

Darwin Initiative, Darwin Plus and Illegal Wildlife Trade Challenge Fund Covid-19 Rapid Response Round - Final Report

Project reference	CV19RR20
If linked with an ongoing project, please include that project reference here (e.g. IWT001)	27-001: Conserving High Atlas agrobiodiversity to improve Amazigh livelihoods in Morocco
Project title	Online local product commercialization, marketing and promotion sustains biodiversity-friendly livelihoods
Country/ies	Morocco
Lead organisation	Global Diversity Foundation
Partner institution(s)	Moroccan Biodiversity and Livelihoods Association; Studio Rif; Falyakun Studio; Digital Guru; Mind7
Start/end date of project	1 January – 31 March 2021
Which fund was this project relevant to?	Darwin Initiative
Grant value (£)	£59,900
Project Leader name	Gary Martin
Report author(s) and date	Gary Martin; 12 September 2021

1. Project Summary

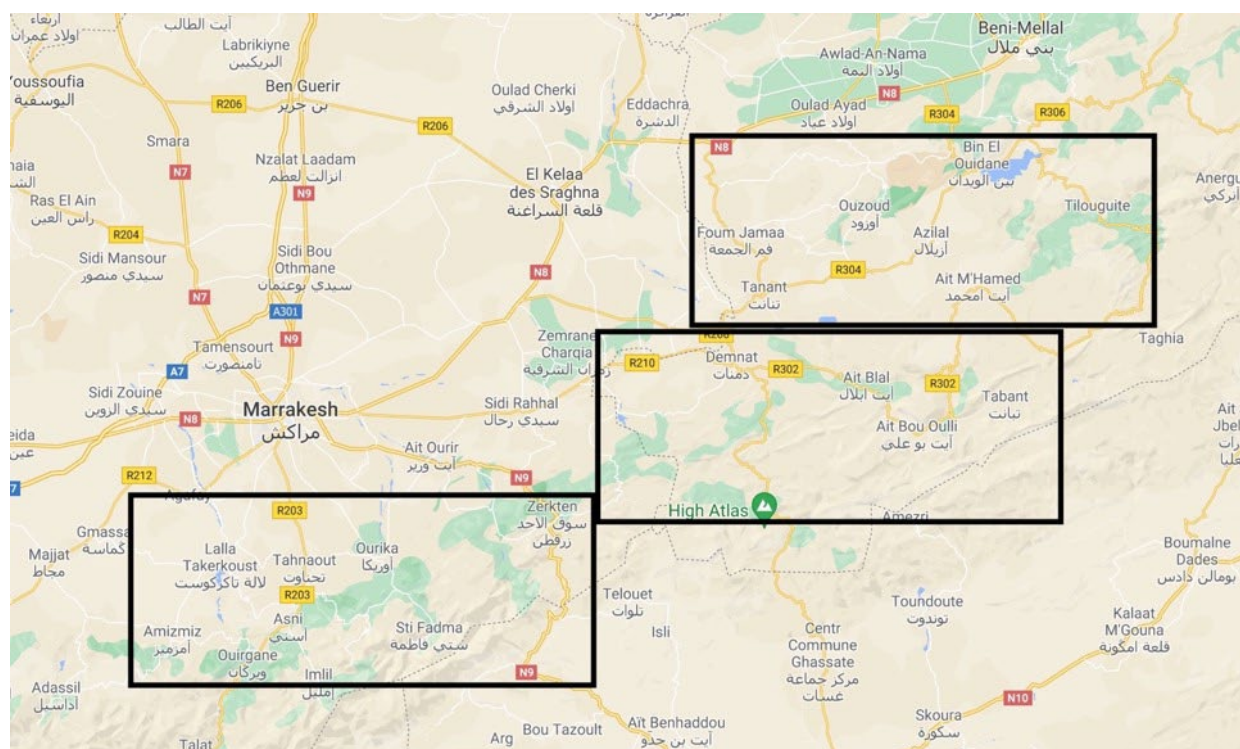
We addressed the threat the COVID-19 pandemic posed for the viability of a nascent green economy in Marrakech and its hinterland, which is directly linked to livelihood improvement in rural communities involved in biodiversity conservation in the High Atlas. We were especially concerned about the impact of the pandemic on emergent organic agriculture and permaculture initiatives, a resurgence of biodiversity-friendly traditional agroecology, a growing trend of agritourism and ecotourism; and an increase in local direct trade that was improving the flow of benefits to artisans, farmers and other producers who play a role in environmental stewardship.

