationally-appointed officials who have specific responsibilities for overseeing revenue sharing. The treatment was intended to provide responsible authorities with information about implementation in near real time, providing scope to address problems observed by residents.

In field audits and household surveys with approximately 2,000 residents, we find no evidence that the monitoring treatment improved the delivery of revenue-sharing projects or increased satisfaction with revenue sharing among residents. Follow-up interviews with officials indicate that the information from citizen monitoring was not used for oversight. It is not possible to use bottom-up monitoring to solve governance problems where institutions are well-suited for obfuscation, corruption, and blame shifting. In order for schemes like revenue sharing to meet their goals of enhancing local welfare through conservation, institutions must be designed to promote more concentrated accountability, limit opportunities for corruption, and enhance the provision of information about outcomes. We reflect on the suitability of benefit-sharing institutions globally to meet the dual goals of enhancing local welfare and conserving natural resources.