



**BIODIVERSITY
CHALLENGE FUNDS**



Biodiversity Challenge Funds Projects **Darwin Initiative, Illegal Wildlife Trade Challenge Fund, and Darwin Plus**

Half Year Report

It is expected that this report will be a **maximum of 2-3 pages** in length.

If there is any confidential information within the report that you do not wish to be shared on our website, please ensure you clearly highlight this.

Submission Deadline: 31st October 2024

Please note all projects that were active before 1 October 2024 are required to complete a Half Year Report.

Submit to: BCF-Reports@niras.com including your project ref in the subject line.

Project reference	<i>DAREX002</i>
Project title	Ensuring the socio-ecological viability of High Atlas cultural landscapes
Country(ies)/territory(ies)	Morocco
Lead Organisation	Global Diversity Foundation
Partner(s)	Moroccan Biodiversity and Livelihoods Association (MBLA); University Mohammed VI Polytechnique (UM6P); Emerging Business Factory (EBF)
Project leader	<i>Gary Martin</i>
Report date and number (e.g. HYR1)	<i>HYR3</i>
Project website/blog/social media	https://global-diversity.org/haci-programme/

1. Outline progress over the last 6 months (April – September) against the agreed project implementation timetable (if your project started less than 6 months ago, please report on the period since start up to end of September).

This report highlights the progress in project DAREX002, “Ensuring the socio-ecological viability of High Atlas cultural landscapes,” from April 2024 to September 2024. Despite delays due to the earthquake, the project is returning to schedule. Progress has been made against the following outputs and activities:

Output 1: Community based regenerative approaches achieve biodiversity conservation and cultural landscape restoration while increasing agroecological productivity

In Activity 1.1, we are establishing three new community plant nurseries and expanding existing ones. We have identified a site for a new nursery in Demnat, which is currently in the preparation phase. The 3D plan has been approved, and financial estimations are confirmed. We are in the process of signing a contract with the host cooperative, with construction expected to begin in mid-November. The new community plant nursery in Tiliouguite, Azilal province is also underway, including plans for the accompanying seed bank. The nursery is

located in the Tamga Forest and will have a focus on forest biodiversity. The annual plant distributions will start in November (1.2).

Seed exchange among High Atlas producers was promoted through the programme's yearly seed fair in Azilal (1.3). The fair gathered around 50 farmers from Al Haouz (Talat N Yaacoub, Ighil, Imegdale, Oukaimden) and Azilal (Zaouiat Ahansal and Ait Mhamed) alongside seed collectors and multipliers from Imilchil, Boulmane, Brachoua, Demnat and Ghmat. Researchers and academics from Cadi Ayad University (Marrakech), Hassan I University (Settat), INRA, and ICARDA participated in the exchanges around importance of saving heirlooms varieties, the links between seeds and cultural identity. In addition to exchange opportunities, the project supports farmers access to local seed through distributions as part of Earthquake relief interventions. Distributions are conducted in October in the earthquake-affected communes of Ighil, Talat N'Yaacoub, Ijoukak, and Imegdale, expecting to reach 3,000 smallholders.

In Activity 1.4, our efforts to improve irrigation, terracing, and soil fertility across 500 agroecosystem parcels have continued, including enhancing agro-biodiversity by introducing new species. We introduced Azolla and other alternative fodders, along with the reintroduction of cactus species. We held a training session with Mr. Zakaria Mountazia, an expert in Azolla production, for farmers in the Anbdour and Tafarghousst villages. This training focused on the cultivation and application of Azolla and other fodders, enhancing terracing and agro-biodiversity in areas where these species were previously absent. Mr. Mountazia connected the Anbdour Cooperative for Alternative Fodder with a specialist to install a Hydroponic Fodder Chamber, which can produce 350 kg per day. He also shared his chicken farming experiences with Tafarghousst farmers interested in poultry projects. As part of our cactus reintroduction efforts, we partnered with local associations in Talat n Yaaccoub, Ighil, and Terre & Humanisme Maroc to distribute over 1,200 pads of two Opuntia cactus varieties to 50 farmers, initiating our multiplication and restoration efforts.

In Activity 1.5, we support the livelihoods of 500 transhumant pastoralists by enhancing access to veterinary care and education for livestock keepers. From June to July 2024, we provided veterinary care for over 300 working animals in Imegdale and Oukaimden. Our ongoing animal health support included remote assistance and transportation to clinics as needed. In July, we distributed alfalfa fodder to 150 households in Oukaimden, and from April to June, we supplied materials for animal shelters, helping 30 families in Ighil and Talat n'Yaacoub construct temporary livestock housing.