Specifically, the emergence of the pandemic put at risk our initiative to conserve High Atlas agrobiodiversity and improve Amazigh livelihoods, as proposed in our Darwin Initiative main project (27-001). When it struck Morocco in mid-March of 2020, we were just about to launch our programme of agrobiodiversity assessment and ex-situ conservation; on-farm selection and sustainable cultivation of promising crop varieties; knowledge exchange, seed sharing, product innovation and commercialisation; and national policy support. Of these, we noted that the pandemic specifically affected product innovation and commercialisation because of a decrease in demand and price of local goods, disruptions in distribution systems and a concomitant reticence to engage in traditional land use practices, including agriculture and wild plant gathering. Lack of infrastructure to conserve and store local products – including organic apples, barley and wheat couscous, almonds and walnuts, honey and medicinal and aromatic plants – led to losses of harvested produce. The availability of cosmetic, craft and culinary

products from regenerative production systems – commercialised by rural cooperatives and local enterprises – became more limited in farmers’ markets, retail outlets and special stands in large supermarkets. This ensemble of challenges ostensibly contributed to greater poverty and unemployment in rural zones, negatively impacting the stewards of High Atlas biodiversity and cultural landscapes.

Community members of the High Atlas who are participants in our existing Darwin Initiative project – and the related programme funded by MAVA Foundation – asked for our assistance as they sought to (1) create and maintain online platforms and in-person opportunities to commercialise and promote local products; (2) improve branding, certification, labelling and social media marketing; and (3) design agricultural, culinary and ecological tourism circuits for a domestic audience that publicise local products and encourage small group visits, allowing communities to represent and commodify their biocultural diversity.

We carried out the project with rural cooperatives from a broad geographical arc in the High Atlas, running due south of Marrakech to the northeast. We designated three hubs, each comprising 4-6 cooperatives: Asni, Demnat and Azilal.



This provided us the opportunity to expand beyond the specific rural communes (indicated in the map below: Ait M’hamed, Imedgal, and Oukaimeden) where we have worked intensively over the past years, thus launching a regional approach that facilitates the achievement of specific objectives in our Darwin main project. These include a regional seed survey of High Atlas cereals, fodder and grain legumes and wild relatives; provincial seed fairs and community exchanges; and a regional gastronomic event organized in Marrakech on High Atlas agrobiodiversity.

We left open the possibility of including a fourth hub to the southeast of Marrakech, covering the region of Skoura, Kalaat M’Gouna and Boumlane Dades. We are also exploring the possibility of expanding to additional hubs further south and southwest of Marrakech as our regional approach grows and as we engage in additional partnerships with organisations such as Slow Food Foundation for Biodiversity, Migrations & Développement, Dar Si Hmad, Nature & Progrès, Centre de coopération internationale en recherche and others.



2. Project Achievements

Our intended outcome was relatively simple, in the context of our more complex Darwin main project and overall High Atlas Cultural Landscapes programme. We expected to assist rural cooperatives and entrepreneurs increase their revenues through effective online marketing and promotion of local products derived from traditional land use practices that contribute to the conservation of High Atlas biodiversity. The specific idea was to help rural cooperatives and enterprises in High Atlas key biodiversity areas to commercialise their cosmetic, craft and culinary goods through COVID-adapted online approaches that shorten market chains and favour local direct sales benefitting consumers and producers alike. We planned social media training for rural cooperatives and derivative campaigns to inform the general public about the availability of biodiversity-friendly local products that support community livelihoods. As part of this endeavour, we sought to provide rural cooperatives with websites developed with open-source software to promote local goods derived from sustainably harvested and equitably traded biological resources and portray the people who produce them.

