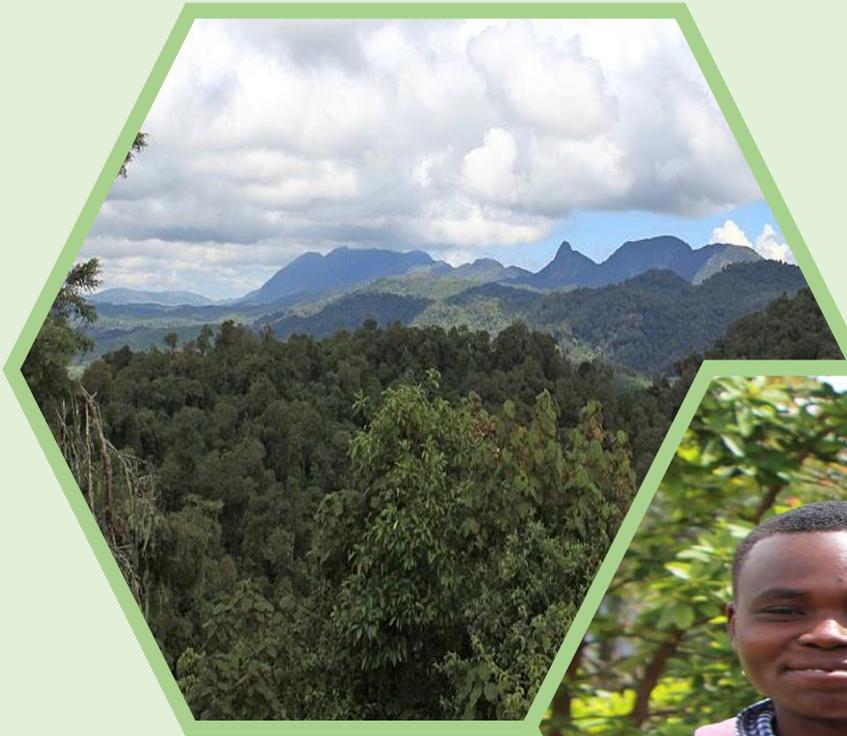


Lessons from Lessons Learned

A review of lessons learned by CEPF grantees in the Eastern Afromontane
Biodiversity Hotspot, 2012 – 2019.



About this report

This report presents the results of a study by Paul Mugo with funding from the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF), through a sponsorship by BirdLife International, in its role as the Regional Implementation Team in the Eastern Afromontane Biodiversity Hotspot. The scope of work included an analysis of grantee lessons learned in the hotspot, literature study on best practices in effective gathering, storage and sharing of lessons learned; and recommendations on how to apply these best practices in the hotspot.

About CEPF

The Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund is a joint initiative of l'Agence Française de Développement, Conservation International, the European Union, the Global Environment Facility, the Government of Japan and the World Bank. A fundamental goal is to ensure civil society is engaged in biodiversity conservation.

About the Eastern Afromontane Biodiversity Hotspot

The Eastern Afromontane Biodiversity Hotspot, which includes 310+ key biodiversity areas and 14 conservation corridors, spreads over 15 countries from Saudi Arabia in the North to Mozambique in the South. CEPF investment in this hotspot totaled USD 12 million which provided about 160 grants to over 100 grantees. All these grantees provided progress and final reports which included sections on lessons learned.

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1. Understanding Lessons Learned

The need for Learning

Donors, grantee civil society organizations and individuals working in biodiversity conservation cannot afford to repeat the same mistakes over and over again. They need to carefully reflect on what works well and why, and what to do differently in the future. It is, therefore, important to create a positive learning environment through which conservation projects go beyond generating outcomes to generating knowledge.



What are Lessons Learned?

Lessons Learned convey key experiential working knowledge gained during the design, implementation or conclusion of a project. They are a critical part of project management since they are attributed to the success of future projects as well as future stages of current projects¹.

Simply put, a Lesson Learned maybe²:

- ◇ an informal policy or procedure,
- ◇ something you want to repeat,
- ◇ a solution to a problem/ corrective action,
- ◇ something you never want to do (again), or
- ◇ how to prevent a problem/ how to avoid repeating a problem.

Although Lessons Learned are obtained from specific project situations, they must be communicated well enough to be understood and used by a wider audience.

High quality lessons possess these key attributes:

◇ **Significance**

They must be significant enough to be credited with a key success or failure within the project.

◇ **Authenticity**

They must be based on facts and should accurately provide the context in which they were obtained.

◇ **Applicability**

They should clearly outline the situations where they could be applied to replicate positive result or reduce failure.

Often, Lessons Learned are regarded as one-off findings until they are deemed to be supported by other sources. Further, the more rigorous the supporting evidence, and the greater

the triangulation of supporting sources, the more confidence the users have³.



2. Analysis of Lessons Learned in the Eastern Afromontane Hotspot

Overview

The overall aim of the analysis was to ensure that lessons learned by grantees become useful to, and used by, conservation practitioners across the hotspot — and beyond.

The analysis was carried out on 129 grants representing: 77 small grants and 52 large grants; and 90 national and 39 international organizations. The projects were implemented across 13 countries (Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Rwanda, South-Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, Yemen, Zambia and Zimbabwe) with 12 organizations working regionally or across the whole hotspot.

“We have learned many lessons related to working with an in-country implementing partner.”

