

**Evaluation of Lessons Learned in Relation to the Regional  
Implementation Team for the Mountains of Central Asia  
Biodiversity Hotspot**

**Final Report**

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on behalf of CEPF  
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## Executive Summary

This report assesses the CEPF's investment program in the Mountains of Central Asia hotspot between 2019 and 2025, focusing on the lessons learned from the performance and delivery of the regional implementation team (RIT), originally awarded to WWF Russia [in collaboration with ARGO - Civil Society Development Organization] and ultimately staffed by an independent team of experts. The program planned investments based on an approved Ecosystem Profile which identified Strategic Directions including conservation of sites, species, corridors, and production landscapes, alongside the strengthening of civil society in the region.

The five-year program of investment resulted in the award of 99 grants (38 large grants and 61 small grants – note these figures are still provisional) in 6 countries, with a total value to date of \$7,437,724. Most of the investment was in five countries – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The program in Afghanistan had to be cancelled following the change in government there, while investment in the part of the China in the hotspot was not possible. The program will close in April 2025 but there is optimism that a new phase of investment will follow on.

The impacts of the program are monitored through analysis of outputs relating to the program logframe which in turn contributes to the global indicators grouped under CEPF's four pillars – biodiversity, civil society, human well-being and enabling conditions. Impacts have not yet been fully assessed but projects have been completed in at least 56 Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs) covering 600,000 ha. Work has taken place on at least 26 of the 33 priority species identified in the ecosystem profile, as well as some additional priorities. Specific outputs include new protected areas, 10 new land use management plans, four micro reserves, three conservation networks, several development projects incorporating additional environmental safeguards, and 20 advanced degrees supported for local students.

The assessment was undertaken remotely through a mix of document review, and interviews with key informants, notably CEPF and RIT staff, and grantees from local and international NGO grantees. The report concludes that the RIT performed effectively across most aspects of the program. The RIT structure of Country Coordinators in each of the five countries, supported by a Team Leader, Small Grants Coordinator and Finance Officer in the head office in Almaty worked well. The team members were selected to suit the challenges facing them in each country, and both questionnaires and interviews concluded that they had added value to their work through their support at all stages of project development, management and review, and in broader capacity building. Their role in facilitating project understanding and approval by local and national government was very important. Each Country Coordinator had a range of expertise but their relative isolation from each other limited their ability to assist, learn from and share experiences with each other and with their cohort of grantees.

During the investment period, 12 Calls for Proposals were issued for Small Grants by the RIT, resulting in 205 applications. Sixty-one grants were approved. CEPF launched 5 Calls for Proposals for large grants, resulting in 37 successful proposals (in addition to the large grant to the RIT itself. The program delivered a good balance of projects under the identified priorities and nearly all projects were felt to

have been successful and achieved impact. The majority of small grants managed by the RIT focused on species and sites rather than more complex production landscapes, human well-being and policy changes.

A number of challenges faced the program through its investment period. The pandemic occurred near the start of the phase and caused some training and networking events to be cancelled and hampered face to face review and technical support for two years. The team adapted well but this certainly delayed and changed some projects and the ability to share experiences throughout the period. The program in Afghanistan was cancelled after the change of government in 2021 and civil unrest affected projects in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. A sequence of events following the war between Russia and Ukraine, and resulting international sanctions, severely affected banking arrangements for many projects. Further, WWF-Russia disincorporated during the project, leaving regional-based experts to staff and manage the program. The RIT and CEPF worked closely to ameliorate the problems caused and everyone agreed this had been done extremely well.

Many lessons have been learned which can serve to inform CEPF and a future RIT in planning for a second phase of investment.

The overall structure of the RIT worked well and key roles including Country Coordinators should be maintained, although there may need to be a rebalancing of resources to reflect changing priorities and workload.

The program achieved a good balance of projects across countries. This was the first significant external investment into civil society in Turkmenistan. More focus on Uzbekistan might give a strong focus to building civil society there. The considerable time spent by Country Coordinators on facilitating the work of grantees through national and local governments was critical and needs to be maintained.

The process adopted for the calls for proposals worked well and seemed to gain a good response. All small grant consultees were very complementary about the support they received from the RIT through project design, implementation, and monitoring.

There are a number of areas where CEPF and a future RIT may be able to use the flexibility of its grant making programs to increase impact.

- Much civil society in Central Asia is still at an early stage of evolution and more focus on organizational development is needed. Any grants to larger international organizations should serve to increase local capacity, whether as key players in targeted conservation projects, or through projects designed around building of capacity for small NGOs by larger, more experienced ones.
- Scaling up the impact of successful projects through follow up grants and through complementary grants to NGOs working in the same or adjacent KBAs (with favorable consideration of projects across international borders across international borders).
- There is a need for better communications of the many successful project outcomes as well as lessons learned, both to government, donors and across the grantee networks. More frequent national networking meetings, site exchanges, peer to peer visits, and more active use of website and social media will all contribute to this, though some do have budgetary implications.
- More thought is needed on a long-term vision for civil society in Central Asia, including identifying barriers to their greater effectiveness and how these may be

overcome. Many short projects have no obvious follow up and grantees should be encouraged to build project sustainability and legacy into their thinking from the initial design stage, building actions into projects that build their own capacity and that of local communities to enable this.

The program has been successful, and it is recommended to operate a Phase II investment if funds can be secured. A larger overall program budget would no doubt pay dividends if it was possible. In this event it will be for CEPF to appoint one or more organizations to run the RIT and to negotiate with them a structure and operation that will continue and enhance this success.

## Acronyms

ARGO	Civil Society Development Organization
CEPF	Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund
CfP	Call for Proposals
CSO	Civil Society Organization
EP	Ecosystem Profile
EU	European Union
FFEM	Fonds Français pour l'Environnement Mondial
KBA	Key Biodiversity Area
LoI	Letter of Inquiry
MCA	Mountains of Central Asia
MTA	Mid-Term Assessment
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
RIT	Regional Implementation Team
SD	Strategic Direction
ToR	Terms of Reference
WWF	World Wide Fund for Nature



## 1. Introduction and background

The Mountains of Central Asia Hotspot, covering 860,000 square kilometers centered on the major mountain ranges of the Pamir and the Tien Shan, is remarkable for its relatively large amount of remaining natural habitat, high endemism and charismatic megafauna, particularly the iconic snow leopard. With peaks rising to over 7,000 meters, 20,000 glaciers, and isolated arid environments and valleys fed by snow melt, diverse ecosystems support the wild relatives of many cultivated fruits, nuts and herbaceous plants, and, overall, upwards of 5,000 plant species, of which 1,500 are endemic to the region. The region also includes 144 Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs), per the IUCN global standard, covering 149,000 square kilometers.

The hotspot includes parts of seven countries: southeastern Kazakhstan; most of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan; eastern Uzbekistan; western China; northeastern Afghanistan; and a small montane part of southeastern Turkmenistan. This area of great cultural diversity and dynamic political history is facing dramatic changes that present a threat to its biodiversity. Economic development, driven both from countries to the east and the west, is leading to huge investments in natural resource extraction, and transport and energy infrastructure, while political pressures create the need for more export-oriented agriculture and lead to loss of transparency on issues of land management. Climate change is a huge threat to these montane ecosystems. Climate models suggest that parts of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are the most resilient ecosystems and will form the most important refugia in the future.

The state of civil society in each of the countries is also varied. The level of capacity ranges from relatively high (e.g., in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan) to relatively low (e.g., in Afghanistan) and the legal environment in which groups work is also varied, for example in terms of their ability to receive foreign funds or to engage in management of public lands.



Figure 1: The Mountains of Central Asia hotspot boundary

Political and global events have absolutely influenced work in the region. First, the global COVID-19 pandemic struck four months after the program began, drastically affecting staff and grantee movement throughout 2020 and 2021. Second, there have been relatively minor, albeit significant, periods of unrest in Kyrgyzstan in 2020 and 2021, and in Kazakhstan in 2022, and there is an ongoing armed dispute between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Third was the change in government in Afghanistan in August 2021 leading to the suspension of almost all foreign donor-funded projects. It was also not possible to work in western China, as the project was not endorsed by the GEF focal point there, and not all donors are supporting work in this politically contentious region. Finally, beginning in March 2022, the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, and the resulting imposition of sanctions on Russian banks, has altered financing mechanisms. At the same time, for reasons in Moscow, unrelated to the work of the RIT, WWF-Russia disincorporated. In response, members of the team made the independent decision to work together to continue the obligations of the RIT.

The Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF) is a joint initiative of l'Agence Française de Développement, Conservation International, the European Union, Fondation Hans Wilsdorf, the Global Environment Facility, the Government of Japan and the World Bank designed to help safeguard the world's biodiversity hotspots. As one of the founding partners, Conservation International administers the global program through the CEPF Secretariat.

In 2019 CEPF launched a five-year program of investment in the Mountains of Central Asia hotspot, which resulted in the award of 99 grants (38 large grants and 61 small grants) in 6 countries, with a total value to date of \$7,437,724.

<b>MCA Countries</b>	<b>CEPF Eligibility</b>	<b>Endorsement Date</b>	<b>Comments</b>
<b>Afghanistan</b>	Yes		Following the change in Government in 2021, most development assistance was suspended and the one grant was eventually cancelled
<b>China</b>	Yes	Not endorsed	Political issues have prevented investment in China, and this is anticipated not to change
<b>Kazakhstan</b>	Yes		
<b>Kyrgyzstan</b>	Yes		
<b>Tajikistan</b>	Yes		
<b>Turkmenistan</b>	Yes		
<b>Uzbekistan</b>	Yes		

Table 1. A summary of the eligibility of MCA hotspot countries for CEPF support

In each of the biodiversity hotspots where it invests, CEPF selects a regional implementation team (RIT) to provide strategic leadership for the program. Each RIT consists of one or more civil society organizations active in conservation in the hotspot. The objective of the RIT is to convert the plans in the ecosystem profile into a cohesive portfolio of grants that contributes to CEPF's long-term goals for the hotspot.

In the Mountains of Central Asia Biodiversity Hotspot, the role of the RIT was initially performed by WWF-Russia with a team headquartered in Almaty, Kazakhstan but with members based in other hotspot countries as well as in Russia. In mid-2023, WWF-

Russia disbanded for domestic reasons unrelated to CEPF or work in Central Asia. Some members of the staff of the RIT reconstituted themselves in a way to continue their work while complying with CEPF's requirements to be registered as a legal entity through the end of the grantmaking program.

Up until December 2023, there was one sub-grantee under the RIT, the Almaty-based Civil Society Development Organization (ARGO), providing expertise in civil society capacity building. This relationship came to a formal close at that time, but ARGO experts are still available on an ad hoc basis.

The current personnel of the RIT are shown below.

<b>Position</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Location</b>
Team Leader	Lizza Protas	Almaty
Small-Grants Manager	Anastasiya Mazneva	Almaty
Kazakhstan Country Coordinator	Lina Valdshmit	Almaty
Kyrgyz Country Coordinator	Mihail Yakovlev	Bishkek
Tajikistan Country Coordinator	Khisrav Shermatov	Dushanbe
Turkmenistan Country Coordinator	Begench Atamuradov	Ashgabat
Uzbekistan Country Coordinator	Aleksandr Grigoryants	Tashkent
Financial Manager	Dilnara Jalilova	Almaty

Table 2. RIT Personnel as of December 2024

The team also relies on various experts with long-standing experience in Central Asia, including preeminent ecologists and people managing programs for conservation of large carnivorous cats.

To capture lessons learned in relation to the RIT for the hotspot, CEPF commissions an independent evaluation towards the end of the investment period. This evaluation is distinct and separate from the formal "Final Assessment" of the portfolio, which is undertaken at the end of an investment phase to evaluate the overall conservation and other impacts of CEPF investment in a hotspot.

The objective of this evaluation is to inform decisions around CEPF's future involvement in the Mountains of Central Asia biodiversity hotspot, in the event that future funding becomes available. This may include decisions by CEPF donors regarding selection of a RIT for a future phase of investment, and the optimum programmatic and management approaches for coordinating any future investment.

## 2. Approach to the Evaluation

This evaluation considers the performance of the RIT in relation to the geography of the hotspot, the capacity of civil society there, the budget allocated, and their achievement of deliverables as defined in their individual grant agreement with CEPF. It also considers the impacts of the investment to date (in terms of biodiversity, human well-being, civil society capacity and enabling conditions for conservation), based on the findings of the Mid-Term Assessment for the hotspot and the Annual Portfolio Overviews.

Separately the consultant has reviewed the institutional landscape in the Mountains of Central Asia biodiversity hotspot and identified any candidate organizations that

could potentially perform the RIT role in the future (either alone or as part of a consortium). This latter report is a confidential report to CEPF.