Nabil Izagaren of Studio Rif created a prototype website using open-access software in the early stages of the project, choosing the Al Oulfa cheese cooperative in Lalla Takerkoust as the focus (Objective 1). He then adapted the prototype to develop websites for six rural cooperatives (five created by women, one by men) with a total of 234 members (219 women, 15 men) by the end of the project, [Al Oulfa](#), [Amaguar](#), [Manahil Al Maghrib](#), [Nisae Aska](#), [Taytmatine](#) and [Yamna](#) (Objective 2). These will be maintained as we continue our support, including by adding information on where the products are available for retail sale and activating e-commerce functions according to the cooperatives' requests. Once we had samples of the products, Laïd Liazid of Falyakun Studio produced hundreds of packshots, some of which can be seen on the websites and other social media accompanied by short descriptive texts (Objective 3). These high-quality photos were provided to the cooperatives for use in online marketing including on Facebook and Instagram accounts, which were created or

enhanced with the support of this project: Al Oulfa ([Facebook](#) / [Instagram](#)), Amaguar ([Facebook](#) / [Instagram](#)), Manahil Al-Maghrib ([Facebook](#) / [Instagram](#)), Nisae Aska ([Facebook](#) / [Instagram](#)), Taytmatine ([Facebook](#) / [Instagram](#)) and Yamna ([Facebook](#) / [Instagram](#)). We worked with an excellent young photographer and videographer, [Elias Nazih](#), to develop photo-documentaries and short videos for each of the rural cooperatives, highlighting specific products, producers and potential agricultural, culinary and ecological tourism circuits (objectives 4, 6); these have been integrated in [Audio-Visual Story Books](#) (made on Canva) by GDF Visual Anthropology and Media Outreach Coordinator Elif Tibet. Saoussane Abdelli of [Digital Guru](#) provided training to 31 cooperative members on management of social media campaigns in three separate trainings (Objective 5; Annex 1). We generated further photo-essays and video stories by to promote agricultural, culinary and ecological tourism circuits that encourage visits by small groups of domestic travellers, especially young Moroccan adults, in collaboration with partner Mind7 (objective 6).

We submitted a proposal to the Google Impact Challenge entitled “Digital Tiwizi: a collective initiative for economic empowerment and inclusion of Moroccan women from rural cooperatives, enterprises and the informal sector” to extend the reach of this programme to an additional ten cooperatives (Objective 7, Annex 2). Although it was unsuccessful, we intend to submit it to additional funders in 2022. In the meantime, the MAVA Foundation approved a project “Support rural entrepreneurs in Morocco to promote sustainable land-use practices” submitted by [Mowgli Mentoring](#), with GDF as a partner. Initiated on 1 February, it has already featured a business boot camp organised by the [IES Social Business School](#) in June and an associated urban field trip for cooperatives arranged by GDF (Annex 3). MAVA Foundation has requested a follow-up proposal from GDF in November 2021 to extend online commercialisation and promotion services to the participating cooperatives.

Although we did not experience any significant problems, it was challenging to keep the inspiring group of young creatives involved in the project on a strict schedule. This was only exacerbated by the unpredictability of COVID-19, as some collaborators fell ill and others had to alter their work flow. There was some uncertainty around our ability to host face-to-face workshops, which we resolved by keeping them small (less than 15 people) and holding them discreetly in large hotels that had the capacity for social distancing. Fieldwork was made more onerous by the need to obtain exceptional travel permits to visit rural communities, but in the end, everything went relatively smoothly.

We did undertake some work that was not originally planned, related to the (1) High Atlas Food Market (Annex 4) and the [Harvest Festival](#) (Annex 5), two events that provide rural cooperatives with the opportunity to directly sell their products in Marrakech, and to the (2) urban field trip to meet restaurateurs and retailers who use and commercialise them. Staff and consultants supported by the COVID rapid response grant participated in organising and creating the branding and visual identity of these in-person events, which contributed to our Darwin main project activities 3.1 Capacity-building and institutional strengthening for rural cooperatives implemented and 3.6 Regional gastronomic event in Marrakech organised and new dishes by urban chefs developed and served.