In collaboration with Society for the Protection of Animals Abroad (SPAN) and animal organization SOREC, we organized training sessions for farriers in Al Haouz province, including a two-day session in Marrakech and one-day sessions in Talat n'Yaacoub and Aghbar, focusing on animal care practices. In September and October, we supported community member from Ighil commune to form an association for shepherds and semi-transhumants, comprising 21 members from Tikhfist and nearby *azibs* ((high elevation pastoralist shelters and corrals), representing a community caring for about 5,000 animals annually. Starting in August, we worked with stakeholders to plan the restoration of transhumance shelters and landscapes in the High Atlas, supporting traditional lifestyles.

We are pleased to announce additional co-funding secured from the U.S. Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation (AFCP). This AFCP grant of \$425,000, running from October 2024 to April 2027, will support activities under Output 1: Community-based regenerative approaches achieve biodiversity conservation and cultural landscape restoration while increasing agroecological productivity, specifically through the restoration of earthquake-damaged agricultural terraces, azibs, water mills, traditional irrigation infrastructure, water sources, and granaries.

Output 2: Certification and labelling expanded for High Atlas cultural landscape products that meet established criteria and performance standards

As part of activities 2.1, 2.2, and 2.5, label consultant, Hafida Mazoud, provided an updated Harvest Label Proposal and an outline for the label standards in October. The business skills

training for cooperatives continues to provide training on national food safety certification processes (2.3). As part of Activity 2.4, aimed at enhancing the visual identity and packaging of cooperatives, we renewed the visual identity of 24 cooperatives in the Imintanout and Idaoutanane regions. This activity supports cooperatives to improve their branding. The team received positive feedback from benefiting cooperatives and their membership. This process took longer than anticipated and this will be taken into account in planning visual identity support for other cooperative partners. This activity is planned for the third cohort of 22 cooperatives in November 2024.

Output 3: Skills of rural entrepreneurs built to enable High Atlas cooperatives to commercialise local biodiversity friendly products from sustainable cultural landscapes

We also continued building the capacities of cooperatives (3.1) expand our reach to another hub, we partnered with The Draa Tafilalt Center for Sustainable Development to work with cooperatives in the Imilchil region. After assessing the cooperatives in the hub, we selected 18 cooperatives for the program, with 11 led by inspiring women passionate about their work and communities. In August, we held the first round of training with these cooperatives, focusing on essential topics such as the legal frameworks, administrative management, and financial management. In September, the second round included sessions on market analysis, sales techniques, digital marketing, and brand positioning. This training also includes a module on consumer research (3.5) The team is preparing to roll out the mentorship programme for new cooperatives in the new year (3.2). In August, we also partnered with Vital Voices, to provide business readiness and mental health training to 10 women cooperative leaders as part of post-earthquake support to cooperative partners (3.1).

The project is in the midst of recruiting a rural enterprise coordinator for the Southern hub, who will also support documentation of cooperative products and of project activities (3.4).

Output 4: Innovation of novel goods and services by rural entrepreneurs and cooperatives operating in High Atlas cultural landscapes incubated

The start of year 3 focused cooperative recruitment in the new Imilchil hub, with 18 new cooperative partners. Their training series is underway with cooperatives receiving training on digital skills (4.2) and an upcoming training on product innovation (4.1). Activities 4.3 – 4.5 on digital marketing services, mobile payment, and transport services resume in the next reporting period.

Output 5: Digital entrepreneurship and platforms promoted to increase revenues from High Atlas cultural landscape goods and services

Activity 5.3 aims to organize two 15-day editions of the Harvest Festival Marrakech annually. The Spring 2024 edition was our most visible and engaging yet, featuring 21 events over three weeks. A highlight was our collaboration with the International Society of Ethnobiology (ISE) Congress, where we coordinated five 'out of the academy' sessions and the Bio-cultural forum. This collaboration showcased our cooperatives' products and stories while co-leading the High Atlas market alongside MBLA at Les Étoiles de Jma El Fna (3.3). Through the Harvest Residency program, participant Amanny Ahmad engaged with two cooperatives—Doutmaquite and Aboughlou—alongside the Oukaïmeden plant nursery and a new community partner in Talat N Yacoub. This initiative facilitated exchanges on medicinal herbalism and health sovereignty, reinforcing the cultural heritage tied to our cooperatives and the High Atlas landscape. Additionally, our collaboration with Um Mami culinary school welcomed three new cooperatives: Tighanimin, Tizouite, and Tizgui, who participated in a two-day training exchange. The exchange culminated in a public event attracting around 50 attendees, showcasing a three-course meal featuring cooperative products, highlighting significant community interest.