The approach taken following appointment was as follows:

1. A brief scoping of the documentation and Terms of Reference, as well as a preliminary discussion with CEPF. An induction report was then produced which outlined the approach to be taken and provided an evaluation framework.
2. This was then followed by a desk review of principal documentation (see list in Annex 2):
3. The desk review was complemented by interviews with relevant CEPF Secretariat staff, the RIT staff, a selection of CEPF grantees and applicants, and any other relevant stakeholders. All meetings were conducted on-line (See Annex 3, 4).

## 2.1 Criteria for Evaluation

The evaluation examined the components and functions of the MCA RIT, as set out in the terms of reference, and evaluated the performance against the following criteria:

- i) Relevance: Were the activities undertaken relevant to the ecosystem profile, RIT terms of reference, the geography of the hotspot, the capacity of civil society there, and the global monitoring framework of CEPF?
- ii) Efficiency: How efficiently was the budget allocated to the RIT converted into results?
- iii) Effectiveness: What were the strengths and weaknesses of the RIT structure and capacities with regard to effective delivery of results?

In addition to directly evaluating the performance of the RIT, lessons learned from the CEPF grants portfolio with regard to the RIT role were compiled and reviewed in the context of the following themes:

- iv) Coverage: To what extent does the portfolio of grants awarded to date cover the strategic directions and investment priorities set out in the investment strategy for the hotspot?
- v) Impact: To what extent have the targets set in the hotspot ecosystem profile for impacts on biodiversity conservation, human well-being, civil society capacity and enabling conditions been met?
- vi) Accessibility: Does the grant portfolio involve an appropriate balance of international and local grantees, taking into account the relative strengths of different organizations with regard to delivery of the investment strategy and considering the priority given by CEPF to building the capacity of local civil society?
- vii) Adaptive Management: In what ways has the development of the grant portfolio been constrained by risks (political/institutional/security/health) or taken advantage of unanticipated opportunities?

## 2.2 The formally Agreed Duties of the Regional Implementation Team

The formally Agreed Duties of the Regional Implementation Team in the Mountains of Central Asia provide the basis for assessing their performance according to the criteria above. The duties consist of nine components, which are:

Component 1. Coordinate CEPF investment in the hotspot;

Component 2. Support the mainstreaming of biodiversity into public policies and private sector business practices;

Component 3. Communicate the CEPF investment throughout the hotspot;

Component 4. Build the capacity of local civil society;

Component 5. Establish and coordinate a process for large grant (>\$20,000\*) proposal solicitation and review;

Component 6. Manage a program of small grants (≤\$20,000\*). (\*Note these thresholds later increased to \$50,000 in some cases);

Component 7. Monitor and evaluate the impact of CEPF's large and small grants;

Component 8. Lead the process to develop, over a three-month period, a long-term strategic vision for CEPF investment;

Component 9. Reporting.

## 2.3 Overview of the Strategic Directions and Investment Priorities for the Mountains of Central Asia

In evaluating the performance of the RIT, it is important to take note of the overall objectives and priorities of the investment program for the hotspot.

No.	Strategic Direction and Investment Priorities	Funding
1	Address threats to priority species 1.1. Enforcement and incentives 1.2. Regulation of collecting, hunting, and fishing 1.3. Species-specific reserves 1.4. Human-wildlife conflict 1.5. Maintenance of species populations	\$1,000,000
2	Improve management of priority sites with and without official protection status 2.1. CSO, community, and PA management collaboration 2.2. Sustainable use of unprotected KBAs 2.3. Identify and recognize KBAs	\$2,300,000
3	Support sustainable management and biodiversity conservation within priority corridors 3.1. Ecological restoration and KBA connectivity 3.2. Integrate biodiversity into development planning 3.3. CSO engagement in development planning	\$1,500,000
4	Engage communities of interest and economic sectors, including the private sector, in improved management of production landscapes (i.e., priority sites and corridors that are not formally protected) 4.1. Engage hunting, tourism, and mining operations 4.2. Mainstream conservation into livestock and farm management 4.3. Forest certification and non-timber forest product value chains 4.4. Site safeguards in infrastructure development 4.5. Raise awareness on species and KBAs	\$1,000,000
5	Enhance civil society capacity for effective conservation action	\$1,000,000

No.	Strategic Direction and Investment Priorities	Funding
	5.1. Communication between CSOs, communities, and government 5.2. CSO capacity for planning, implementation, fundraising, and communication 5.3. Networks among SCOs 5.4. Strengthen funding sources and access to funding by CSOs 5.5. Environmental education	
6	Provide strategic leadership and effective coordination of conservation investment through a regional implementation team  6.1. CSOs achieve shared conservation goals 6.2. Harmonize investments and direct funding to priority issues and sites	\$1,200,000
<b>Total</b>		<b>\$8,000,000</b>

Table 3. Strategic Directions and Funding Allocation per Ecosystem Profile

This evaluation was commissioned by CEPF. It was limited to 20 days of time and so by necessity not all issues are addressed in detail. The focus is on the performance of the RIT but this is on occasion inseparable from the overall impact of the CEPF program of investment.

### 3. Evidence on the performance of the CEPF and the RIT in the Mountains of Central Asia

This section summarizes the assessments and evaluations that had taken place prior to the commissioning of this current initiative. Subsequently, additional questionnaire information that was gathered during the current evaluation is summarized.

#### 3.1 The Mid-term assessment of 2022

This assessment focused on the overall impact of the investment program and occurs at the mid-point of any phase of hotspot investment. The assessment was undertaken as an internal exercise with a view to informing the remainder of the investment phase through to late 2024 (since extended to April 2025). However, it did provide some useful recommendations to guide the work of the RIT in this remaining period.

At the time of the mid-term assessment, 67 grants had been awarded, 43 of them small grants through the RIT. A total of \$4.2m had been contracted and 45 local organizations had received grants, this constituting 65% of the total. Most grants were for strategic directions 1 (species) and especially SD2 (KBAs). However, there were also at least 5 for each of the strategic directions on corridors, production landscapes and capacity building. There was a reasonable geographical spread across all five countries although fewer in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

The assessment noted the profound changes which had taken place since the preparation of the Ecosystem Profile, in particular the pandemic, the change of government in Afghanistan and the financial and political implications of the sanctions imposed on Russia after the advent of the war with Ukraine.

However other trends had also been identified. There was a changing and improving understanding and definition of KBAs, especially in Kyrgyzstan. There had been less high-quality applications than expected from Tajikistan and, especially, Uzbekistan. Some more remote KBAs, and some priority species – notably some plants - had attracted limited interest from grant applicants. Finally, some investment priorities had not attracted much interest. Thus, there has been little uptake of IP 3.1 (ecological restoration at a corridor scale), IP 4.3 (forest certification), IP 4.4 (private sector

engagement and safeguards on infrastructure projects), and IP 5.4 (sustainable financing mechanisms).

Proposed approaches through the rest of the investment period of particular relevance to the RIT included:

1. An anticipated extension of the RIT agreement until 30 April 2025, allowing for more time for existing and forthcoming small and large grants.
2. A suggested emphasis on capacity building of CSOs in Uzbekistan, in lieu of biophysical results. One possible approach would be to pair Uzbek groups with high-capacity partners from Kazakhstan.
3. A proposal not to pursue one target, 4.3 on hectares of certified forest, in view of the lack of any anticipation of progress.
4. The logical framework shows progress toward most of the targets but there is a challenge of assessing the impact and sustainability of these results. For example, it is one thing for a group to start a nursery for wild apple trees in a KBA; it is another thing for the group to plant the trees in the KBA, ensure their survival, and determine the number of hectares, if any, that are under improved management because of their intervention. Upcoming grants should therefore be to existing recipients, or to other groups with appropriate expertise, to ensure that where projects have started, results are achieved.
5. In respect of KBAs with improved management, the challenge for the remaining period was defining “improved management” in different contexts and ensuring grantees meet those measures. Outputs could include defining a problem and solution, developing a plan, and implementing that plan. It is also important to try and identify how much of a KBA can be said to have improved management as few projects cover the whole site.
6. The target for creating 60,000 hectares of new or expanded protected areas was overly ambitious given the time frame, although the purpose is still valid.
7. A suggestion is to try to build upon sites where there are two or more grantees, to build geographical clusters. There were also several ‘technical clusters’ – projects addressing similar issues (e.g. grazing plans, nurseries for iconic plant species, snow leopards, soaring birds) where groups could form networks and share experience.
8. Additional globally threatened species might now merit prioritization, such as the Great Bustard (*Otis tarda tarda*) and the Goitered gazelle, given a better understanding of their presence and the threats they face. Many plants, including tulips, still need better red list assessments.
9. A number of additional KBAs (8 in Tajikistan, 4 in Kyrgyzstan and 1 in Uzbekistan) were considered as priorities which warrant investment.
10. Within Strategic Direction 5 on capacity building, clearly support was needed in Uzbekistan, and to a lesser extent in Tajikistan, to develop the ability of partners to



conceptualize projects per international standards, as well as addressing basic issues such as registration and permits to receive foreign funds. Organizations in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan need to develop skills on conservation planning and methodologies (e.g., KBAs).

11. In Turkmenistan, the goal is to demonstrate to government the value of CSO engagement by building CSO competence. Thus, the technical topic – studies of unique biomes like caves, animal tracking, tourism, sustainable grazing – can be less important than the capacity building, itself. Grants might take this approach.

*The assessment concluded 'The investment in the Mountains of Central Asia is different than many of its predecessors, less focused on iconic species or specific public protected areas, and more focused on the engagement of CSOs, often of relatively low capacity, working in sites – KBAs – with a biological, as opposed to administrative, delineation. This has meant a learning curve for CEPF's constituency, made more challenging by the pandemic and a series of serious political events. Still, the RIT has created a solid foundation of grants with potential to deliver conservation outcomes. The remaining period will focus on ensuring those results'.*

Many of these recommendations have been followed up in part. There was little addition investment possible following the Mid-term Assessment as the budget was already largely committed. Therefore, many recommendations remain a work in progress and are very relevant to planning for the next investment phase.

### 3.2 Existing grantee Questionnaires

Two sets of data outlining grantee perception during Phase 2 are available and are held by CEPF secretariat. However, they give limited information for the purpose of this evaluation.

#### **Grantee perception surveys**

Grantee perception surveys were sent to a selection of grantees as part of a global assessment, whose results were published in September 2024. However, only 9 grantees from MCA completed this survey, all of them large grantees. As large grantees, their main contact is with CEPF and therefore the survey had a very limited number of responses related to the RIT. A brief summary of the responses highlights some comments that are most relevant to the RIT.

- Almost all responses were very positive, and covering the application process, grant management and financial support, technical support, impact monitoring and evaluation, communications and reporting. The comment was made that CEPF feels like a partner as well as a donor.
- The least positive responses related to the processes for assessing and monitoring social safeguards and gender implications. This may relate to different attitudes towards this process and suggests that for both large and small grants the importance of these needs to be emphasized but also ways found to convey them in a relevant and positive manner.
- Technical and financial project visits were appreciated and considered very useful where they occurred. While CEPF staff will no doubt try to visit large grantees if they are on a mission in the country, it's also a valuable part of the RIT's role to assist in



large grant monitoring. One consultee commented that they would have liked more input from the Country Coordinator.

- There was a request that CEPF and the RIT do connect grantees working in the same geographical/thematic area. This certainly does happen but is obviously sufficiently appreciated that it could be the norm, including between those implementing large and small grants.
- There was a suggestion that an initial meeting between the RIT/CEPF and the grantee could be held at the start of the project to include consideration of any capacity building needs/opportunities (this was not possible due to the pandemic).
- The suggestion for each project to attempt to produce its own impact report and discuss non-technical reporting and storytelling opportunities.

### **Surveys commissioned by Zoi Network as part of large grant 114082**

The Zoi network undertook a civil society questionnaire on the role and contribution of CSOs to local, national and global biodiversity targets. This was part of Large Grant project number 114082 *Enhance civil society contributions to priority-setting in the Mountains of Central Asia*.

The 20-question survey was distributed to around 200 potential respondents, most of whom have practical experience and knowledge of biodiversity in Central Asia. Responses were received from 90 participants, with balanced representation from all Central Asian countries as well as from some international partners and organizations. Gender balance of participants was 60% male, 40% female.

Although not geared directly towards perceptions of CEPF or the RIT, some of the responses did include relevant material and to date it is the only comprehensive survey undertaken with these groups. It is also an excellent review of how CSOs in the region see the current situation and thus helpful in planning any future investment period.