Additive Adventures, July 2016

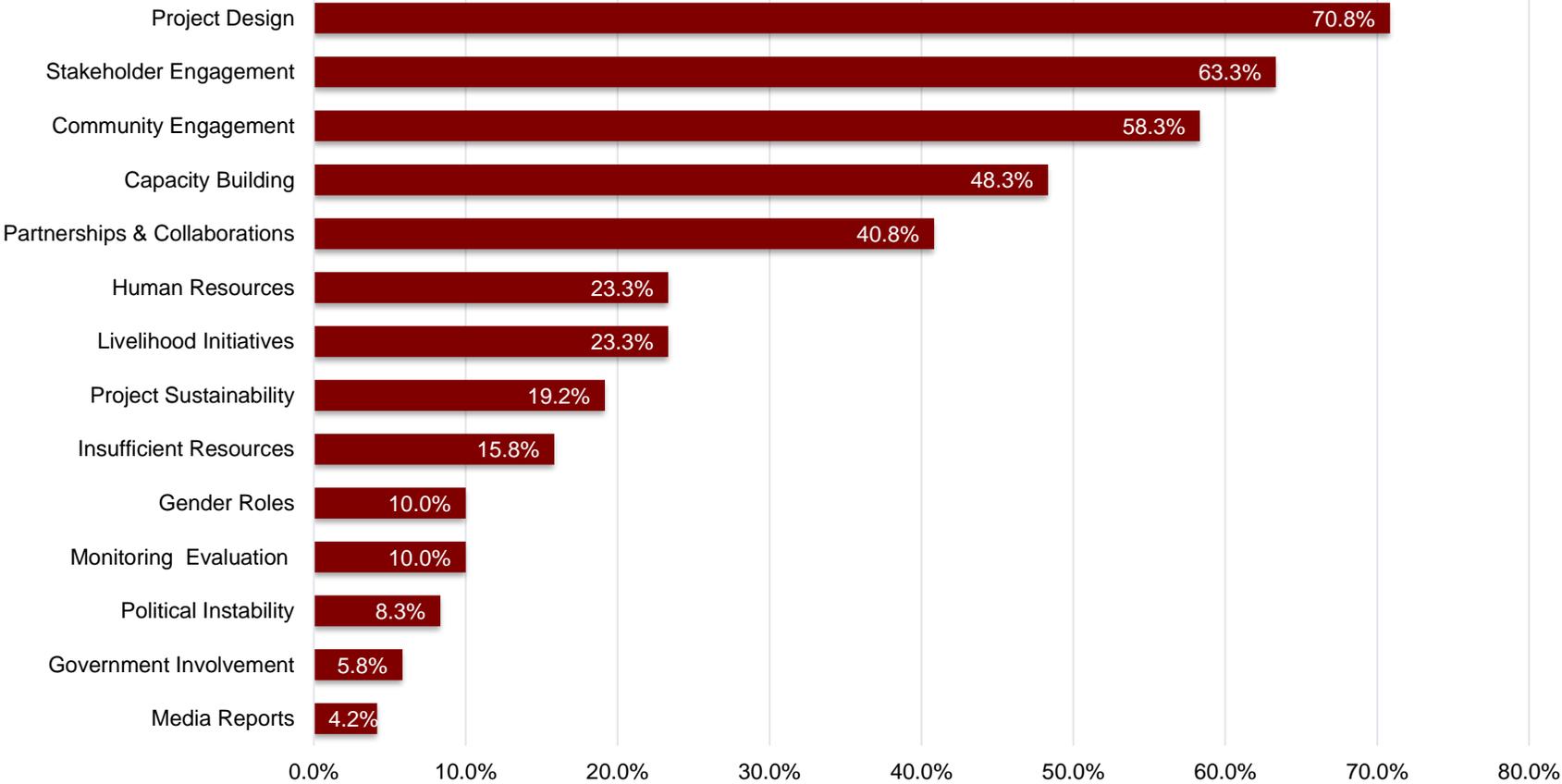
Methodology and results

We reviewed grantee final completion reports and collected lessons learned data. In consultation with the regional implementation team, we clustered the lessons learned into a database and ran various levels of analysis. We sought to answer questions such as: what types of lessons are reported most often (and by whom); who should be learning them (grantees, government, communities, donors); and, do different grantees come up with the same solutions.

