



**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 2025

Please note all projects that were active before 1st October 2025 are required to complete a Half Year Report.

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

Project reference	DAREX002
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	Gary Martin
Report date and number (e.g. HYR1)	HYR4
Project website/blog/social media	https://global-diversity.org/hacl-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).

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

Activity 1.1: Establish 2 new community plant nurseries and enhance 4 existing nurseries

The administrative and contractual procedures for the new Demnate plant nursery have been completed at the start of YR4. The team is working with *Cooperative Demnatna* to operate the nursery, stocked with locally selected medicinal and aromatic plants. The nursery will benefit local partners, especially cooperatives, public schools and local associations, as well as individual farmers through the annual distribution of the plants produced. The nursery construction was managed by agroecological expert, Boujmaa Gueghlan, who is supporting cooperative members' capacity building on nursery management.

Activity 1.2: Implement annual plant distribution of 25,000 plants of wild-harvested native species

Between April and September 2025, our community researchers distributed over 26,950 plants from 38 species, including rosemary, thyme, almond, and fig trees, across four nursery sites: Imegdal, Ait M'hamed, Zaouiat Ahensal, and Oukaïmeden. The campaign reached 550 beneficiaries, including community members, cooperatives, associations, and schools, and represented 75% of total nurseries' production. This initiative represents strong community engagement and commitment, combining ecological restoration with strengthened rural livelihoods. Follow-up surveys are now underway to assess planting outcomes and identify areas for improvement.

Activity 1.3: Organize seed fairs and annual exchanges of seeds among High Atlas farmers

We collaborated with eight farmers from Talat n'Yaacoub and Ighil to continue the seed multiplication initiative. This was launched through exchanges on local varieties of cereals, legumes, and vegetables that were once widely cultivated in the region. Farmers reflected on the reasons behind the gradual loss of local agrobiodiversity, highlighting three main factors: intensifying droughts, ageing rural communities as younger

generations migrate to cities, leaving few successors to maintain traditional varieties, and declining consumer interest as markets favor high-yield, uniform commercial seeds with greater market appeal.

During the exchanges, 41 local reproducible seed varieties, including cereals, legumes, vegetables, herbs, and squash, were shared by farmers from Imilchil and Midelt. Participants expressed strong interest in the initiative while also emphasizing the need for careful planning in light of ongoing drought conditions. As a next step, a list of autumn/winter seeds will be shared in a WhatsApp group, allowing each farmer to select the varieties they wish to work with.

Activity 1.4: Enhance agroecosystem parcels through soil fertility interventions, local seed distributions, and capacity building for farming communities

Our efforts to improve irrigation, terracing, and soil fertility across 500 agroecosystem parcels have continued. In Tanzzat village, learnings from the farmer field school include the application of lime powder and installation of fruit fly traps for 80 apple trees across 20 parcels (900 m²) as part of ongoing Integrated Pest Management efforts.

In June, we facilitated compost training with three female agricultural cooperatives, followed by two additional workshops in July in Ighil and Talat n'Yaacoub, reaching a total of 16 farmers. Sessions combined theoretical lessons on soil composition and organic matter with practical exercises using locally available materials: sheep and cow manure, sawdust, corn stover, cardboard, wool, and wood residues to produce high-quality compost. The workshops equipped farmers to replicate and adapt these techniques in their own contexts. The next step will be selecting parcels where the compost will be applied and monitored to evaluate its impact on soil fertility.

Complementing the interventions under Activity 1.4, the U.S Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation (AFCP) programme was relaunched in September 2025. This project complements the goals of Output 1 by restoring earthquake-affected agricultural sites. Restoration work has been completed on 4 agricultural terraces in Aghbalou village, Talat n'Yaacoub, with surfaces ranging between 200 and 600 m². The work focused on rebuilding the walls that support the terraces, and on-site monitoring is ongoing to ensure quality implementation and measure progress. In Amskrajen, the identification and mapping of 60 potential agricultural terraces to be restored were carried out with the participation of more than 15 community members and local association representatives.

Activity 1.5: Support sustainable practices of 500 pastoralists and livestock keepers

In May, in collaboration with the Cooperative Imlsin n'Sirwa and wool expert Annie Lauveaux, a one-week field mission was conducted in the Sirwa region to support Farmer Field School activities on animal breeding, shearing, and wool processing. 33 participants across several azibs, high elevation pasture systems, attended workshops that improved shearing and wool handling, herd selection, and cooperative management. This activity strengthened local capacities and highlighted Sirwa's potential as a model for sustainable pastoralism and wool value chains.