1. The majority of respondents consider the role of the civil society and NGOs in biodiversity conservation in the countries and the Central Asia region to be 'important' and are familiar with national and global biodiversity targets.
2. Current conditions for public and NGO activities are assessed as 'suitable, acceptable', with positive trends in terms of organizing forums and networking, but negative in availability and accessibility of funding and stricter regulatory and operational conditions.
3. The future of the civil society organizations in the next five years is seen by participants as 'suitable, acceptable', with some actors anticipating deterioration and others looking for improvement.
4. The contribution and participation of the civil society in conservation can be increased in a number of ways, with most participants mentioning: training in key biodiversity areas, tools and methods of biodiversity monitoring; assistance in writing applications and fundraising; development of networks and cooperation; involvement in larger donor projects and programs; communication of achievements.
5. Participants' responses indicate that the quality and availability of biodiversity data and information in the countries and the Central Asia region leave much to be desired. National biodiversity reports and strategies may be inaccessible at the local level (e.g. as they are often located at convention sites outside the country's web resources) or written in a language that is difficult for the general public to understand. Outdated and incomplete biodiversity data is often a problem. Nevertheless, many survey participants provide or share data and reports with

- environmental authorities to support the implementation of biodiversity goals and strategies, Red List updates, and to share info with other stakeholders.
6. Similarly, Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs), a relatively new and complex concept used by the Convention on Biological Diversity, IUCN, GEF and other international entities/donors, are not yet well known or used at the local level (local authorities and communities). At the level of government regulations and sub-laws, there are gaps in the description and implementation of KBAs. Scientific and civil society organizations in Central Asia are increasingly using this approach. This is largely due to the projects and efforts of the CEPF and GEF.
  7. Among the anthropogenic pressures on Key Biodiversity Areas identified as “important” by participants are: over grazing, deforestation, poaching and illegal collection of flora and fauna, pollution and waste, land use and habitat change and the climate change impacts.
  8. The region seems to achieve only partial progress on the previous NBSAPs, therefore CSOs can play a key role in providing inputs to the updated biodiversity goals and NBSAPs and contribute to their implementation. The answers give recommendations on areas where NGOs can strengthen and develop collaboration with government agencies and international projects.
  9. The survey lists a wide range of options for channels and formats for disseminating information on biodiversity, which the majority of respondents consider important and useful.
  10. According to the survey, scientists, public organizations and local communities are often interested and involved in civil society biodiversity projects, while the involvement of other groups depends on the situation, with the private sector reported as less involved and interested.

### 3.3 Surveys undertaken as part of this evaluation.

Since there was a lack of direct feedback from grantees, especially small grantees, concerning their relationship with the RIT, a simple survey was undertaken as part of this evaluation. A set of 10 questions were agreed and sent out via the RIT to all small grantees. This exercise was undertaken in Russian to ensure that all grantees had the chance to engage.

This survey was completed by 14 small grant organizations, 2 of whom I also interviewed online. This included 7 from Kazakhstan, 3 from Turkmenistan and 2 each from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

In addition, I interviewed 11 grantees, 6 of whom had received small grants, as well as (in some cases) large grants through Zoom.

These grantees are all acknowledged and are listed in Annex 3.

Individual organizations’ comments are not attributed. However, their ideas and comments helped me to develop my conclusions and recommendations. Most of the small grantees had had detailed interactions with the RIT. Those who had only received large grants had often limited interactions with the RIT as these grants are contracted by CEPF itself. However, many of them have wider program interests in Central Asia and so their insights as to how CEPF might develop its work in the future were frequently insightful and constructive.

All small grantees who had interactions with the RIT had a favorable view of their work and appreciated their support. All grantees were also appreciative of the support given

by CEPF itself and their direct support where this was given. Some of the more frequent views expressed and some notable suggestions are summarized below.

- All of those grantees (all small grantees) and some large grantees) who had dealt with the RIT were very positive about the support and encouragement they had received. They also complemented the CEPF staff for their support where given. Generally, the less experienced organizations had received most input from the RIT and were most appreciative of it.
- Some of the support most frequently mentioned was the training for and assistance with completing grant applications, the materials provided by the RIT including the ecosystem profile and training materials, and the assistance with introductions to stakeholders especially those from national and local governments, and in some cases, the private sector.
- Their ability to resolve problems was also frequently noted, especially those around financial transfers and management, and other procurement and logistical matters. Many organizations had struggled with issues on financial transfer and increasing costs, especially of capital items, and complemented the commitment and flexibility shown by the RIT in supporting them.
- Specific issues raised were the need for faster decisions to be made on project grant applications, and for fast communication by country coordinators where important new information emerged. Naturally some would like the levels of grant funding to be higher and for a wider range of sites and projects to be eligible for funding.
- Smaller organizations particularly appreciated the training and capacity building given. The younger organizations probably were less sure about what to expect and what they needed. Many would appreciate additional training, if possible, especially around financial management and a range of technical issues. A few mentioned the need for training needs assessment and wider organizational development. It was felt that larger organizations were an important resource for helping younger ones.
- Likewise, all appreciated the opportunities given to network with other grantees, and with other government officials and donors. Almost all would like more opportunities to network so as to learn from and share experiences with each other. There is a need for communities of interest, at both national and regional levels.
- The low level of awareness of environmental organizations among local communities was often mentioned, and thus the importance of supporting information dissemination and awareness raising.
- It was felt that CSOs had a major contribution to make to improving the management of protected areas, even though CEPF's funding is directed at civil society. This, and other ways of helping government to implement national environmental agendas, was important in building trust and being recognized as a useful contributor.
- Several grantees mentioned the importance of building the needs and engagement of women and young people into projects from the design stage.

## 4. Main Evaluation Findings

This section outlines the main findings of this Evaluation according to the key criteria of Relevance, Efficiency, Effectiveness, Coverage, Impact, Accessibility and Adaptive Management. Within this, the key component parts of the RIT's Terms of Reference are noted and assessed.

This is an evaluation of lessons learned relating to management by the RIT, not the overall conservation and socio-economic impacts of the program. In practice this can be hard to separate as part of the role of the RIT is to implement a successful program. Comment is made on occasion on the delivery of the program, but this is not a comprehensive attempt to do so.

Grantees often do not clearly distinguish between the RIT and the CEPF Secretariat, especially those implementing Large Grants. So, it may be hard to attribute successes or setbacks clearly to one or other of the parties. Some of the smaller grantees are not necessarily very familiar with the operation of CEPF or the RIT and associate the program strongly with one or two individuals.

Feedback received is perhaps slightly biased towards the views of the larger CSOs who have benefitted from the program, partly due to language constraints, but mainly because some smaller CSOs may lack the capacity to respond to questionnaires. However, it is felt that the responses received do reflect most opinion concerning the program.

(There is considerable overlap within the seven assessment criteria. Where possible I seek to avoid duplication of information but have cross-referred back to comments made in earlier sections).

## 4.1 Relevance

*Were the activities undertaken relevant to the ecosystem profile, RIT terms of reference, the geography of the hotspot, the capacity of civil society there, and the global monitoring framework of CEPF?*

### 4.1.1 Response of the RIT to the challenges and opportunities of the hotspot's geographical, ecological, political and socio-economic characteristics

The Mountains of Central Asia is a complex hotspot with seven countries and a wide variety of important habitat types and of social and political systems. The capacity of civil society is generally low but varies a lot across the hotspot in terms of its strength and in relation to its freedom of operation and relationship with government.

That said the five principal hotspot countries do have a number of similarities and (in part) a tradition of cooperation and cross border working. They share the experience of gradual emergence from their status as members of the former Soviet Union, share a working language and a number of regional organizations or groupings. While there are also many individual differences and some national disputes, this provides a solid basis for a program.

The RIT has a cohesive and logical structure with a centralized team based in Almaty, Kazakhstan, including Team Leader, Small Grants Coordinator and Finance Officer, along with five country coordinators. This seems a sensible structure which has generally served its purpose well. The team also has access to a number of additional support and advisory services including additional communications staff and scientific advisers.

Some of the operating parameters are outside the control of the RIT. The ecosystem profile sets out some clear objectives within which they need to operate, and within the framework of CEPF's operational procedures. However, a large part of the hotspot in Western China could not be included in this phase of investment due to a lack of endorsement by the GEF focal point and because of donor restrictions. Although grants

were awarded in the small part of Afghanistan that lies within the hotspot, these had to be cancelled following the change of government there in 2021.

The Profile identified 33 priority species, 28 priority sites, and five priority corridors around which CEPF will apply the six Strategic Directions identified above, each broken down into Investment Priorities. These Strategic Directions form the heart of CEPF's plans for grant-making in the Mountains of Central Asia Biodiversity Hotspot.

The RIT had some major disruptions during the implementation of this program.

First the **COVID 19 pandemic** which disrupted the implementation and monitoring of the project. Of course this was a worldwide phenomenon which impacted all programs. The timing was particularly critical for the Mountains of Central Asia as it occurred at the start of the investment process before a number of initial training and communications had occurred. While CEPF staff did visit the region for the initial training of the RIT, and one roll out event to grantees took place in Kyrgyzstan, quite a number of subsequent events had to be postponed and transferred from face to face to remote events. Of course, some RIT staff and some grantees also became ill. This created some delays and eventually led to the extension of the investment phase through to April 2025. However, in most cases the process of awarding grants proceeded relatively smoothly to the credit of all parties. Naturally there were changes necessary to practices at both RIT and grant implementation levels.

There were a number of less tangible impacts of this which had small but potentially important cumulative impacts. This will have included the reduction in face-to-face training, inability of expert advisers to travel, different patterns of implementation with less contact with the local community, impacts upon site and project monitoring, and impacts on the potential for any transboundary working. There are also some likely longer-term impacts through the establishment of different working patterns and greater reliance on remote communications. These will have positive and negative aspects, but it will be important to consider whether changes to working patterns in future operations – for example more regular face to face team meetings – have benefits which might outweigh the additional costs incurred.

A major set of events was triggered by the onset of the war in Ukraine in February 2022 and the subsequent imposition of **international sanctions on Russia**. This necessitated the restructuring of the management of the RIT such that it had to be fully based in Central Asia, and that financial transfers could no longer take place via Russia. Some grantees also had to reorganize their financial systems into banks which were not the subject of sanctions. In 2023, WWF-Russia disincorporated, ending its operations in Russia and in Central Asia. This was an unprecedented situation for CEPF. From the time of the close of WWF-Russia to the end of the overall program, there were only 18 months remaining. It would have been difficult, if not impossible, to recruit a new organization to fill the role. Thus, the CEPF Secretariat sought and received the approval of the Donor Council to transfer the RIT and SGM from WWF-Russia to a newly constituted team of regional-based experts, a subset of the original RIT staff. RIT Grant 110214 was formally closed on 31 December 2023 at an amount of \$926,178.85. From the original obligation, the remainder was transferred to a new RIT grant, Grant 115208 for \$273,821.15. SGM Grant 110307 was closed at an amount of \$1,226,908.95, with the remainder -- \$148,121.88 – transferred to new SGM grant, Grant 115223.

In 2023 the CEPF Managing Director informed the Grant Director that due to over-commitment of funds from the CI Spenddown Fund and the European Union donor codes, the *de facto* spending authority in the region would be \$7,450,000. This necessitated a de-obligation of funding from the SGM; a reduction of \$52,986.36, bringing the SGM to a new total of \$1,373,491.96. This required some cuts in expenditure and limited the ability to award further grants.

The RIT and CEPF worked very closely together through this sequence of events and all consultees I spoke to felt that this had been handled exceptionally well such that inevitable disruption to the overall investment program was minimized.

The RIT appears to have operated in a balanced way, seeking to apply the eligibility criteria and to secure a good balance of the Strategic Directions identified in the Ecosystem Profile. In practice given the early evolution of civil society in the hotspot there has been a preponderance of projects focusing on species conservation, and on KBA conservation. Almost all of the small grants awarded have been for these two strategic directions, with very small numbers and expenditures for SD3, SD4 and SD5. This was predictable as small CSOs will find tackling these more complex landscapes very difficult.

Each project in the MCA program contributes to the Portfolio indicators identified for the hotspot as a whole and to the Global indicators monitored and maintained by the CEPF Secretariat. The RIT is an important contributor to this process and has clearly invested time and effort into evaluating individual project outcomes and reports and feeding this into the global system. This was made more complex by the changes in Small Grants Coordinator, and the various renegotiations that were needed to project grant agreements. Perhaps in a future phase, a more comprehensive monitoring framework can be established at portfolio (RIT) and global (CEPF) levels, that is also better understood at the project level by individual grantees? Much experience will have been gained in this work during the first phase. There may be a need for some additional training for the RIT in this process, especially where there are staff changes, and this may be an area where additional resources should be identified.

#### 4.1.2 How has the RIT planned and allocated resources to address the Nine components of the Terms of Reference?

Brief comment is offered below in relation to each component of the agreed Terms of Reference between CEPF and the RIT. These ToR are outlined in full in Annex 1.

##### Component 1. Coordinate CEPF investment in the hotspot.

This component is undertaken jointly in collaboration with the CEPF Secretariat.

The RIT have established a strong presence at national level with Country Coordinators in each of the five principal countries, working alongside the core team in Almaty. The five coordinators are from quite diverse backgrounds - some from a senior government background, others younger with more civil society experience. They seemed well selected in dealing with the rather different situations they face. In Turkmenistan for example, the coordinator had well-established links with government, and could introduce grantees to relevant officials and help them through NGO registration processes, and this seems to be essential in delivering successful projects. All coordinators have a good knowledge and understanding of their areas of operations and good trust and working with the civil society there. The team has not had the

opportunity to meet physically very often due to the pandemic, budget limitations, and travel restrictions but have monthly remote meetings which enable them to share experiences.