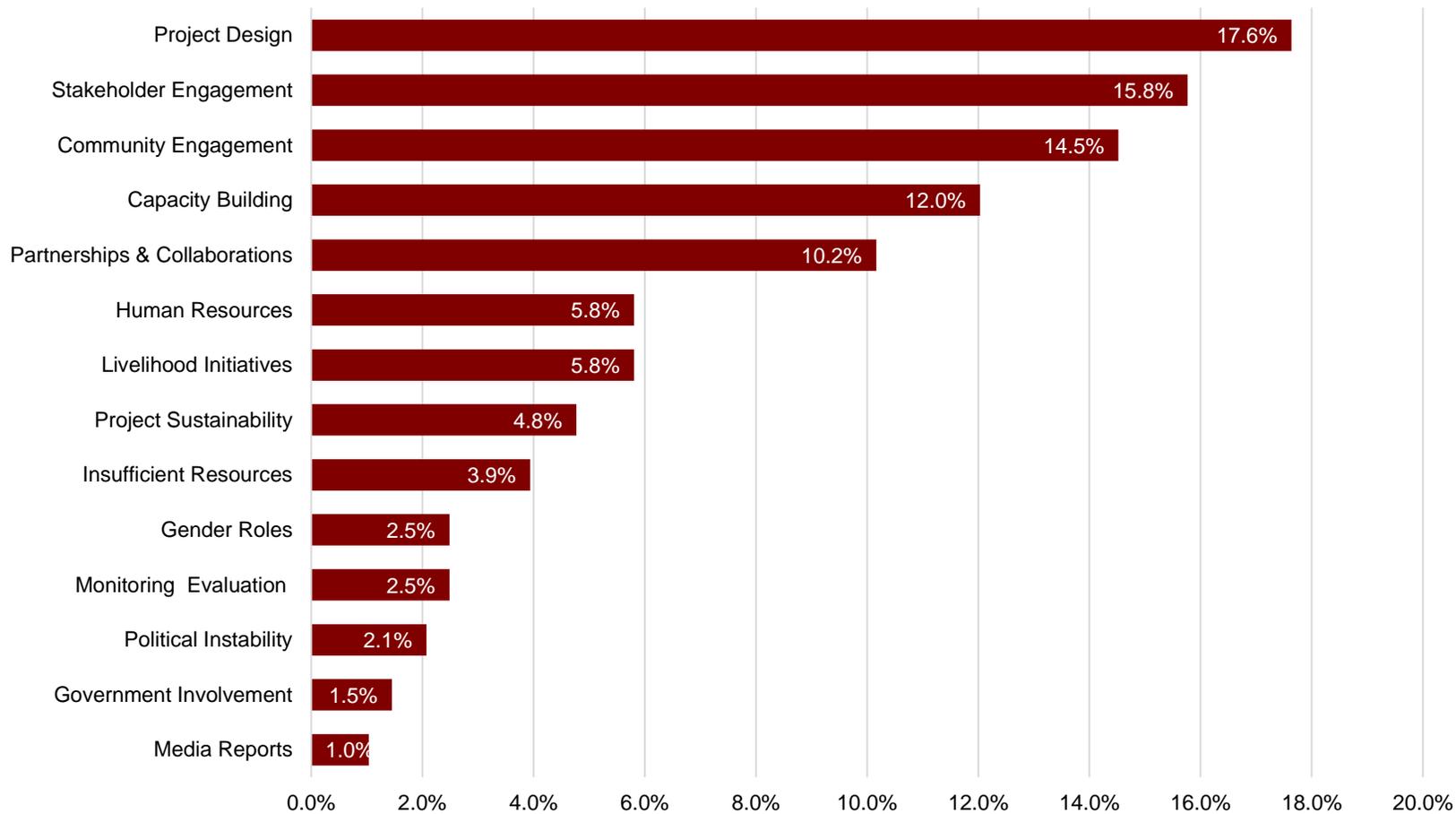
Parallel to this, we carried out a literature study on best practices in effective gathering, storage and sharing of lessons learned; and

The following results were validated by key stakeholders during a lesson learned experience exchange event in Uganda in July 2019.

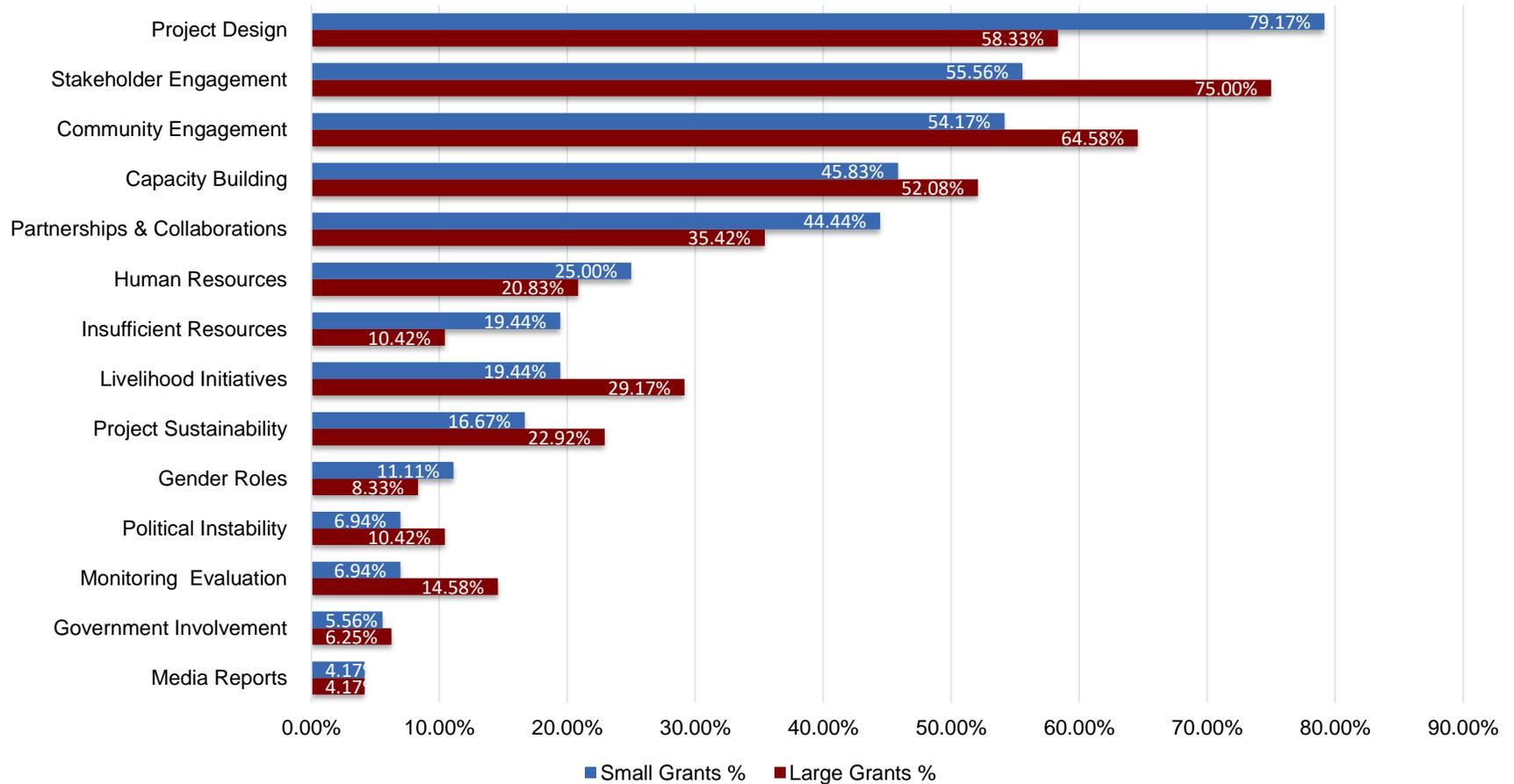
Percentage of grantees that reported Lessons Learned under each theme