During the first half of the year, we focused on disseminating findings and experiences through presentations at conferences and publications in peer-reviewed journals. Key activities include:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - ISE Session Convening and Oral Presentations: We convened sessions on topics such as Livestock, Cultural Landscapes Conservation, and Agrobiodiversity at the ISE Congress, facilitating discussions among participants and stakeholders. - Publications: We published articles, including "No Atlas for the High Atlas?" and a Recommendation article addressing livestock issues, aiming to enhance understanding of the unique challenges and opportunities within the High Atlas region. 	
<p>2. Give details of any notable problems or unexpected developments/lessons learnt that the project has encountered over the last 6 months. Explain what impact these could have on the project and whether the changes will affect the budget and timetable of project activities.</p>	
<p>Over the past six months, our project aimed at supporting High Atlas communities in their recovery post-earthquake has progressed smoothly, with no major problems reported. These last six months were a key moment of transition as we reached the 1-year mark post-earthquake. The team finalised emergency interventions and moved forward with long-term support activities. We learned valuable lessons in this transition, particularly on value for money in our interventions. During the summer 2024 seed fair in Azilal, we reconnected with the seed producers in our project network. We met with Boubki Cooperative, a cooperative of 30 small farmers from the Imilchil region, one of the new zones of work in the project. Initially, our team faced internal debates about procuring seeds from the cooperative, as their prices were higher than those available in the broader seeds market. Our team's collective decision was to prioritise purchasing from the cooperative for several reasons: the seeds were locally replicated and well-suited for mountain agriculture and supporting local seed entrepreneurs is part of our project's vision for socio-ecological viability in the High Atlas. This decision reinforced our understanding of value for money, shifting our focus from merely the lowest cost to a more holistic view that includes community impact and sustainability. The experience emphasised the importance of considering the broader implications of financial decisions, and it fostered a deeper alignment within our team about the values we want to uphold. This decision required us to make adjustments in our co-funding due to the higher initial costs, but we believe it will yield long-term benefits through enhanced agricultural resilience and strengthened community relations.</p> <p>We have also worked towards strengthening the governance of the programme, which has led us to focus on ensuring that all necessary agreements and contracts are both compliant with UK legal standards and relevant to the specific context of Morocco. This process involved internal debates and adjustments, pushing us to learn new methods better suited to local needs. This experience has been a valuable and is an ongoing learning opportunity, highlighting the importance of flexibility and cultural alignment in governance practices. While this adaptation has required additional time, we believe it will support smoother implementation.</p>	
<p>3. Have any of these issues been discussed with NIRAS and if so, have changes been made to the original agreement?</p>	
Discussed with NIRAS:	No
Formal Change Request submitted:	No
Received confirmation of change acceptance:	No
<p>Change Request reference if known: <i>If you submitted a financial Change Request, you can find the reference in the email from NIRAS confirming the outcome</i></p>	

4a. Please confirm your actual spend in this financial year to date (i.e. from 1 April 2024 – 30 September 2024)

Actual spend:

4b. Do you currently expect to have any significant (e.g. more than £5,000) underspend in your budget for this financial year (ending 31 March 2025)?

Yes ☐ **No** ☒

4c. If you expect and underspend, then you should consider your project budget needs carefully. Please remember that any funds agreed for this financial year are only available to the project in this financial year.

If you anticipate a significant underspend because of justifiable changes within the project, please submit a re-budget Change Request as soon as possible. There is no guarantee that Defra will agree a re-budget so please ensure you have enough time to make appropriate changes to your project if necessary. Please DO NOT send these in the same email as your report.

NB: if you expect an underspend, do not claim anything more than you expect to spend this financial year.

5. Are there any other issues you wish to raise relating to the project or to BCF management, monitoring, or financial procedures?

None

6. Please use this section to respond to any feedback provided when your project was confirmed, or from your most recent annual report. If your project was subject to an Overseas Security and Justice Assistance assessment, please use this space to comment on any changes to international human rights risks, and to address any additional mitigations outlined in your offer letters. Please provide the comment and then your response. If you have already provided a response, please confirm when.

Still waiting for feedback on the annual report