The RIT has some collaboration with other donors, although donor networking seems not to be well developed in Central Asia, partly because there are actually rather few active donors investing in biodiversity conservation. The author is aware of only one existing and active donor liaison group that operates in Tajikistan. The RIT has attended this. There has also been collaboration here with GIZ on training programs. GEF Small Grants programs are extant or starting and Country Coordinators have been able to help introduce grantees to these additional opportunities, for example in Kyrgyzstan. Donor engagement has been an area which has been more difficult for the RIT. Nonetheless the RIT does have meetings with other donors, especially at Team Leader and Supervisor level, and visit their offices, particularly during visits by CEPF Secretariat staff.

Establishing and maintaining a good relationship with Government has been a very important part of the work of the RIT, and this has required particularly intensive working in this hotspot. The relationships between government and civil society are complex in Central Asia and vary across the five principal countries. While Kazakhstan has a longer history of civil society engagement, the sector is often still quite new. In much of the hotspot, it has been necessary for the Country Coordinators to personally introduce grantees to both central and local government officials prior to the commencement of work. In Tajikistan, endorsement is required by a central Committee for Environmental Protection, followed by reports to them every six months. It has certainly helped that the coordinators are in the main already known to and respected by government officials. Nonetheless this work is a rather hidden aspect of the RIT's work that involves a lot of time.

Establishing linkages with government in respect of their taking an active interest in project outcomes, impacts and lessons has been more challenging. This reflects the suspicion of civil society in some countries, but also the small number of officials with an overview on biodiversity conservation, and the often-rapid turnover of staff, especially at senior levels. Improving this is clearly a long-term objective, but in some cases, governments have clearly seen a value in receiving and contributing the outcomes of CEPF projects into NBSAPs and other environmental reporting. The relationship between the two is best developed in Kazakhstan but in Tajikistan the regular reporting to the Committee for Environment Protection does mean that they are well informed about CEPF projects. The grantee YGPE in Tajikistan is one of the few NGOs in Central Asia to be accredited by UNFCCC to attend meetings.

There are a number of examples where CEPF and/or the RIT have encouraged successful networking between grantees at both national and regional levels. The Biodiversity Conservation Fund of Kazakhstan received two continuation grants for their projects and brought other grantees in under the umbrella of the project, two of whom also received small grants. LEADER in Kyrgyzstan was introduced to NGOs with interests in micro reserves in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan and actively supported small CSOs in the project area, one of whom subsequently received a small grant. ACTED and FFI both ran projects which focused on capacity building of small CSOs who were not yet mature enough to seek their own CEPF grants. The networking meetings organized by Zoi Network as part of their large grant were well attended and reviewed.

There is scope for more grantee collaboration. Generally networking of NGOs in Central Asia is still limited though there are NGO or environmental networks of sorts in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. As everywhere the Coronavirus pandemic of 2020 and 2021 restricted the hosting of collaborative meetings and transboundary activities, which are also constrained by budgets. These remain important objectives which should be a part of planning for any future investment phase. There are a number of ways to encourage such collaboration through the use of clustered grants, the encouragement of joint grant implementation, and through contributions at meetings organized by other organizations.

Component 2. Support the mainstreaming of biodiversity into public policies and private sector business practices.

This was a challenging element of the RIT's work program for Central Asia.

The relationships between government and civil society are inevitably complex and vary hugely. Civil society has not had a long tradition in the region and the idea of it influencing public policy and practice is still emerging. Governments may be suspicious of NGO intentions and in some cases new legislation and practice is becoming more restrictive, for example new laws in Kyrgyzstan on organizations receiving foreign funding. This has not yet impacted the way that NGOs work but does emphasize the limits on any activity that could be deemed political. Most civil society grantees have taken an approach of positive engagement, seeking to influence Government policies by demonstrating the evidence, successes and lessons learned from their projects, and such contributions are usually viewed as helpful. However, in some cases there are major threats to biodiversity from new infrastructure or from land use practices and seeking to counter these is hard.

There have been some grants which have made progress in influencing policy and decision making, although it may take a longer time to fully achieve success. These include the insertion of site safeguard policies into energy, mining and forestry programs, the protection of migrating birds of prey and storks from collision with overhead wires, and the raising of public debate on development projects in order to influence the practice and content of environmental impact assessments. An excellent example from Kyrgyzstan was the presentation of a roadmap on implementing protected local areas which was made to all seven regional administrations in the country.

While the RIT does engage with government at various levels, many face-to-face meetings were impeded by the pandemic in 2020 and 2021 and resurrecting such activities and engaging government in field visits has been difficult, and not always felt likely to improve relations. It is important to note that establishing the program at all in some countries of the region and establishing a positive dialogue with government is a very significant achievement and sets the ground for future progress.

The ecosystem profile promoted greater involvement with the private sector as an effective tool for conservation in the Hotspot. This envisaged collaboration with land management sectors including forestry, tourism, mining, hunting and energy, as well as the potential for small local enterprise to help deliver more sustainable management of natural resources. This has been hard to deliver in production landscapes and there have been fewer grants in this category than originally planned, most of them large grants. An example is the grant to the Tabigat Republican Association of Hunting



Communities and Farms in Kazakhstan, which has been training community members to serve as horseback tourism guides in the open hunting areas between three state-managed protected areas in the Dzungaria region.

The influencing of government and engagement of the private sector remains an important objective in the hotspot, to improve and influence decision making, to demonstrate the positive impact of CEPF projects in contributing to NBSAPs, and to facilitate the understanding and appreciation of successful projects so that others can replicate and upscale them. This will require long-term investment to create the underlying enabling conditions for change. The long-term visioning exercise and the preparation for a second phase should consider what actions CEPF and the RIT can take to further progress this.

### Component 3. Communicate the CEPF investment throughout the hotspot.

There seems to have been good communication with potential grantees at the start of the project. It was planned to hold face-to-face introductory meetings in each country to explain the investment program to civil society and other stakeholders. However, this and other aspects of face-to-face communications were severely impacted by the pandemic, and this has led to a longer-term change in behaviors as remote systems have markedly improved and increased efforts are made to reduce the environmental impact of travel. However, those consulted felt that they had received good communication from the RIT and that ongoing dialogue as they prepared and delivered projects was helpful.

Grantees also appreciated the ability to circulate to potential grantees and other stakeholders the ecosystem profile and the visual summary of the profile that was produced prior to the start of the investment. Additional materials were made available to CEPF through two grants which focused on communication materials – one to the PF Union of Photojournalist's produced a selection of high-quality images which have been used in the RITs and CEPF's annual reports and some media releases. The Zoi Network has also produced a report of some of the most impactful projects from the investment, although this report has not yet been widely circulated.

The RIT has produced some social media releases and also maintained a website, although this has not been updated recently. There has also been active use of the local media - for example stories on micro reserves in the local press and on TV and radio. Some excellent images and stories have been used for the CEPF annual reports. Generally, there could have been more use of the very strong stories emerging from the program. This was not helped by the loss of media input from WWF-Russia, staff changes within CEPF itself, and the extra time and cost involved in translations. There is still time to make the best use of the stories that have been collected through web stories, webinars, or other media. Communications planning and any necessary training should be a stronger element of a future investment phase.

Several consultees felt that more needs to be done to ensure that government officials are aware of project successes and lessons learned, to facilitate their actions to reflect findings in policy and take measures to scale up and replicate examples of successful practice. This is primarily a role for grantees, but CEPF/RIT can encourage and facilitate the production of such materials as well as helping directly through engagement with government contacts including GEF focal points.

#### Component 4. Build the capacity of local civil society.

The RIT delivered this component effectively although there is huge scope to do more in a future phase.

The civil society sector is generally young and many organizations are small, and lack some elements of capacity both as individuals and in terms of CSO governance and operation. There are a few larger organizations especially in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan that have experience of international grants and operations. A wide range of organizations received grants from CEPF in this phase. Some clearly aspire to be large, effective and sustainable NGOs, while others are very local associations with very specific and limited objectives, for example ex-military, hunters or pasture managers.

The small grant application template included questions asking applicants to identify training needs for their own organization, and to identify how the project could assist on this topic. They also had the option to identify measures which will raise the capacity of the local community or other beneficiaries. This provided the opportunity for small organizations to gain significant experience and benefit from project implementation, as well as essential equipment. In practice the focus for most grantees was on aspects directly relevant to the project design and implementation. Firstly, many grantees stated that they got help from the RIT to understand and assemble the application, often via incremental drafting and feedback. They were also trained in project development, financial and grant management, and in reporting. This all was highly appreciated by those grantees who were consulted. Of course, the benefit was the greatest for those with least starting capacity, whereas more experienced NGOs often did not need this help.

Both the grantees and the affected local communities received a range of experience throughout project implementation. Depending on the nature of the project, beneficiaries were trained in practical aspects relating to the outcomes, for example on land management, monitoring, or tree planting. Some grantees also delivered training for communities on project development and reporting issues that they themselves had been trained on.

A good indicator of development was that several grantees (including three in Tajikistan) successfully implemented small grants and then went onto receive large grants. Several consultees remarked that many NGOs were now much clearer in the mission and had added confidence in their ability to operate and to approach other donors and decision makers.

All grantees are asked to complete the Civil Society Tracking Tool (CSTT) and the Gender Tracking Tool (GTT) as part of project monitoring. This was mostly completed satisfactorily although grantees needed quite a lot of help and the baseline scores particularly may not have been fully accurate. Full project cycle CSTT's were completed for 46 projects of which 31 reported an increased capacity during the project. The increases were real although quite modest reflecting perhaps the limited focus of most capacity building.

The promotion of gender equality is also an important element in the growth and maturity of civil society. It was recognized that countries within the hotspot are at different stages of progression towards greater gender equality. Grantees were also asked to complete the Gender Tracking Tool (GTT) and 47 achieved this, with 29 demonstrating an improved score across the project.

Despite this progress, much of the strengthening appears to relate to the CSOs ability to apply for and implement projects, rather than the wider governance and management of the organization. There is an opportunity to undertake more capacity building in future and CEPF will need to decide how much of a priority this is in the next phase. In some places, capacity remains low and so here this focus could be stronger, for example in Uzbekistan. Some face-to-face training was certainly delayed or cancelled as a result of the pandemic. A future phase should ensure that this is implemented early on, perhaps via the development of a comprehensive 'Masterclass' training event for new applicants and hands on assistance throughout the process. If budget allows, more face-to-face experience sharing and learning events with groups of grantees are also recommended.

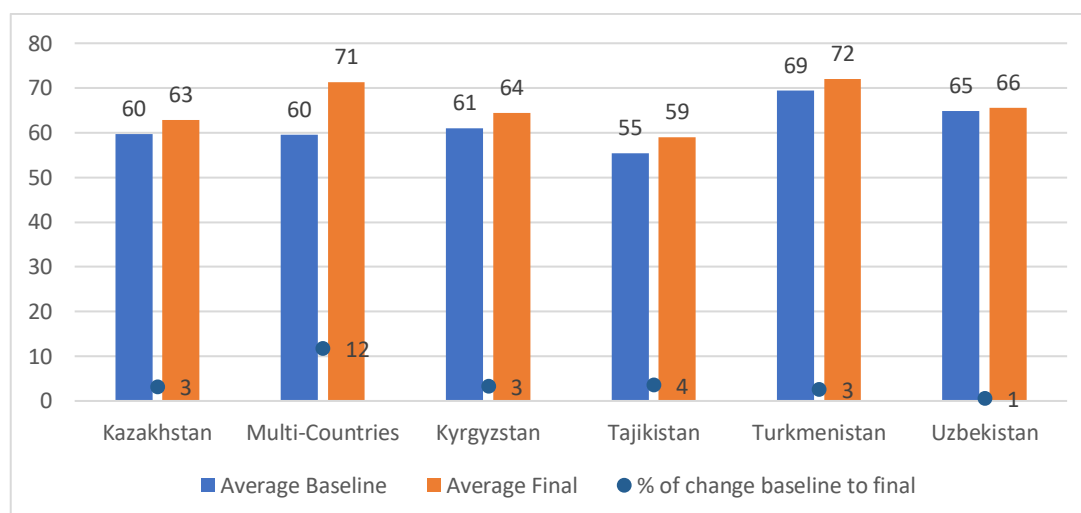


Figure 2: Average Change in Capacity of Civil Society Organizations in the Mountains of Central Asia Biodiversity Hotspot, 2019-2024