Preparatory work was also completed for additional pilot initiatives, including livestock management, wool value chains, and small-scale poultry production. During this period, site visits were conducted in 5 communities, 88 farmers and pastoralists were consulted, and 15 women were engaged in preparatory discussions and skills exercises. Farmer Field School Technical curricula were designed, field assessments ongoing, and local partners mobilized, ensuring that activities are ready to be launched in the coming months, starting with the Livestock-based Farmer Field School in November 2025. Work also progressed on an ethnoveterinary publication based on a previous study in Al Haouz, documenting local knowledge on animal health and disease management.

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

Activity 2.1: Register High Atlas Harvest as an official brand and label with associated Moroccan national authorities

Work on the legal registration of the High Atlas Harvest label is ongoing and will be prioritized in the second half of the year, following the finalization and delivery of the label standards under Activity 2.2.

Activity 2.2: Development of label standards in consultation with relevant stakeholders

Three of four chapters of the Harvest label were delivered by the end of September: biodiversity conservation, social impact, and production management. The team is reviewing the current draft standards

through focus groups in October and November 2025 to ensure cooperative feedback is incorporated into the final draft. The final chapter on governance will be delivered by November 2025.

Activity 2.4: Deliver training on food safety certification to 100 cooperatives

The food safety certification training remains a core component of our capacity-building programme, and will be implemented in the next project period, as part of the next cohort's training cycle.

Activity 2.5: Improve visual identity and packaging for 200 cooperatives

Under the Visual Identity building activity, we have supported 22 cooperatives this year. Each cooperative worked with the design team to develop cohesive and distinctive visual identities that reflect its values and products. The cooperatives received a complete branding guide, including personalized logos, color palettes, typography, and templates for business materials. Work on packaging design is ongoing. Despite some coordination challenges, consistent communication ensured full participation. Each cooperative now has a professional identity system to strengthen visibility and market presence.

Activities 2.3 and 2.6, linked to the registration of the High Atlas Harvest label (Activity 2.1), these activities are scheduled for implementation in the second half of this year and in YR 5, in line with the project's implementation plan.

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

Activity 3.1: Provide business boot-camp training to 200 cooperative members

We continued strengthening the capacities of cooperatives by selecting nine newly established ones that were most affected by the recent earthquake, as part of our 5th training cohort. Many of these cooperatives had seen their production disrupted or temporarily halted, while others had only recently begun operations in the aftermath of the earthquake. The bootcamp provided practical support for recovery by helping them re-establish operations, strengthen management systems, and identify market opportunities to restore income-generating activities.

The first round in July covered legal frameworks, administrative, and financial management. In August, the focus shifted to practical business skills, including cost calculation, marketing, and market analysis. The final session in September introduced advocacy and communication, as well as branding and positioning, topics that were particularly well received, as the cooperatives are in the early stages of defining their identity and market presence.

Activity 3.2: Establish a mentorship programme for cooperative leaders of 200 cooperatives

We continue to document the impact of peer-to-peer mentorship, such as the sale of gift baskets where cooperatives source products from one another, emerging sales points, and knowledge and resource exchanges within the cohort WhatsApp groups.

Building on the strong peer-to-peer mentorship networks that naturally emerged among our partner cooperatives in previous years, we are working to expand these exchanges through the development of an advanced mentorship programme for beginner cooperatives. The team conducted a needs assessment with cohorts 4 and 5, which include new cooperatives from earthquake affected communities and several cooperatives still facing challenges in maintaining or advancing their activities. The project team has designed a new programme to provide sustained, hands-on guidance to help them strengthen governance, management, and market capacities. The experienced mentors will support cooperatives to overcome operational, market, and organizational challenges, and foster self-reliance and peer support networks. The mentors will be selected based on experience in cooperative development, agribusiness, or social enterprise and will each be matched with 4 - 5 cooperatives based on needs, geography, and expertise. After conducting a baseline assessment of the cooperatives, the mentors will offer monthly structured visits and provide regular guidance and feedback to support the cooperatives' activities and governance.

Activity 3.3 Organize High Atlas direct trade markets in Marrakech

We continue to integrate solidarity markets into the Harvest Festival programme. For the Spring 2025 edition, we organized a market day with Dar Belarj, featuring products from our cooperative network alongside the craft and artisanal products from the mothers of Dar Belarj. We will organize more solidarity markets in the next project period.

