



**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	Darwin Initiative Main Project (Grant 20-030).
Project title	Fungal Conservation in Sub-Saharan Africa: sustainability and livelihood implications
Country(ies)/territory(ies)	Benin Republic; Zimbabwe; United Kingdom
Lead Organisation	University of Parakou (Benin Republic)
Partner(s)	CABI (United Kingdom); Permaculture Association (United Kingdom); Matobo Conservation Society (Zimbabwe)
Project Leader	Dr. Nourou S. Yorou
Report date and number (e.g. HYR1)	10/03/2024 HYR2
Project website/blog/social media	Website: https://fc-ssa.org/ Social media: https://web.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61552153022482

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).

Although we are not looking for specific reporting against your indicators, please use this opportunity to consider the appropriateness of your monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) systems (are your indicators still relevant, can you report against any Standard Indicators, do your assumptions still hold true?). The guidance can be found on the resources page of the relevant fund website.

All activities set for the third half year have been completed duly and those started during the previous semesters and planned over several quarters are in progress.

For Output 2, which focuses on livelihoods protection, the project team organized training sessions with villagers in the second cohort of villages on seed sowing techniques. Villagers were selected gender-neutrally (6 to 15 participants per village) to plant tree seeds and carry out nursery after-care activities. Practical sessions were held to discuss planting methods and sapling care, ensuring that participants clearly understood the tasks and agreed on fair remuneration. In collaboration with the trained villagers, 1,868 seedlings were produced across six new nurseries, and an additional 1,200 seedlings were purchased from local nurserymen. In total, 3,068 seedlings were distributed among 10 new villages and successfully transplanted, involving 196 local community members. As the project approaches its conclusion, stakeholders are being encouraged and supported to develop and commit to plans for the continued care of existing young trees and the post-project sowing, transplanting, and after-care of new seedlings. In Zimbabwe, 180 cuttings of *Brachystegia spiciformis* were prepared in early September 2025, using rooting powder to improve their chances of success. This activity was timed with the sap-rising period in the miombo woodland. Additionally, eight root-shoots were collected experimentally. These efforts aim to replace the seedlings scorched by heat during the previous season.

Regarding output 3, which focuses on poverty and gender equality a synthesis article has been written, submitted, and accepted for publication. In addition, ethnomycological surveys were conducted to document the contribution of wild edible mushrooms to household food security and income generation in Benin. The survey also documented local communities' perceptions of the sustainability of fungal resources. Furthermore, the project has launched a second round of training for beneficiary communities on mushroom cultivation, aimed at helping them diversify their income sources.

Regarding Output 4 on infrastructure, new equipment was provided to project staff to enhance their operational capacity. As part of the capacity-building activities, the Tropical Mycology Centre trained five undergraduate students and one master's student, and welcomed two new PhD candidates. In addition, the Centre of Excellence organized the MYCOBLITZ Summer Course in Benin from the 3rd to the 20th of June 2025, aimed at promoting applied mycology skills among young scientists. The Centre also conducted a specialized training course titled "Bridging the Gap: Strengthening the Capacity of African Researchers in Molecular Biology and Bioinformatics" from the 12th to the 17th of May 2025. The staff members received training on Protection from Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Harassment.

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.

During this period, the main challenge encountered was related to seedling production. Although the project initially planned to produce all seedlings through community nurseries, some delays occurred due to limited access to quality seeds and variable germination rates. To meet the planting targets on time, additional seedlings were purchased from local nurseries to complement those produced with trained villagers. This adjustment ensured the distribution and transplantation of the required number of seedlings across 10 new villages. The project timeline remained unchanged.

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: *If you submitted a financial Change Request, you can find the reference in the email from NIRAS confirming the outcome*

Guidance for Section 4: The information you provide in this section will be used by Defra to review the financial status of projects. This review will identify projects at random for spot checks on financial management and will include requests for evidence of the actual spend information provided below. Please ensure the figures you provide are as accurate as possible and that you have the evidence to support it. You do not need to provide it now.

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

Actual spend: [REDACTED]

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.

NONE

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.

Suspicious 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.

Checklist for submission

Have you responded to feedback from your latest Annual Report Review ? You should respond in section 6, and annexe other requested materials as appropriate.	YES
Have you reported against the most up to date information for your project ?	YES
Have you clearly highlighted any confidential information within the report that you do not wish to be shared on our website?	YES
Include your project reference in the subject line of submission email.	YES
Submit to BCF-Reports@niras.com	
Please ensure claim forms and other communications for your project are not included with this report.	