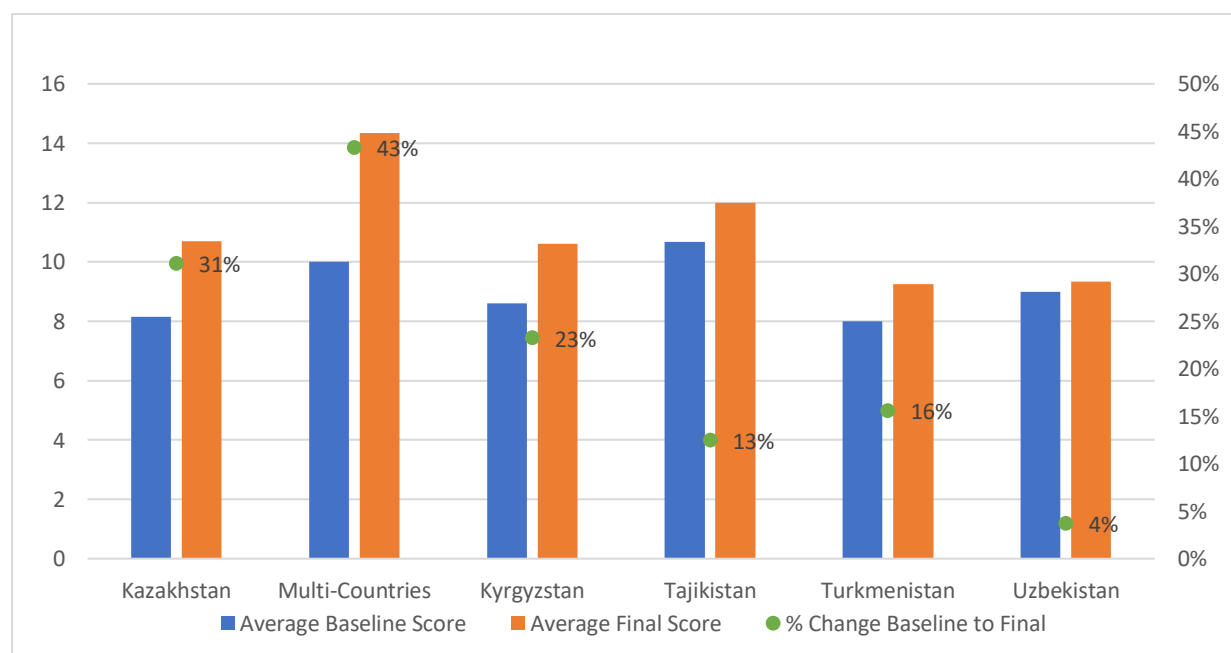


Figure 3. Average Change in Understanding of and Commitment to Gender Issues, by Country in the Mountains of Central Asia Biodiversity Hotspot, 2019-2024

Component 5. Establish and coordinate a process for large grant (>\$50,000\*) proposal solicitation and review (\* note that this threshold was increased from \$20,000 during implementation)

The RIT has played a constructive role in the development and operation of the Large Grant Program in the MCA hotspot. Between March 2020 and November 2022, CEPF launched 5 Calls for Proposals for large grants, for which 132 letters of inquiry (LoIs) were received. Thirty-seven (28%) of these were eventually successful.

Although the contracting and reporting of the large grants is undertaken by CEPF itself, there is still an important role for the members of the RIT. They are involved with CEPF in preparing and launching the calls for proposals, establishing an evaluation process and obtaining external expert reviews, making joint decisions on the applications, and in some cases communicating with applicants to ensure they understand the process and also the eventual outcome. Generally, the feedback to unsuccessful outcomes is from CEPF itself. A couple of grantees who also had rejections for large grants commented that the feedback could have been more comprehensive and helpful.

Component 6. Manage a program of small grants (≤\$50,000\*) (\* note that this threshold was increased from \$20,000 after the start of the program)

The RIT has delivered this component effectively, with a number of challenges faced.

This component is the core business of the RIT and has generally been delivered successfully. During the investment period, 12 Calls for Proposals were issued for small grants, resulting in 205 applications. Sixty-one grants were approved, a success rate of around 30%. These figures are provisional and do not include grants which were renegotiated due to banking changes and a couple which were cancelled before they started. For the Small Grant Program, the RIT was fully responsible for all aspects of the process, in collaboration with the CEPF Grant Director. This included identifying, preparing and launching the calls, convening experts to evaluate the proposals (apparently usually two per grant including the scientific adviser), managing the award, contracting, disbursement and grant compliance on these projects, including all aspects of reporting and financial management. This was led by the RIT Leader and Small Grants Coordinator, while the Country Coordinators handled most of the direct liaison with CSOs. The finance team was also involved in guiding grantees on how to compile the budget and have been most directly involved in the financial reporting and payments.

This has been particularly complex in this hotspot due to changes to banking arrangements and the need to tailor payments to national restrictions, sometimes involving multiple payments. This RIT often sent a larger proportion of the small grant funds upfront because of the difficulties encountered in financial transfers. This could have caused problems in disincentivizing later reporting, and it would normally be recommended to send only part of the grant initially. The RIT also submitted detailed semi-annual reports to the CEPF Secretariat and compiled information for the CEPF grants management database.

The majority of small grants have focused on strategic directions 1 and 2 focused on priority species and KBAs. This reflects the focus of many organizations at an early stage of their development, and the limits on achieving corridor or landscape impacts with a small grant. The RIT have achieved a reasonable spread of grants across the landscape with most awards in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, more than anticipated in Turkmenistan, but fewer than expected in Tajikistan and especially Uzbekistan. They

managed to attract a diverse range of groups for example including hunter's associations and pastoralist's groups.

The consultees engaged in this evaluation were all very appreciative of the support given by the RIT, especially the advice and training, and the problem-solving aspects, especially when finance and banking problems hit the program in 2022 and 2023.

A small number of grants awarded early on in the program were viewed with hindsight as not fitting well with the overall objectives of CEPF, and a couple were terminated. Despite the training given, there were a number of missing, delayed or poorly completed final reports which required a lot of chasing up by the RIT and by CEPF.

No.	Focus	Release Date	Due Date	LOIs Received	
				Large	Small
1	Kyrgyzstan	16 Mar 2020	20 Apr 2020	n/a	22
2	Kazakhstan	20 Apr 2020	20 May 2020	n/a	27
3	Uzbekistan	20 Apr 2020	20 May 2020	n/a	6
4	Turkmenistan	22 Apr 2020	22 May 2020	n/a	3
5	Tajikistan	24 Apr 2020	25 May 2020	n/a	21
6	Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan	6 May 2020	18 Jun 2020	47	n/a
7	Uzbekistan	5 Oct 2020	6 Nov 2020	n/a	5
8	Turkmenistan	15 Dec 2020	15 Jan 2021	n/a	4
9	Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan	15 Dec 2020	16 Jan 2021	23	n/a
10	Kazakhstan	1 May 2021	1 Jun 2021	n/a	10
11	Kyrgyzstan	1 May 2021	1 Jun 2021	n/a	16
12	Tajikistan	1 May 2021	1 Jun 2021	n/a	12
13	Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan	9 Jun 2021	1 Aug 2021	8	n/a
14	Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan	4 Oct 2021	21 Nov 2021	15	n/a
15	Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan	1 Dec 2021	15 Jan 2022	n/a	25
16	Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan	15 Nov 2022	10 Jan 2023	39	54
<b>Sub-totals</b>				<b>132</b>	<b>205</b>
<b>Total</b>				<b>337</b>	

Table 4. MCA Calls for Letters of Inquiry

#### Component 7. Monitor and evaluate the impact of CEPF's large and small grants

The RIT has been focused on ensuring good monitoring and validation of technical and financial reports. The RIT has performed strongly in the level of support given to small grantees during project preparation, during the period of contracting and development of baseline data and tracking tools, and during implementation. This is evidenced by the questionnaire responses and by the interviews with grantees. The decentralized structure of the RIT has enabled reasonable levels of field visits and on-site support, although hampered during the period of the pandemic. This is also rather variable across the hotspot as some country coordinators had many more projects to manage than others. The Turkmenistan coordinator for example seems to have visited the project sites very regularly, and there has also been good coverage in Kazakhstan as it's easier and cheaper for the Almaty-based team to visit these projects.

The monitoring of large grants is more variable, and the division of duties between the RIT and CEPF is a little less clear. In practice many of the international organizations implementing large grants have worked primarily with CEPF, and although country coordinators have visited the projects, it has perhaps been less clear what their role is or what added value they can give to large NGOs who have extensive experience in project delivery. There has been a more active monitoring presence by the RIT in large grants run by national NGOs who may already have a relationship with the RIT staff. The RIT should try to ensure that it engages with all large grants as their local input is valuable and because the larger projects can contribute to their own understanding and experience which they can in turn pass onto others.

Many small grantees noted that the support included additional training and capacity development, helping the grantees to network, and also helping to identify additional sources of financial and technical support.

The coordinators and wider RIT team also actively assisted with parallel actions to ensure and improve environmental and social safeguarding and gender empowerment. These are challenging work areas for small NGOs in Central Asia. Grantees appreciated the assistance given.

There was a view expressed that the two sets of grants – large and small – were not particularly integrated. While the two sets of grants are determined and managed separately, there is a lot of benefit in monitoring across the overall investment portfolio to seek complementarity between the two. This enables the grants to build upon the work of each other but also enables young and inexperienced small grant holders to learn from the more expansive work of larger NGOs.

The most challenging element of program monitoring goes beyond the assessment of project delivery and completion but focuses on the impact in contributing to CEPF's portfolio and global indicators. This has certainly been done jointly by the RIT and CEPF but more thought can be given to how to assess change, especially in meeting of the more intangible areas of the program.

The RIT worked with the CEPF Secretariat to conduct regular reviews and assessments of progress. The Mid-Term Assessment was conducted remotely and included practical guidance on how to improve monitoring and reporting and fill any gaps in delivery of investment priorities. Annual Performance Overviews are compiled by the Grant Director based on a range of information including reports submitted by the RIT. A Final Assessment will also be produced after a workshop in February 2025.

#### Component 8. Lead the process to develop, over a three-month period, a long-term strategic vision for CEPF investment

This Component has not yet been delivered. An outline has been discussed by the Grant Director and RIT Team Leader and modified based on progress and experience elsewhere. This needs to be completed as a draft and be available for discussion at the February 2025 Final Assessment meeting.

The development of a strategic vision for the whole hotspot seems to have been constrained by a number of factors including:

- The huge variation in civil society, with many CSOs as yet at an early stage of development, and political and socio-economic factors and complexities across the Hotspot, making a unified vision problematic;

- The relatively small number of donors supporting civil society to deliver biodiversity conservation in the region. This amplifies the importance of CEPF's role but makes defining its niche in the context of others more difficult;
- The difficulties of producing a practical and useful document given significant uncertainty over future trends and the role of civil society vis a vis government.

The RIT leader agreed that any strategy needs to be concise, understandable and practical. It should attempt to identify CEPF's niche but perhaps focus on how to resolve underlying barriers which restrain the ability of civil society to achieve meaningful impact. These again relate to its capacity but also to the space it is able to occupy in contributing to advancing biodiversity conservation and contributing to national and regional environmental targets.

### Component 9. Reporting

The RIT has delivered this component effectively.

There seems to have been adequate RIT communication with and reporting to CEPF throughout the project. CEPF Grants Managers reported delivery of financial and progress reports. These have on occasion been delayed as a knock-on result of delays in receiving adequate reports from the many grantees, as well as the many changes in grants caused by changes in RIT operation and banking arrangements. Technical reports have mostly been delivered on schedule. CEPF staff noted the much heavier load placed on the RIT Team Leader in reporting due to the fact that most of the team do not speak English and so there is a need for translation and taking on the bulk of the more strategic work. This could be mitigated in future by some additional training and use of language technology assistance that may enable more delegation.

It was obvious that the process of financial and technical reporting was challenging for many grantees, because of their inexperience in compiling such complex reports, as well as technical limitations and language issues. RIT staff obviously spent a lot of time helping grantees with technical details and approaches to reporting. This should have led to a significant increase in their knowledge and capacity, enabling them to consider seeking funds from other donors in the future.

Supervision missions and other hosted events and travel have of course been limited by the pandemic and the limitations in budget. However, country coordinators have been active throughout the investment phase. The RIT also appears to have given strong support and coordination to field visits by CEPF staff, since travel became possible again in 2022.

## 4.2 Efficiency

*How efficiently was the budget allocated to the RIT converted into results?*

CEPF has invested about USD\$7.45 million into the Mountains of Central Asia during this phase, a reduction from the original allocation of \$8 million due to donor shortfall. Most of this had been allocated by mid-2023.

The division of funds spent across each of the six strategic directions was as follows:

Strategic Direction	Allocation (original allocation in brackets)	Large Grants		Small Grants		Total		Balance
		No.	Amount	No.	Amount	No.	Amount	
1. Species	\$1,835,045 (\$1m)	8	\$1,251,527	24	\$583,518	32	\$1,835,045	\$0
2. KBAs	\$2,106,313 (\$2.3m)	11	\$1,456,166	28	\$623,712	39	\$2,07978	\$26,435
3. Corridors	\$600,000 (\$1.5m)	4	\$560,636	2	\$38,896	6	\$599,532	\$468
4. Production landscapes	\$640,000 (\$1m)	6	\$595,625	2	\$39,972	8	\$635,597	\$4,403
5. Capacity building	\$1,068,642 (\$1m)	7	\$1,011,015	3	\$57,627	10	\$1,068,642	\$0
6. RIT	\$1,200,000 (\$1.2m)	1	\$1,200,000	n/a	n/a	1	\$1,200,000	\$0
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$7,450,000 (\$8m)</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>\$6,074,970</b>	<b>59*</b>	<b>\$1,343,725</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>\$7,418,694</b>	<b>\$31,306</b>

Table 5. Investment across the six Strategic Directions in the MCA hotspot.