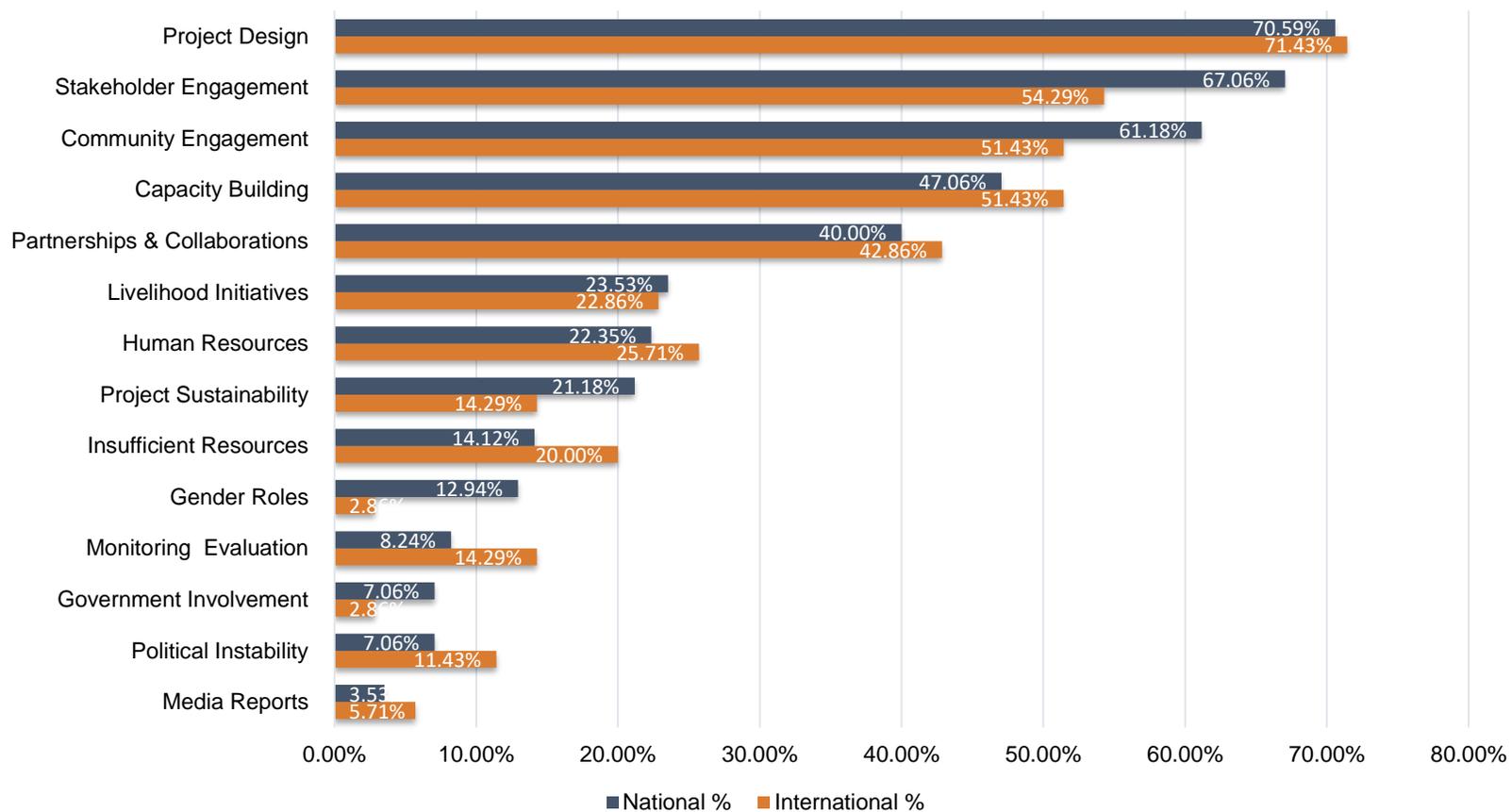
Percentage of Lessons Learned reported under each thematic area