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

Training and guidance on product innovation (Activity 4.1) and digital skills (Activity 4.2) continue to be part of cooperative capacity building. But as a result of our focus on emerging and beginners' cooperatives in this project period, we had to simplify these training modules. The content was adapted for their level of advancement, receiving guidance on product development and exposure to digital marketing and social media presence. Activities 4.3, 4.4, and 4.5 on digital marketing access, payment options, and distribution and transport will resume in the next project period.

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

Activity 5.1: Create and support existing social media accounts for at least 150 cooperatives

We continued to provide support to our cooperative partners, helping them strengthen their online presence. They benefited from ongoing opportunities to increase their visibility, including being featured at major events organised during the 8th edition of the Harvest Festival Marrakech. These platforms allowed cooperatives to promote their products and connect with broader audiences both online and offline. Training on digital tools and digital commerce remains a key component of our capacity-building programmes, helping cooperatives effectively showcase and sell their products.

Activity 5.3: Organize 10 editions of Harvest Festival Marrakech

The 8th edition of the Harvest Festival Marrakech took place in May 2025, celebrating community building and horizontal forms of learning through 11 events and collaborations with partners, including High Atlas communities. Events spanned from the Atlas Mountains to Marrakech, featuring exchanges with cooperatives Al Oulfa and Doute maquite, creative workshops led by artist Oumaima Abaraghe, and a public dialogue on Siroua wool with pastoralists and expert Annie Lauveaux. The festival concluded with a day of markets, seed exchange, and workshops inspired by the Dar Bellarj/Qanat rooftop garden, including sessions on plant-based cosmetics and an Argan exchange with Azouka Essaouira.

Activity 5.4: Establish a social media and communications campaign to promote local products and Harvest Festival Marrakech

As with each edition of the Harvest Festival, our [social media](#) and communications target communities interested in environmental justice in Morocco but also beyond, attracting international engagement and increasing by around 950 followers over the past six months. Posts from the 8th edition of the Harvest Festival Marrakech reached an average of 7,000 views, demonstrating the festival's growing online impact. Building on this momentum, we lead an online reading group that ran from August to October 2025, in preparation for the Fall festival.

Knowledge generation and dissemination

Since April 2025, we have produced and disseminated two peer-reviewed articles, one book chapter, and one technical report spanning biodiversity assessment, gender-responsive research, cooperative development, and consuetudinary governance, together constituting a strengthened knowledge base and a coherent foundation for action in the High Atlas Cultural Landscapes programme.

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.

Over the last six months, the project encountered several challenges and gained important lessons, particularly around the selection and training for cohort 5. This group of cooperatives are all emerging or beginner cooperatives from around the epicentre of the earthquake. Working with participants who were new to formal cooperative structures required additional support, both in terms of content and engagement strategies. The selection process required field visits to each cooperative, for a more accurate assessment of the cooperatives' context and needs. Many cooperative representatives had limited formal education, creating multiple communication barriers. This necessitated increased translation, simplification of training materials, and additional follow-up to ensure understanding and active participation.

While these challenges required last-minute adjustments and additional facilitation, they did not significantly affect the project budget or timetable. Instead, they provided valuable lessons for future cohorts: the need for tailored support for beginner cooperatives, and flexible delivery methods.

3. Have any of these issues been discussed with NIRAS and if so, have changes been made to the original agreement?

Discussed with NIRAS:	No
Formal Change Request submitted:	No
Received confirmation of change acceptance:	No

Change Request reference if known:

4a. Please confirm your actual spend in this financial year to date (i.e. from 1 April 2025 – 30 September 2025)

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 2026)?

Yes ☐ No ☒ Estimated underspend: £

4c. If you expect an 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, and not later than 31st December. 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 BCFs management, monitoring, or financial procedures?

Suspensions or allegations related to fraud and error concerns should be reported to fraudanderror@Defra.gov.uk

None

6. Project risk management

6a. If your project has an Overseas Security and Justice assessment, please provide an update on any related risks, and any special conditions in your award paperwork if relevant for your project.

6b. Have any concerns or allegations relating to sexual exploitation, abuse or harassment been reported in the past 6 months?

Yes ☐ No ☒

If yes, please provide further information, ensuring no sensitive data is included within responses.

Suspensions or allegations related to safeguarding concerns should be reported to

ODA.Safeguarding@defra.gov.uk

7. Please use this section to respond to any feedback provided when your project was confirmed, or from your most recent Annual Report. As a reminder, all projects that were scored as 'Not Yet Sensitive' in the Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) assessment of their latest Annual Report should demonstrate how they are meeting the minimum GESI-Sensitive standard.

No feedback requested from the last annual report