While the investment in Countries was as follows:

Country	Large Grants		Small Grants		Total	
	Count	Obligation	Count	Obligation	Count	Obligation
Afghanistan	1	\$2,276	0	\$0	1	\$2,276
China	0	\$0	0	\$0	0	\$0
Kazakhstan	5.5	\$873,670	18	\$448,217	23.5	\$1,321,887
Kyrgyz Republic	10	\$1,410,233	14	\$277,855	24	\$1,688,088
Tajikistan	10	\$1,203,573	11	\$217,519	21	\$1,421,093
Turkmenistan	1.5	\$224,066	10	\$224,756	11.5	\$448,822
Uzbekistan	3	\$398,625	6	\$175,378	9	\$574,002
Multi-country	5	\$762,526	0	\$0	5	\$762,526
RIT	1	\$1,200,000	0	\$0	1	\$1,200,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>\$6,074,970</b>	<b>59*</b>	<b>\$1,343,725</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>\$7,418,694</b>

Table 6. Investment across the different countries in the MCA hotspot.

\*Note figures compiled prior to all projects being awarded (eventual total 99).

Most of the objectives of expenditure were met, but the eventual allocations across strategic directions varied quite a lot from the initial proposal. As discussed above this entailed more spend on species work but less on others, especially the corridors and production landscapes. This is not seen as a negative, but reflective of the capacity and immediate priorities of many grantees.

The cost of the RIT (SD6) administration and management aims to be no more than 15% of the total budget, and this was the allocation made to the RIT at the start of the phase. By mid-2023 this had risen to 16% of the budget as a result of the cut in overall grant to the hotspot. This cut did not really reduce the RIT's workload as most calls for proposals and grants had already been issued. Indeed, the RIT were involved in a lot of unforeseen work as a result of their relocation and the need to re-contract many grants and amend financial mechanisms.



The number of countries in the hotspot has required considerable devolution of working to the country coordinators with some inevitable cost implications. Given this, the RIT seems to have operated quite efficiently. Their budget appears to have been quite constrained and limited the extent to which they can organize events and meetings, beyond those necessary for basic operation of the grant mechanisms.

## 4.3 Effectiveness

### 4.3.1 What were the strengths and weaknesses of the RIT structure and capacities with regard to effective delivery of results?

The decentralized structure of the RIT has greatly assisted the strong support to the project throughout the implementation period. Notable feedback from grantees has included:

- Effective publicity for new calls including (remote) launches;
- Consistent ongoing availability of RIT staff to assist with project scoping, with project development, contracting and explaining the need for and logistics of collecting baselines data and completing tracking tools;
- Assistance with introductions to national and local government stakeholders;
- Trouble shooting and problem-solving during project implementation including on financial management and banking issues due to the Russian embargos;
- Introductions to experts who can give technical advice, and to other organizations who can assist in follow on capacity building, or project follow up;
- Help with report writing.

The country coordinators operated quite autonomously from each other and although they were regularly together in meetings, had limited opportunities to meet in person, due first to the pandemic but more widely due in part to budget limitations. The coordinators came from quite different backgrounds and had different strengths and experiences, so they could have perhaps helped each other and shared their specific skills more widely across the region.

At the start of the project the RIT was associated with the wider WWF-Russia family and had access to quite a number of skills such as on communications and accounting, as well as a range of technical expertise. Some of this was lost in the transition away from Russia. This limited some communications work. Fortunately, the use of technical experts for grant assessment had been largely completed before these changes occurred.

### 4.3.2 What program impacts are attributable to approaches or actions undertaken by the RIT?

Separating the impact of the RIT from that of the CEPF Secretariat is difficult not least because their working relationship means that many activities have been seen as indivisible to grantees. Quite a large proportion of the expenditure in the program has been accorded to large grants, where people have often seen the CEPF team as their first contact point.

Equally it is difficult to fully separate broader non project benefits - such as capacity building facilitated by CEPF - from those of other donors working with the same organizations, sometimes in the same places. Evaluating short term impacts of many of the projects is problematic. Despite all these caveats, there are a number of activities and approaches raised by consultees which appear to have led to impacts strongly assisted by the RIT.

- Consultees noted that CEPF projects have often been one of the first projects of significant size that their organization has received and that CEPF has a key role in taking risks and giving trust at early stages of NGO development. This gives them experience of projects and assists with gaining further funding from donors in the future. The smaller grantees saw the support of the RIT as key in this, in that the training and mentoring received, and introductions to important stakeholders in government and donors, had been very significant to them;
- A number of consultees identified proactive interventions by the RIT which had had a positive impact on the quality of their project and its outcomes. This included the sourcing of technical advice from experts, direct assistance given by country coordinators or the Finance Officer, assistance with procurement, as well as support and feedback at all stages of project development and implementation;
- There were good examples of where grantees working in the same area had been introduced to each other and encouraged to cooperate. For example, some of the organizations working on micro reserves, and Public Association 'UGAM' and other small grantees in Kazakhstan working in the same KBAs.
- While most capacity building was directed towards project-related matters, there were some training opportunities on wider organizational development and specific issues, for example training on gender for NGOs in Tajikistan;
- It was suggested by a number of consultees and RIT staff that some of these successes in capacity building could be consolidated by a more organized and structured training program, so that the benefits so far given to individual or small groups of NGOs could be extended to a broader cadre of organizations.

## 4.4 Coverage

### 4.4.1 To what extent does the portfolio of grants awarded to date cover the strategic directions and investment priorities set out in the investment strategy for the hotspot?

As noted above, there was some disparity between original targets for the different strategic directions and those achieved. For small grants managed by the RIT, most were for SD1 on species and SD2 on KBAs, though some of these did consider wider issues around corridors and production landscapes. Despite clarifying of the types of projects that CEPF wished to fund, it will eventually fall to the RIT and CEPF to consider those projects that civil society chooses to develop. At this stage of their development, many national NGOs are more focused on projects relating to particular sites or species than those attempting more holistic work. The latter are in any case more suited to larger grants.

### 4.4.2 Observations on Strategic Directions

Strategic Direction 1 is designed to address threats to priority species, including through improved enforcement and incentives for nature users, improved regulation on hunting and collecting, support for species-specific reserves, reduction of poisoning and trapping, and maintenance of populations of priority species. This was a popular strategic direction with 32 grants awarded, 24 of them small grants. This reflects the relevance of the topic and how it resonates with organizations in the region. The majority of priority species did attract grants, and a few additional species, such as Great Bustard were added during the phase. A few plants did not receive any grant proposals, although there were a lot of applications for endemic apples, pears, and nuts (reflecting a national emphasis on

this) and, unsurprisingly, several grants focused on charismatic and wide-ranging megafauna: snow leopard and ungulates like Urial and Bukhara deer. Many of these projects lead to some tangible outcomes including better protection from hunting or collecting, creation of new habitats for species and greater knowledge of conservation needs.

Strategic Direction 2 is designed to improve the management of priority sites, including by facilitating collaboration between stakeholders, developing management plans for KBAs outside protected areas, and building capacity for management of KBAs. This strategic direction, as intended, received the highest number of awards, 28 of the 39 being small grants. Grants worked in every eligible priority KBA other than one in Tajikistan and three in Uzbekistan. Notables are Kazakhstan's Aksu-Zhabagly, Sary-Djaz in Kyrgyzstan, Baluvan in Tajikistan, and the Koytendag region of Turkmenistan, with each seeing several complementary grants. Some projects were quite large, for example that by the Kyrgyz Association of Forest and Land Users (KAFLU), which is working in the Isfayram-Shakhimardan region of the country. KAFLU has engaged the locally operating state forestry company to ensure better management of the 220,000-hectare KBA, focusing on Surmatash State Nature Reserve, and forestry practices that affect wild almond (*Amygdalus bucharica*) and wild apricot (*Armeniaca vulgaris*).

Strategic Direction 3 is designed to support improved management of corridors, including via protocols for connectivity of KBAs, improved development planning, and engagement of civil society in review of development plans. As noted above, the challenge with this strategic direction is that working at a corridor level is beyond the scope of many grantees. Nonetheless, there were six grants including two small grants. An illustrative corridor grant is the one to the Aga Khan Agency for Habitat in Tajikistan, which is looking at the ungulate migration routes between Tajik National Park and Zorkul Natural Reserve.

Strategic Direction 4 is designed to improve the management of production landscapes by working with the private sector on improved management, including hunting, tourism, mining, livestock, farms, and forestry operations. Eight grants have been awarded, two of them small grants. An example is the grant to Tabigat, working in Kazakhstan's Dzungaria region, which is working to convert hunters and poachers into tour guides. The goal is to enable these people to make a living off the unprotected land lying between Zhongar-Alatau National Park, Lepsinsky State Nature Reserve, and Tokta State Nature Reserve.

Strategic Direction 5 is designed to build the capacity of local civil society, enabling groups to better engage with each other, the private sector, and government, and enhancing their capacity to implement projects. Ten grants have been awarded under SD5 including three small grants, although it should be noted that all projects are asked to include capacity building elements. Highlights are two grants to ACTED, a French NGO, and Fauna & Flora, an international NGO, working in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, respectively. Each group is working with five local CSOs on fundamental issues of registration, operational and financial management, and government and community engagement, while also providing training to implement small-scale conservation projects.

#### 4.4.3 Observation on delivery in Countries

No work was possible in China for political reasons and the initial (large) grants to Afghanistan had to be cancelled. However there has been reasonable investment across

the whole of the remaining hotspot including in Turkmenistan, which was seen as challenging, although only a small part of the country lies within the hotspot, The majority of projects have been in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, while there were less projects than hoped in Uzbekistan. Awards have been made in 56 different KBAs. The roles of the RIT making small grants in Turkmenistan and of international organizations able to work with local sub-grantees in Uzbekistan have been crucial.

## 4.5 Impact

*To what extent have the targets set in the hotspot ecosystem profile for impacts on biodiversity conservation, human wellbeing, civil society capacity and enabling conditions been met?*

The efforts made by both CEPF, and the RIT have led to successful outcomes which have benefitted all four pillars of CEPF's work – Biodiversity Conservation, Strengthening Civil Society, Human Well-being and Enabling Conditions. This report is not intended to be a full assessment of project impact and most of this data has not yet been compiled. The last assessment available of progress towards project indicators is within the 2023 Annual Performance Overview. A Final Assessment report produced by CEPF at the end of the project and following the final evaluation workshop will assess this in full. Brief comment only on the work of the RIT to ensure these successful outcomes is given.

These outcomes are delivered by a combination of the large grants and small grants. While the RIT bears overall responsibility for the monitoring of progress towards achieving impacts on small grants, these duties are shared with the CEPF staff for large grants. The nature of small grants and the relatively early stage in the evolution of much of civil society in Central Asia means that most of the outputs from their achievement will relate to pillar 1 (biodiversity conservation) and pillar 2 (strengthening civil society). Projects that will improve human well-being and create enabling conditions are likely to be larger projects or follow up projects to initial interventions, although there are certainly elements of both of these within the small grants completed in this hotspot.

Thus, much of the effort expended on monitoring by the RIT was likely to focus on these first two pillars. When questioned on project outcomes the country coordinators and other RIT staff mostly indeed cited achievements on these. The team generally has very strong technical knowledge of biodiversity issues and appears to be well able to effectively monitor these impacts, although the complexities of truly assessing the long-term impact of short interventions is discussed elsewhere. Most of the team is also experienced in working with civil society although some may need additional support on this. Consultees were overwhelmingly positive about the input and support of RIT members on these matters.

Lessons learned for the future include the importance of setting clear achievable indicators which can be realistically both achieved and measured. Several consultees suggested the advantages of longer duration projects (ideally with but even without additional budget) and the importance of planning sustainability and follow up. The RIT has an important role to play in coaching grantees on these issues. As civil society in the region develops, there may be more emphasis on projects striving for greater outputs on human well-being and enabling conditions. The RIT may need additional capacity and skills to fully engage in support for such projects.

## 4.6 Accessibility

*Does the grant portfolio involve an appropriate balance of international and local grantees, taking into account the relative strengths of different organizations with regard to delivery of the investment strategy and considering the priority given by CEPF to building the capacity of local civil society?*

Not counting the RIT, 98 grants have been made to 69 unique organizations. Of these, only 13 are international and 56 are local organizations, while over half the available funds have gone to local groups, reflecting CEPF's goal of reaching and building local civil society.