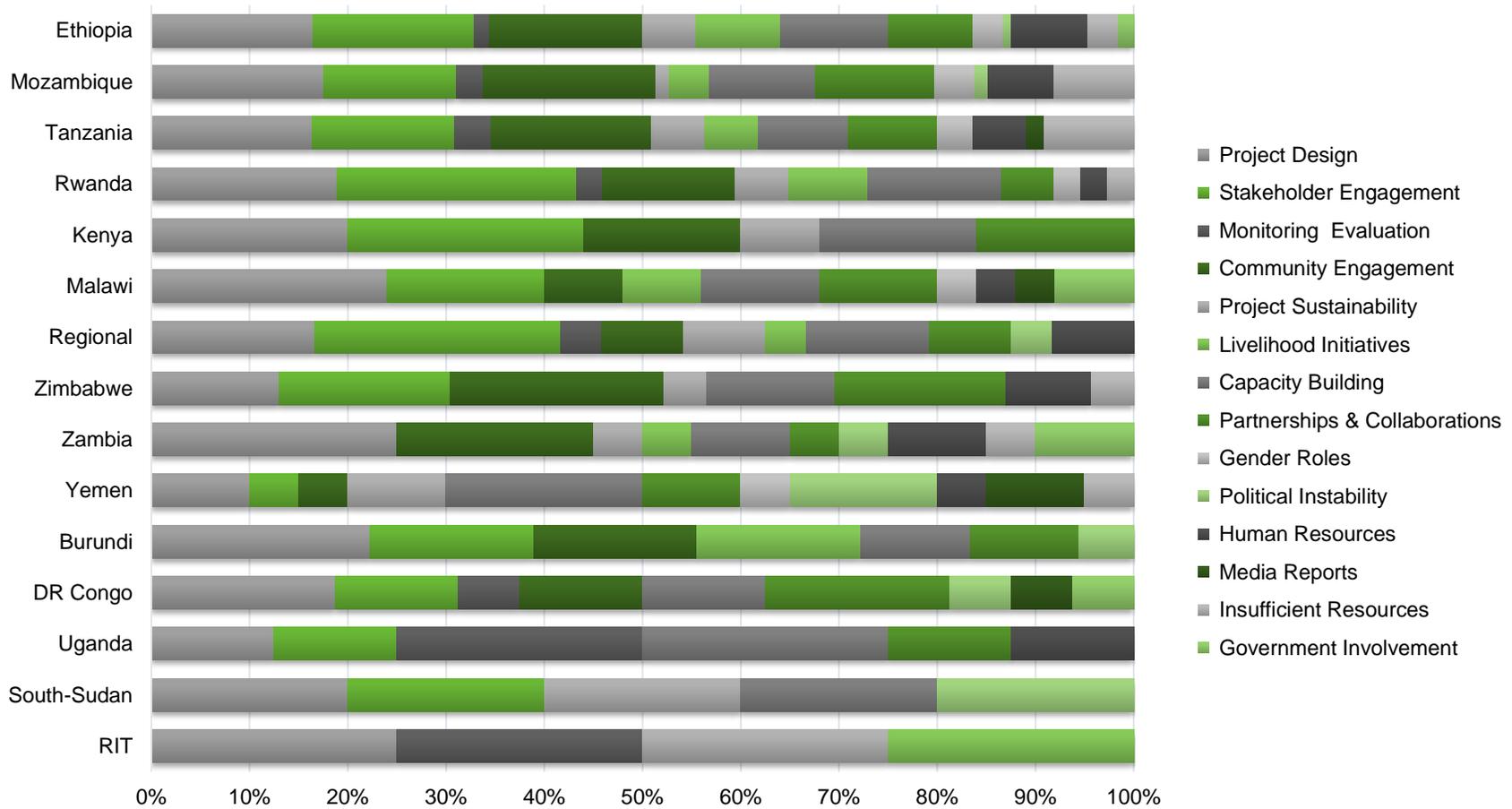
Percentage of Lessons Learned reported by Large and Small Grantees