Our project did contribute to gender equality by favouring women (93.6% of beneficiaries) and women’s cooperatives (83.3%). This is particularly important because men have traditionally had primary access to markets and marketplaces in Morocco, and redressing the balance to include women is important to achieving equity in community development. Value for money was a particularly interesting element of the project, as we found that potential service providers presented widely varying quotes that corresponded to a fair extent with their level of expertise, experience and reputation. After interacting with numerous candidates, we chose emerging creative and technical consultants (for the most part the ones noted in the proposal) who offered the best value for money in our eyes. This led us to form and reinforce effective partnerships with agencies and people involved in digital marketing, graphic arts, interactive storytelling, photography, videography and web development. During the project, GDF also

brought on a new staff member (funded from other grants and sources), [Elif Tibet](#), as Visual Anthropology Lead & Media Outreach Coordinator. She along with [Ibtissam Bouseta](#), Communications & Programme Officer for our High Atlas Cultural Landscapes programme, who was partly funded through the COVID rapid response grant, helped assess and coordinate the work of these new partners. This combined approach allowed us to achieve all the objectives set out in the proposal, generating a diversity of outputs that demonstrate, in our perspective, excellent value for money. This project – along with the other initiatives we are involved with – allowed us to assess and refine our new safeguarding policy (Annex 6).

Although it is difficult in a short-term project to demonstrate contribution towards the wider aims of the Darwin Initiative, specifically enhancing biodiversity conservation and contributing to sustainable development in lower and lower middle-income countries, we are monitoring specific indicators that we expect to show impact over time. First, working with cooperatives provides us with a relevant metric, change in annual revenues over several years, to assess livelihood improvement. For all the rural cooperatives, we have financial data from 2019 (and in some cases before) and 2020, showing a general downward trend related to the impact of COVID-19. Because of the continuing economic disruption caused by the pandemic, we do not expect significant improvement in 2021, but we anticipate that 2022 revenues will outstrip even those of 2019, attributable in part to our promotion of local products. As part of our criteria ranking of rural cooperatives, conducted by GDF consultant Tasnim Elboute, we are assessing the sustainability of plant resources – both cultivated and wild – that are transformed for commercialised local products. These including African spurge (*Euphoria resinifera*) and other nectar source plants for bees, wild thyme (*Thymus saturejoides*) and other aromatic plants, mastic (*Pistacia lentiscus*), carob (*Ceratonia siliqua*) and diverse forage plants that play a role in milk production for cheese cooperatives.

3. Lessons learnt

This grant further opened our eyes to the advantages of working with local creative and digital consultants in the implementation of the Darwin Initiative projects, especially getting them involved in capacity building for beneficiaries, innovative approaches to enhancing local livelihoods through online marketing and state-of-the-art dissemination that incorporates infographics, interactive storytelling, short videos and more. This is a fast-moving field, with new developments (such as the emergence of popular graphic design platforms like [Canva](#)) that comes face-to-face with a daunting digital divide that separates rural and urban populations, as well as more affluent people from those who are economically marginalised. During the project, we had to adjust the social media training for rural cooperatives to make it more accessible and appropriate for the community members who participated. We found, as anticipated, that progress was rapid when we gave younger members of the cooperatives the internet access, tools and training they needed to bridge the digital gap.

The best way to express what we would do differently is to explore what we plan to do next. While we were satisfied with our efforts to create websites and enhance social media for six cooperatives, the work dedicated to each enterprise limits the possibility of scaling up the initiative to the potentially hundreds of cooperatives that would be eligible for such services. In our emerging proposal to MAVA Foundation to extend our online commercialisation assistance to some of the cooperatives that have participated in the “Support rural entrepreneurs in Morocco to promote sustainable land-use practices” project, we are envisioning approaches that benefit a broader range of beneficiaries. For example, there is a need for an online platform to commercialise a broad range of products from diverse cooperatives to meet the demand of a growing public of consumers in Morocco interested in healthier diets and lifestyle changes. We hesitated to include this ambitious initiative in our rapid response grant not only because of limited time and budget, but more importantly because there were several emergent governmental and non-profit initiatives targeting this goal. We were also concerned about opening the door to cooperatives that had not been properly vetted, and to products that did not meet quality and sustainability standards. One idea that has emerged is the creation of an

alliance or coalition of cooperatives to market their diverse local, sustainably produced goods – almonds, couscous, culinary herbs, honey, saffron, walnuts and more – under a single “High Atlas” label.