Type	Large Grants		Small Grants		Total		Percent of Grant Funds	Unique Recipients
	No.	Amount	No.	Amount	No.	Amount		
International	19	\$2,557,831	1	\$18,757	20	\$2,576,588	41	13
Local	17	\$2,317,138	58	\$1,324,968	75	\$3,642,106	59	56
<b>Total</b>	<b>36*</b>	<b>\$4,874,969</b>	<b>59*</b>	<b>\$1,343,725</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>\$6,218,694</b>		<b>69</b>

Table 7. Large and Small Grants by International vs Local Recipient

\* Note figures compiled prior to all projects being awarded (eventual total 98).

This still represents quite a large proportion of the grant to international organizations. Experience from other hotspots suggests that this is quite normal in the first phase and would and should be expected to shift towards local organizations in a phase 2. Realistically a lot of major projects in the region have traditionally been managed by international organizations and they have had more capacity and found it easier to attract large grants. However, almost all small grants (except one) have been awarded to local and national organizations. Some projects later in the phase are illustrative of trends which should be encouraged in a future phase:

- National organizations successfully implementing a small grant and then moving onto be awarded a large grant, for example three grantees from Tajikistan - Youth Group on Protection of Environment, Youth Ecological Centre and Ganji Tabiat;
- International and national organizations collaborating together on the same project, or parallel projects e.g. Wildlife Conservation Society and Tajikistan Nature Foundation;
- International organizations managing large grants which are explicitly focused on building capacity of local NGOs so that they in future can manage their own projects, for example ACTED in Uzbekistan and FFI in Tajikistan.

The niche of CEPF in promoting smaller civil society organizations is a critical one and both national and international grantees seemed to understand this. Local grantees appreciated that CEPF support often took a risk in investing in them and built their capacity, confidence and credibility. They also felt that CEPF and the RIT on their behalf had been very good at promoting Calls for Proposals and acting in an open and encouraging way to help them through the application process.

## 4.7 Adaptive management

*In what ways has the development of the grant portfolio been constrained by risks (political/institutional/security/health) or taken advantage of unanticipated opportunities? How well was learning and adaptive management applied by the RIT?*

The program has been characterized by a high degree of adaptive management because of events in the external environment which have impacted on its operation. These are discussed elsewhere but briefly, COVID had major impacts right at the beginning of the investment, and required the RIT to reorganize its introductory meetings, calls for proposals and initial training. They did this very effectively although inevitably this will have affected the extent to which potential grantees were properly appreciative of all the nuances of eligibility and what projects were appropriate. While hard to evaluate these, overall, the program has been able to operate effectively, and of course more face-to-face working has been possible in the last three years.

Throughout 2022 and into 2023 and 2024, the advent of war in Ukraine and subsequent sanctioning of Russia and of Russian banks has had major impacts on the operation of the program. The restructuring of the RIT and the many individual changes needed to each grant, its financial and banking arrangements has been hugely time consuming. It is to the great credit of CEPF and the RIT that this has been achieved with very limited disruption to projects, and consultees were highly appreciative. Inevitably this will have drained energy and disrupted the RIT from undertaking other - potentially proactive - work but this was unfortunately unavoidable.

The program also exhibited a high degree of flexibility in assisting individual projects to complete their work successfully, including allowing alterations to budget and activities where clear justifications could be given, and allowing no cost extensions.

## 5 Lessons learned from the Implementation of Phase 1 of the Hotspot

The following section identifies some overall lessons from the many documents studied and conversations held during this evaluation. Many lessons are not new and will have appeared in other reports and been discussed by those engaged in the program since 2019. I have attempted to group them in a logical order but there are of course many overlaps. As per the remit of this evaluation, the lessons here focus on the management of the program but there would be much benefit in a wider exercise to review the technical lessons from the first phase of implementation including those relating to impacts and outcomes.

### General Observations

The first phase of the investment program in Central Asia has faced a fairly unique set of challenges which have tasked CEPF and the RIT to problem-solve. While the pandemic was a feature of all programs, the start of MCA investment in late 2019 did mean that a lot of face-to-face trainings and events were curtailed. While CEPF did visit Kazakhstan in late 2019 to meet with the RIT, follow up meetings and subsequent in-country meetings were cancelled. Despite this, remote working continued, and the RIT members appear to have a good understanding of the structure and process of the grant programs.

Secondly, the political turmoil in the region had very significant impacts. First the change of government in Afghanistan necessitated grants to be cancelled. Then the impacts of sanctions on Russia led to a chain of events including change of the RIT lead organization and the need to renew all existing small grants.

It is to the great credit of the RIT and CEPF that the problems stemming from this were assessed and largely solved, while enabling the program to continue with relatively little delay.

The RIT also succeeded in operating a grants program in some challenging environments. In particular the launch and operation of the grants in Turkmenistan seems to be the first such conservation grants initiative operating in the country. This has led to the delivery of some successful projects and the forging of better working relationships between NGOs and government ministries. Such progress owes much to the contacts, reputation and diligence of the RIT members.

This operating environment can require a greater increase in workload from RIT staff than may be immediately apparent. As well as their primary duties, country coordinators have spent a lot of time assisting grantees with introductions and orientation with central and local government agencies. In many cases this is required, for example in Tajikistan where it is mandatory to engage projects with local government and to secure an endorsement by the national Committee for Environmental Protection prior to commencement. In Turkmenistan the Coordinator has spent a lot of time assisting NGOs with their registration process which is a pre-requisite for a grant to be awarded. This process is inevitably time-consuming.

There are continuing political uncertainties around working in Central Asia. These are unlikely to prevent CEPF operating anywhere but will warrant careful understanding and monitoring. A new law came into effect in Kyrgyzstan in April 2024 imposing restrictions on NGOs securing foreign funding. This is intended to control political activity and should not impact upon CEPF grantees, but this will depend upon the degree and rigor of implementation. On the other hand, it is hoped that it may become easier for NGOs to operate in the future in Uzbekistan.

#### Overall structure and performance of the MCA program.

The RIT working with the CEPF staff has played a critical role in the delivery and success of the CEPF Program. Having a locally based team that understands the political, social and environmental context as well as local culture and language has been essential. The structure of the RIT with a core team and coordinators based in each of the five main countries has worked well. Each of the coordinators is a national of that country and their contacts, experience and existing reputation among grantees and government officials has been important, even more so in countries where civil society is not well established.

Beyond its existing functions, consultees identified a number of tasks where the RIT could be more active and play an even more valuable role in coordinating and encouraging conservation actions across the region – some of these are outlined below. However, additional events and meetings come at a cost, and seem not to have been achievable within existing budgets. The level of these costs then has to be acceptable to CEPF donors although hopefully all recognize that the scope of the work undertaken by the RIT goes well beyond what could be termed as 'administrative costs'. In the next phase it would be helpful to agree broadly what training and dissemination events are required and ensure a budget for them is allocated.

Given the wide physical separation of the RIT members, achieving good team cohesion is critical. The team has met regularly over zoom. The country coordinators in particular have diverse backgrounds and there may be scope for them to operate more as a team,

lending relevant skills to help each other. Occasional physical meetings (at least annual) would have been helpful although there are some constraints on travel, especially in and out of Turkmenistan.

#### Donor environment and coordination

CEPF has a clear niche in Central Asia as one of the few organizations focusing on biodiversity conservation and on channeling its support through civil society. Other donors such as the EU, AFD, GIZ and World Bank are present in the region but mainly channel support to government. They do support some biodiversity programs especially on snow leopards, but more on climate change, water management, pollution and land degradation. There are some other opportunities for civil society in the region to gain international support for their work, for example through the GEF Small Grants program which is increasing its investment in Central Asia. The UK Government Biodiversity Challenge Fund/Darwin Initiative is granted through global competition and a number of NGOs in Central Asia have benefited from it. The better-established NGOs often benefit also from working with international NGOs including BirdLife International, National Geographic or FFI, or from support by corporate sponsors.

However, CEPF remains quite unique and has represented the first opportunity for many CSOs to gain international support. Local RIT staff have an important role in seeking out opportunities for complementary or follow-up funding for grantees where it exists. Linking up NGOs to GEF grants or other funding is one of the most important forms of assistance they can offer. This has already happened quite effectively in Tajikistan. While this remains a challenge here, CEPF and the RIT should certainly engage with any donor coordination mechanisms at national or regional level, and act as ambassadors to encourage other relevant donors to increase their investment in biodiversity conservation.

#### Project management and Grant management

CEPF has funded a wide range of successful projects across five countries. Each of these projects will have offered lessons for the implementing organizations and they should be encouraged to apply these in planning their future work. There was no widespread feedback collected by CEPF or the RIT at the end of project implementation in this hotspot. It is recommended that grantees applying to a future investment phase should be asked how they have applied lessons learned from any previous grants.

One common piece of feedback was that grants were often too short. While small grants have limited budgets, it can still be quite hard for small organizations to complete work in a short period, especially where it involves working with communities or where delays are possible due to climate or another variances. It might be helpful to allow longer periods for completion of projects where appropriate. While it is tempting to try to support work in new areas, there is also good sense in following up successful projects with additional support to increase chances for the legacy and sustainability of achievements to be realized.

The RIT often tried to link up grantees who were working in the same KBAs or nearby locations. This should be encouraged as should projects where international and national/local NGOs propose collaboration. An attempt could be made to improve the complementarity between the large and small grant portfolios, so as to achieve a more effective and integrated program. This will be further facilitated if there is budget



available for more grantees to meet each other and share experiences, whether by visiting project sites or meeting in more central locations.

It was suggested to try to schedule all the Calls for Proposals at the start of the investment period so that grantees know what to expect and so that the RIT can phase its work better. A hands-on workshop to help NGOs develop large grant proposals was successful and attended by 23 people. It was felt that this was a good approach for both large and small grants.

While grant application forms should not be excessively long, some additional information can help to improve project design and increase prospects for successful completion. For example:

- the insertion of a section asking applicants to consider their capacity building needs and those of local communities and beneficiaries is important and should be continued. Elements of these activities should certainly be considered to be legitimate costs in project budgets.
- Asking applicants to research and consider the context of their application to encourage them to understand existing data and information, and any lessons learned from previous projects, so as to improve their proposal and avoid duplicating work.
- Climate change has multiple implications for the hotspot's biodiversity. Projects should continue to focus on biodiversity objectives but should be asked to consider the implications of climate change for meeting these objectives, and whether any modifications are needed to mitigate or adapt to them;
- Continuing use of external project reviews for appropriate projects in order to gain additional understanding of the context and quality of short-listed applications

Grantees appreciated all the support and guidance during the project preparation and contracting phases, and the practice of trying to get the grant installments paid quickly to avoid cash flow issues. It would be helpful to continue to make decisions on grants as quickly as possible, and to be flexible on budget where circumstances change, or where increasing costs require some budget adjustments. Grantees who have submitted serious proposals but ultimately not been funded should always be given constructive feedback. The RIT should continue to engage with them so that they have future opportunities to try.

### Capacity Building

Most grantees consulted felt that the projects supported by CEPF had made a significant contribution to the strengthening of their organizations. In some cases, this was due to the formal training or mentoring provided by RIT staff, but often it was the less tangible aspects of experience gained by implementation and by new contacts established or developed.

The CSTT has been a critical tool to measure this increase in capacity. At the same time, most consultees noted that it can tell only part of the story. It would be helpful to capture some of the less tangible benefits through other means, for example videos, storytelling or published case studies. Some of this was done through individual projects and the review of projects undertaken by Zoi Network as part of a large grant also contributed strongly.

A number of organizations have been assisted to form informal or formal networks of grantees at the local, national or sub-regional level. This has included links at the KBA or sub-regional level, national/international links and links created within capacity building projects, for example those Uzbek CSOs within the umbrella of a project managed by ACTED, or similarly in Tajikistan, under a FFI managed project. NGOs have a huge amount to gain from sharing experience and acting together to increase the environment for biodiversity conservation in their country. CEPF/RIT should consider helping with such networks in phase II, where there is a local demand for them.

It was felt by a number of consultees that some of the capacity building could be given in a more structured manner – for example a series of webinars on aspects of organizational development, or a 'masterclass' on project development. Training needs assessments should be encouraged at both the organizational and sectoral levels.

There is also a legitimate role for civil society to help train and upskill government officers, for example those working in protected areas. Both government and civil society also have many technical and scientific skills needs.

CEPF has played a strong role in promoting better equality of opportunity between women and men. Promoting conversations in training and project development workshops has been key to this, as is the comprehensive use of gender disaggregated data. This should continue to be a focus in phase II. Perhaps sharing experiences from areas where gender equality is more developed (e.g. in Kazakhstan and from other hotspots) would be one suitable way forward.

#### Sustainability and long-term self-sufficiency of grantees and projects

Biodiversity conservation is, obviously, a long-term objective. Civil society plays a critical role in successful conservation almost everywhere in the world. In Central Asia its role is still a relatively young one, and still very much in development. Most grantees supported by CEPF have a long-term ambition to grow and flourish although there are a few exceptions among small single-issue groups. Critical to achieving this will be successful building of the capacity of CSOs and their sector, and an increase in the opportunities to raise funds from donors or other sources.