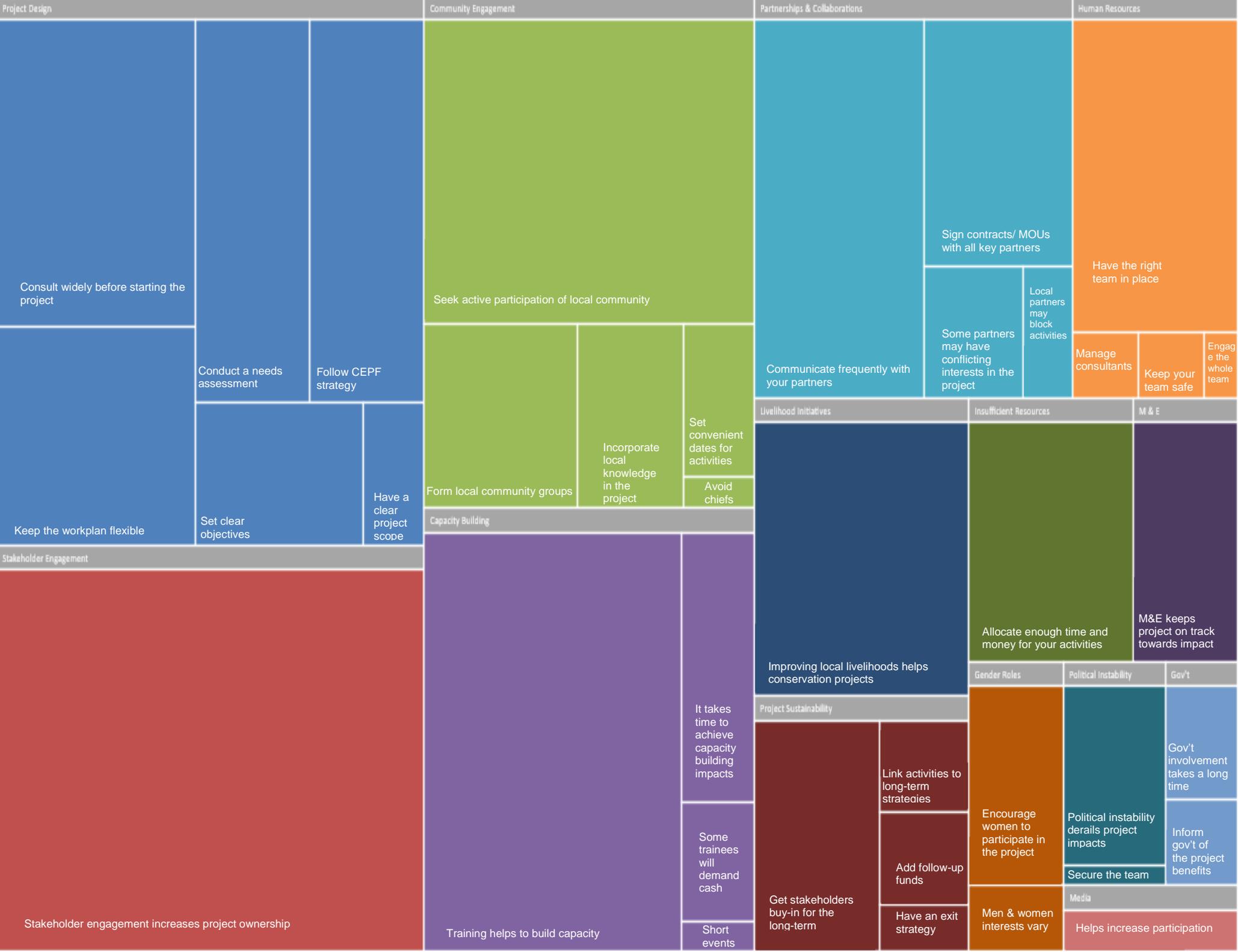


Percentage of Lessons Learned reported by National and International organizations



Types of Lessons Learned reported by country





3. Recommendations on Gathering Lessons Learned

The temporary nature of projects, staff turnover and the complex nature of biodiversity conservation are some of the challenges faced when gathering Lessons Learned. When lessons learned are lost, opportunities for operational efficiency within the organization are missed.

The following strategies are effective in gathering Lessons Learned:

◇ **Surveys**

Surveys can be sent to the project team and other relevant stakeholders either during or after closure of projects. They are useful in gathering feedback and can be tailored to seek opinions on specific aspects of the project. Surveys should be sent in a timely manner when the respondents can still remember all details of the project.

◇ **Project post-mortems**

Postmortems conducted in between and at the end of project phases are vital in gathering lessons. The main

ones can be brought on board in order to improve the processes of future operations.

◇ **Staff exit interviews**

Knowledge is lost every time team members are discharged without exit interviews⁴. Exit interviews capture Lessons Learned thus far and helps to inform the new hire and the remaining team.

◇ **Networking & Social media engagements**

Often, Lessons Learned are difficult to express either in writing or speech (tacit knowledge). Shared conversations in collaborative networks can help gather tacit knowledge since each participant becomes a node in a network transmitting to others⁵.

◇ **On site exhibitions**

Nothing beats an 'on-site' visit to get a first-hand experience of how things are done. On the ground observations and interactions with teams implementing similar projects helps gather practical Lessons Learned.

4. Recommendations on Storing Lessons Learned

Many valuable Lessons Learned end up in unread project reports and under-used databases. It is useful to think about 'storage and dissemination' as one since lessons are meant to be used not just archived.

Categorize before storage

Before storage, a strict 'minimum quality criteria' should be used to sieve out low quality 'lessons'. The remaining high-quality lessons should then be verified by relevant subject matter experts then clearly categorized for ease of access.

Typical ways to categorize Lessons Learned include:

◇ **Themes and sub-themes**

Through a consultative process with the project team and other stakeholders, lessons can be classified thematically. This participatory process helps to identify categories that are relevant to the team's work.

◇ **General and Specific**

General lessons typically have a very broad application domain and are therefore less prescriptive in their application context. On the other hand, Specific ones provide very detailed contexts within which they can be applied.

◇ **Positive and Negative**

Positive lessons are acquired from successful project achievements and are described to enhance the replication of positive experiences. In contrast, Negative lessons spell out or suggest problems that are likely to be faced in a given context.

“TSURO and BirdLife Zimbabwe collaboration provided an opportunity to learn some technical aspects such as biodiversity monitoring”

TSURO Trust, August 2017.

It is not unusual to find conflicting lessons, or contradictory suggestions to solving similar problems. In such cases, it helps to clarify the context in which the lesson was obtained and suggest cautiousness in replication⁶. Whichever classification is chosen, lessons must be stored collectively because they provide different perspectives to common problems.