Among our recommendations to others doing similar projects, we suggest developing detailed and explicit criteria for selecting cooperatives that are consistent with supporting rural enterprises engaged in community livelihoods improvement and sustainable natural resources management. For our project, we established the following specifications, which are adapted to the local context:

1. Business viability: the enterprises need to show potential to build their capacity to thrive economically, grow and create jobs for local people, effectively driving economic development in the region, while adding value to the community and conservation sector, including by embracing networking opportunities, forging partnerships and scaling up;
2. Geographical location: the specific focus is on the High Atlas, but cooperatives from four of Morocco’s twelve regions (Béni Mellal-Khénifra, Drâa-Tafilalet, Marrakech-Safi and Souss-Massa) could potentially qualify for inclusion, although on a practical level, cooperatives within a three-hour radius of one of three hubs (Asni, Azilal and Demnate) would be ideal participants;
3. Governance: the enterprises should conform to Morocco’s *Loi n° 112-12 relative aux coopératives*, as consolidated on 1 November 2018, and its specific provisions on voluntary membership, democratic management, economic participation and commitment to society, and they should be legally registered as cooperatives;
4. Land-use practices: the producers involved in the cooperatives should be engaged in traditional land-use practices and modes of production that lead to biodiversity conservation, cultural landscape management and sustainable development;
5. Sector: the cooperatives should be engaged in producing certified agricultural products (including relevant cosmetic, craft and culinary goods), sustainable ecotourism services or both, related to nature conservation especially in community conserved areas;
6. Social values: as the project seeks to contribute to the creation of a vibrant and inclusive entrepreneurial community, the cooperatives should include youth, women and the underprivileged, benefitting its members and the wider community;
7. Technical capacity: cooperative members who participate are able to access and master online tools that will be used during business bootcamps, mentoring workshops and other training opportunities.

Another lesson is to explore carefully is the role of middlemen in promoting vibrant local economies that integrate environmental sustainability. There is a tendency to embrace the concept – especially because of the COVID experience – of “short circuits”, which seek to have communities build an independent local economy capable of supplying the goods and services its people need, especially if the mainstream economy should collapse. This leads some people to critique the role of intermediaries, and to propose direct trade as a solution to put more money in the pocket of producers while offering lower prices to consumers. Although laudable, it is important to recognize that ‘cutting out the middleman’ often creates higher transactional costs that impact both profits and prices. E-commerce promises a form of direct trade with decreased transactional costs, but implementing it is not always straightforward in lower and lower middle income countries, especially for rural producers seeking urban consumers. We have not resolved this dilemma in our work with rural cooperatives, but we are exploring the involvement of social enterprises and urban buying clubs – using an [online ordering facility](#) that is in development – that minimize profit-taking at the intermediary level.

A final lesson learned is that a short-term project entangled with a broader programme – in our case a COVID rapid response project embedded in our High Atlas Cultural Landscapes programme, partly funded by a Darwin Initiative main grant – brings its own administrative, financial, management, technical and M&E challenges. While it may be relatively simple to show the short-term budget has been spent wisely and the objectives attained, as we hope we

have demonstrated in this report and annexes, there is a greater interactivity with the broader programme that is more challenging to convey. The smaller project effectively works as a booster to a more ambitious programme of work, and it is worthwhile documenting this leveraging in the monitoring and evaluation process to understand the full impact of the grant. For this reason, we have included reports in the annexes that document activities that are primarily funded by other grants, but for which the rapid response support was a significant contribution.

4. Other comments and feedback

The *ad hoc* programme of COVID rapid response grants, although probably exceptional and difficult to integrate into the general Darwin Initiative programme on a permanent basis, provided a very effective booster to our main grant and overall High Atlas cultural landscapes programme. Responding to a need that wasn't apparent when we submitted the main grant application (because it was accentuated by COVID), the grant proved to be catalytic and high impact. In a sense, MAVA Foundation is integrating this approach as it prepares to close down its funding in late 2022. GDF and its partner MBLA have had main grant funding from MAVA over multiple years, and this is enhanced by specific capacity building linked to smaller grant opportunities. For example, many of our staff participated in an online course on [Nonprofit Fundraising Essentials](#) and we are benefitting from a [fundraising grant](#). In addition, MAVA awarded us a [Learning & Sharing grant](#) following training on storytelling. These are increasing the effectiveness and impact of our work as well as strengthening our organisations. I would encourage the Darwin Initiative to consider offer additional rounds of rapid response grants as the opportunity arises.