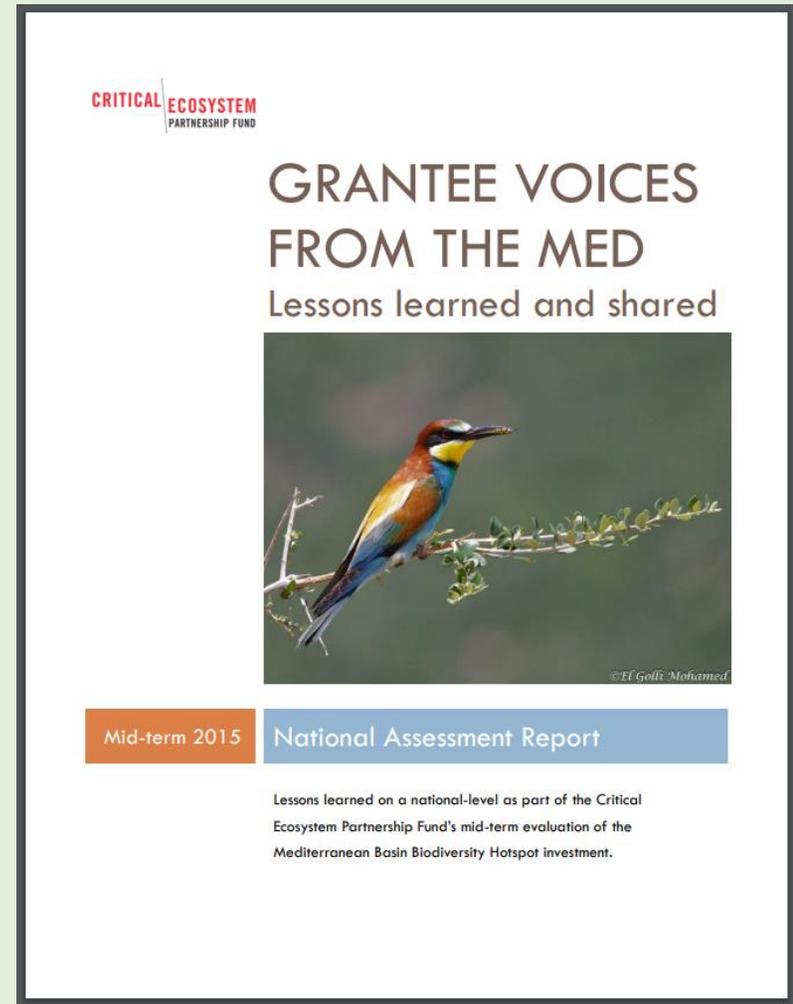
5. Recommendations on Disseminating Lessons Learned

◇ Reports and Publications

End of project reports and related publications are effective in providing the context within which the Lessons Learned were gathered. Dissemination is mostly done at the end of projects or project phases. Unfortunately, they are often left to gather dust as new projects start and organizational priorities change.

◇ Databases

Databases can store a large amount of Lessons Learned in an organized way for ease of retrieval. They could be gathered from multiple projects and organizations and updated on a regular basis. Dissemination is easily done through bulk notices sent out to users. To maintain efficiency, databases must have an assigned administrator to constantly update and maintain the system.



◇ **Websites**

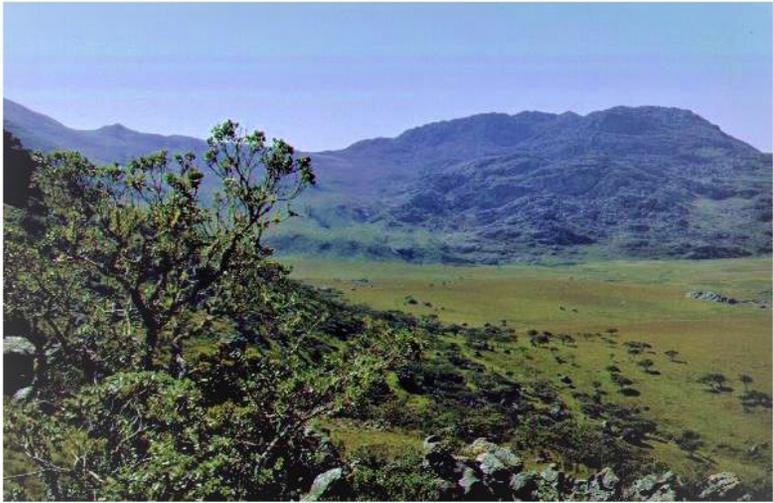
With the growth of internet users, websites have become mainstream information sharing tools. They can be used to store and freely disseminate multiple file types including documents, pictures and videos to users across the world. Websites are however expensive to set-up and maintain.

◇ **Other free web-based resources**

There are numerous easy to use web-based platforms that provide the same benefits as websites but are available freely. Although these come with limitations such as storage size and graphics, they are easier to set-up and update. Such sites include wix.com, weebly.com, wordpress.com and livebinders.com.



Lessons from Birdlife Zimbabwe's stakeholder capacity building project



With funding from CEPF, Birdlife Zimbabwe (BLZ) implemented a stakeholder capacity building project in the Key Biodiversity Areas (KBA) of Chimanimani-Nyanga Mountains from 2013 to 2015. BLZ worked to successfully develop Stakeholder Management Advisory Groups (SMAGs) and local community conservation groups called Site Support Groups (SSGs) which provided technical and advisory support to the KBA site managers. This work with the stakeholder groups helped in increasing collaboration and coordination for biodiversity conservation in the Chimanimani-Nyanga Mountains. Read about lessons learnt by Birdlife Zimbabwe during the design and implementation of the project [here](#).

◇ **Social media platforms**

It is easy to share good and bad experiences on social media, and to respond to feedback. It is however advisable to operate within an organizational social media policy to prevent embarrassment or legal problems.

◇ **Mentoring schemes and knowledge brokering**

Much of the key learning is not comprehensively addressed in written reports⁷. Mentoring schemes and knowledge brokers can help stimulate the transfer of tacit knowledge through one on-one individual engagements

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Lessons learned (5) - science

Using science as a basis for your projects is good in multiple ways: (1) it will help you achieve your impacts (no need to reinvent wheels or make common mistakes); (2) it will help you to convince donors that you know what you are doing, and (3) it will help you to convince governments or corporates to do something good (or stop doing something bad) if they know that it will actually work. 'Evidence' is the key word.

See also <https://www.conservationevidence.com/> and read about the evidence gathering by WCS at Cyamudongo Forest in Rwanda here: <https://tinyurl.com/yvj7l2mt>

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Lessons learned (4) - research

Before you start working at a CEPF, you will need to know what is there to
See more of CEPF Eastern Afromontane Hotspot Program

◇ Information graphics

Visual images are very persuasive. They can help simplify complex Lessons Learned into easily understandable charts and diagrams. Information graphics can be developed using computer software such as Adobe InDesign, Photoshop and Illustrator. However, experienced individual graphic designers can also develop illustrations straight onto a canvas by hand.



6. Specific recommendations to the Eastern Afromontane RIT & CEPF

Define key terminologies

- ◇ The lessons learned contained in the grantee reports are highly variable. This suggests that the grantees lack a common understanding of the term “Lesson Learned”. We recommend that you develop a uniform working definition to be included your guidance documents, and to be used in future training events. Section 1 of this report suggests a working definition and the 3 point minimum quality criterion for Lessons Learned – significance, authenticity and applicability.
- ◇ The study found that 63% of the lessons learned were about ‘*stakeholder engagement*’, 58% about community engagement and 41% about partnerships and collaborations with other organizations. These clusters, while informed by the actual data, point to a need for a standard working definition for the term “stakeholder” in CEPF funded projects.

Review the reporting template

- ◇ We recommend that the ‘*Lessons Learned*’ section of the report be moved up on the reporting template. Preferably, it should appear just below (or be merged with) the section reading ‘*Describe the success or challenges of the project toward achieving its short-term and long-term impact objectives*’. We believe this will increase the response rate and enhance the linkage between Lessons Learned and the project success or challenges.
- ◇ We recommend changing the ‘*Lessons Learned*’ section to a more prescriptive tabular format. This will enhance the collection of more relevant data on the context in which the lessons were obtained for ease of replication.

#	Describe successes of the project towards achieving its short-term and long-term objectives	Describe the action or context that led to the success	If you were to do this again, what would you replicate?
1.			
2.			
#	Describe challenges of the project towards achieving its short-term and long-term objectives	Describe the action or context that led to the challenges	If you were to do this again, what would you change?
1.			
2.			

Increase time and resources allocated for project design and consultations

- ◇ Data showed us that 71% of the grantees learned lessons about project design. Specifically, they mentioned the need to allocate more time for planning, consultation with stakeholders, and comprehensive needs assessments. While this could be as a result of the layout of the current lessons learned reporting template, which lists '*project design process...*' first, it could also point to an urgent need to reevaluate the way projects are designed. We recommend that you introduce a '*comprehensive project design phase*' with increased the timelines, financial resources and capacity building to help grantees in project design. Further, you need to be more tolerant to grantees who suggest changes to their project scopes, activities and timelines.

Enhance capacity building

- ◇ We recommend that the you provide more capacity building for future grantees especially in project design and stakeholder engagement. From the Lessons Learned we reviewed, it appears that these two thematic areas were attributed to key successes or challenges faced by current grantees. Additionally, we recommend that the Lessons Learned from this funding period be integrated into future capacity building events to help grantees avoid repeating the same mistakes.

- ◇ We recommend that future grantees undergo capacity building around capturing, storage and dissemination of lessons learned. This will not only improve the quality of the final project impacts but will help ensure that all important best practices and lessons learned are documented.

Compile Lessons Learned continually, and from other sources

- ◇ We believe that the grantees learned more lessons than they included in their final completion reports. We therefore recommend that the lessons learned analysis and compilation be done continually rather than at the closeout stage. More lessons are likely to be found in grantees' (un)official progress reports and correspondences with you, and in other publicity materials they developed.

Verify the reported Lessons Learned

- ◇ We recommend the verification of all the lessons learned before they are widely distributed. While we acknowledge that these lessons were captured first hand by grantees implementing projects on the ground, there is need for subject matter experts to verify their accuracy. Some of the lessons may only be relevant to specific organizations because of the nature of their projects and locality.

- ◇ We believe that the RIT and other independent consultants can play a role in verification of Lessons Learned. We recommend that the RIT conducts semi-formal discussions with the grantees, or other stakeholders, regarding the factors that led to the success or challenges they face during their routine site visits.

Develop a Lessons Learned database

- ◇ We recommend that the RIT develops a database of all Lessons Learned during this funding period. We believe this will not only inform conservation practitioners but will help shape all future investments that CEPF may undertake in the Eastern Afromontane region and beyond.

Further studies

- ◇ We recommend further studies to refine the long list of Lessons Learned compiled from this research. This would entail updating the lessons in line with the proposed working definition, as well as a verification process to establish validity. Only then will the lessons discussed here be useful in the future.
- ◇ This study needs to be replicated across all the regions that CEPF is working in to enhance the transfer of ideas across hotspots. The Lessons Learned captured here will be useful to inform future CEPF investments in other regions. It would be interesting to study whether the same Lessons Learned are captured elsewhere.

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