Donor support is accepted not to be a very long-term solution to sustainable financing of civil society. However, it is almost certainly a critical step on the road to self-sufficiency and arguably more is still needed in central Asia as a whole. CEPF is not intended to be a donor in any single hotspot for the very long term, but its role is currently distinct and almost unique. A long-term vision for civil society in the hotspot will be prepared before the end of this phase, and analyzing how income into the region for biodiversity conservation can be increased will be a key element.

Few NGOs are genuinely self-sufficient, even the larger ones requiring external income for much of their work. Common features of successful NGOs are good governance, adequate capacity and diverse funding streams and reliance, such that they can survive the loss of any one income stream.

One of the most efficient approaches to conservation is to learn lessons and identify successes, so that successful approaches can be scaled up and replicated elsewhere within the country or neighboring counties. Ideally then, national policies would evolve

to make implementation of successful interventions easier and more effective. The Final Assessment of the MCA program should aim to identify some of these. Thought needs to be given to how to better promote outcomes to decision makers in government and other donors, to encourage appropriate policy support and larger scale funding support.

Much of the above also applies at the project level and to the communities implementing them alongside grantees. Building community resilience is essential – consultees mentioned the value of projects engaging at least two communities in a project, and then encouraging them to continue to collaborate and learn from each other after the project ends.

## 6 Main conclusions and recommendations

The MCA hotspot program will end the current phase in April 2025, after a six month no-cost extension period. A few projects are still operational, but most will have ended by February 2025. A Final Assessment report will be produced with input from a closing workshop in February 2025.

There is currently good confidence that funds will be available to launch a second phase of investment in the MCA. This will involve a revision of the Ecosystem Profile and review of the current strategic directions and associated priority KBAs and species, hopefully leading to the launch of a new program before the end of 2025. During this period CEPF will also need to decide which organization (or organizations) should manage the RIT during a next phase. The following recommendations are not made with any knowledge of or assumption on who this would be and are aimed at CEPF and at whichever organization is subsequently selected for this task.

Despite a number of major challenges, the program so far has been very successful. This reflects the strengths of the hotspot approach, the contribution of the RIT and the constructive working relationship between CEPF, the RIT and the many grantees supported. Notably consultees stressed:

- that CEPF is the only donor who develops an evidence base and has a clear focus on biodiversity. For a number of grantees, this was their first significant grant and first time to be supported by an international organization;
- that the structure and operation of the RIT has worked well, especially the availability of local country coordinators;
- grantees appreciated the information provided by CEPF, especially through the ecosystem profile. While some would have liked to be able to work in other locations, the focus on priority species and KBAs has in itself helped civil society to understand how to develop more effective conservation projects;
- RIT staff have a good knowledge of the region and particularly of civil society, and their good contacts and reputation have helped to build an understanding of CEPF objectives and the delivery of a successful program.

A number of recommendations are made for consideration by CEPF and a future RIT for the development of a second phase. There are complex, inter-weaving factors involved, and the managers of the program have far more knowledge of these issues than can be gained by a consultant in a short evaluation. Hence, they are intended also as provocations to encourage discussion and the formulation of appropriate actions.

### Grant impact

Several consultees expressed a feeling that while the program had had many beneficial impacts, it would be hard to assess them quantitatively. The midterm assessment reviewed progress according to the portfolio indicators in the log frame, and in many cases identified relatively few cases where the indicator had been reached, but many projects still in progress which may contribute by the end of the investment. Hence the situation should be much improved by the time of the final assessment workshop but there will likely still be many uncertainties. This relates to a number of factors:

- The short duration of projects and the lag time in securing some benefits, for example designation of new protected areas;
- The fact that many projects will only improve the prospects for part of a KBA, or one population of a threatened species, complicating overall impact assessment.
- The intangibility of some impacts, for example of the increased capability of civil society or raised awareness as a result of completing granted projects.

CEPF should consider how to better measure the impact and contribution of a program of investment of this type. This may necessitate more investment in monitoring and evaluation and some additional technical capacity in this area could be considered either as part of the RIT or through a specific grant.

Some more detailed assessments of the impact of some of the more significant projects may be helpful, particularly to assess cumulative impacts where several projects occurred in the same area, and temporal impacts to see whether impacts were sustained after project funding had ceased.

Different aspects of project impact should be celebrated. The investment does seem to have had some significant increase in the capacity of civil society in program countries, and perhaps the population as a whole and key decision makers are more aware of biodiversity conservation than they were five years ago. These are important for long term conservation sustainability. They could be made more prominent objectives for the future investment in some areas, for example increased civil society capacity may be the most important output at this stage in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

#### Donor environment and coordination

Greater collaboration between donors would be beneficial, especially with the growth of the GEF small grant program. Environmental donor networks could be considered where they don't already exist. While CEPF cannot directly influence other donors, they should emphasize the success of their work and the opportunities for replication or scaling up, whenever opportunities arise.

#### Grant and project management

Both the Large and Small Grant systems have worked very well. Some possible refinements to their operation might include:

- More complementary grants in the same areas so that organizations collaborate for more impact, including across large and small grant portfolios. These are felt by consultees to have demonstrated this greater impact where they have happened;
- Some more strategic grants, for example to undertake similar projects on the same species or related habitats (the example was given of fruit tree projects). These could be collaborative between several local NGOs or sourced to a larger organization to coordinate;

- Calls for proposals should as far as possible be planned ahead and at regular intervals. This would enable grantees to potentially be able to apply for follow up grants to consolidate their achievements. It would also assist phasing of processes and reporting to smooth out RIT workloads;
- Continue to make use of external reviews where it can add value and context and aid better decision making on short-listed grants. Some reviewers and some other willing external experts could be part of a register of people able to help advise grantees on technical or logistical problems that they encounter during project implementation.
- Project development and management training should continue with face-to-face meetings at the start of the new phase. Subsequently, many felt that there is still a need for training on grant management, narrative reporting and the measurement of and reporting on indicators.

There was limited feedback available from grantees at the start of this evaluation. There has been no local formal feedback at the end of grant periods, and only nine grantees (all large grantees) responded to the CEPF grantee perception survey that was administered at the end of their grants. It is recommended to solicit observations on what went well, challenges and lessons learned via a simple questionnaire perhaps during the final assessment workshop.

### Capacity Building

Capacity building should continue to be a high priority for CEPF investment and effort. Almost all consultees felt that capacity building of their staff and organizations was one of the major positive outcomes of their engagement with CEPF. Strategic Direction 5 should continue but could perhaps be given even more emphasis and support, particularly in countries such as Uzbekistan where the sector is at an early stage of development.

The hands-on training given to understand and develop large grant proposals is a good example of what could be a series of modules to equip civil society with a set of skills which will benefit the organizations beyond individual projects. Others include:

- Financial training. This is frequently noted as one of the most important aspects of capacity building since this is a weakness in so many of the grantees;
- Communications capacity building. This could be followed up by project outputs more focused towards decision makers and donors – for example by encouraging applicants to include high quality outputs such as brochures and videos within the project grant;
- Technical training, including scientific knowledge and the ability to proactively analyze issues and problems. This could be assisted through a register of experts who may be available to help grantees with inputs to projects or actions beyond the projects, and who may be volunteers or contractors. This could also be achieved by more linkage with scientific institutions, universities or botanical gardens.

Alongside this, consideration should be given to whether there are additional ways of measuring the impact of capacity building programs, even if these are more qualitative than quantitative. Meanwhile, it is important that the RIT works with grantees to ensure that they fully understand the civil society and gender tracking tools and can complete robust baseline and project end information.

### Networking and exchange of experience

Grantees generally were appreciative of opportunities to meet each other and discuss experiences and lessons learned. This happened more in some places than others. For example, three meetings were organized in Tajikistan to bring grantees together. While the level of collaboration appears to vary across the region, such meetings can also break down barriers where they exist.

It is suggested that (approximately) annual meetings should be scheduled at the national level to bring together grantees and other stakeholders – to review progress, celebrate success and build capacity for the future. Such meetings may work best where there is a clear theme and objective, and when government stakeholders can also be invited. Practical themes such as reviewing and protecting KBAs or enhancing the role of women in conservation have worked well elsewhere.

In addition, visits to other grantee project sites for experience sharing and learning are considered very valuable. These can be costly, so maybe small group visits are most effective. While some interviewees spoke of the benefits of international exchanges, costs mean these will be the exception. Visits to other projects within a country and transboundary visit between 2-3 Central Asian countries with similar issues would be the normal mode of operation. There may be other events organized outside of CEPF, but which are bringing grantees together and so provide opportunities to add value by adding activities on.

All the above will help to develop 'communities of practice' for NGOs working on similar projects across the hotspot. Ideally these could then lead to more formal collaborations on joint or related projects in the future, which could include transboundary projects.

Such meetings and visits can also engage government officials, and those working on NBSAP and CBD implementation and reporting. This provides an excellent way of increasing their awareness of the nature and impact of CEPF granted projects. It is essential that success stories and lessons are disseminated to relevant government stakeholders so that they can replicate and scale up work through their own programs and through those of donors. The scrutiny of NGOs in some hotspot countries does have the side effect that officials are quite aware of many projects, and certainly there is appreciation of the way the outcomes contribute towards planning for and reporting to CBD and other international conventions.

#### Communications and promotional work

There is scope for the RIT to be more proactive in soliciting good stories and news from grantee projects. This has been undertaken in some places and many grantees have been actively undertaking their own communications work, as well as providing information to the RIT. This was strengthened by two projects: one delivered by Zoi Network who produced a review of project experiences entitled '*Contributions of civil society organizations to nature conservation and sustainable development*', the other by the Union of Photojournalists who produced a dossier of excellent photographs of the region's KBAs.

The next phase could add to this by developing and implementing a communications plan and by setting out what communications materials and training should be provided at the beginning of each grant implementation period. This will include segregation by audience, for example it might include outputs primarily of interest to governments. There must be clear agreement on how to acknowledge the input and support of the RIT and its parent organization, alongside the funding and support of CEPF and its donors.

### Project and organizational Sustainability

CEPF and RIT resources could be targeted towards mechanisms to encourage and support the greater sustainability of completed projects and their implementing organizations. This could be through staff resources (for example a Capacity Building Officer) or by issuing grants to investigate approaches to and mechanisms for longer term sustainable financing.

A starting point for this is to ensure that all potential grantees understand the importance of project legacy and are encouraged to build this into their project design and implementation. This does not ensure success but is a crucial starting point. Small organizations, particularly, need to think about their future (and of any capacity built) beyond the grant and some advice could be produced on this.

This relates back to the issue of scaling up and replicating successful projects. CEPF/RIT should consider how to increase knowledge of the success of and lessons from projects in two key audiences 1) governments (national and local) who can support replication of success through policy mechanisms and budget support and 2) other donors who may have resources to fund similar programs elsewhere.

### Thematic and Geographical issues

Many consultees recommended that CEPF should look to increase the number of transboundary projects given the close ecological links between KBAs across borders and the close political working within parts of the region. These projects add complexity and will not always prove politically possible but do offer the opportunity to work at a larger scale, solve problems which can often occur across boundaries and also assist organizational collaboration and learning.

Several consultees supported the production of more information about KBAs and their conservation in Central Asia, including supplementary guidance on their value, approaches to working in them, and setting (and meeting) targets for their conservation.

Proposals for changes to the ecosystem profile and strategic directions are beyond the scope of this evaluation. All consultees broadly supported the existing strategic directions and, perhaps unsurprisingly, no one suggested halting any of them.

Climate change has many and varied implications for the Mountains of Central Asia hotspot. There is already more focus on climate change than biodiversity among donors and CEPF should not consider funding climate projects per se. However increasingly climate change will have implications for the type of biodiversity conservation projects that are necessary and for what approaches should be made to achieving success. It is suggested that the grant form might ask grantees to consider the implications of climate change for their biodiversity conservation projects and whether any additional are needed to help to mitigate or adapt to these effects.

Measures for ecosystem resilience and the development of nature-based solutions could be explored in different kinds of landscapes. Given the focus of many funds on climate change any contribution from CEPF needs to be clearly focused on biodiversity and on demonstrating nature-based solutions which could be adapted at a larger scale by other institutions and donors.

### Program management and effectiveness

The network of country coordinators has generally worked very well, and their work has been essential in enabling projects to take place in an effective way and be politically acceptable to host governments and communities. Those selected are from quite different backgrounds and this seems to have generally been appropriate to the country. Some were quite inexperienced at the start, but grantees noted that they had become more knowledgeable and effective as time went on.

Given the wide range of their duties it is inevitable that these coordinators are not expert or experienced in all fields. Some have strong political connections but are less experienced on dealing with NGOs. They do not have all the technical knowledge required to assist projects but have generally been effective in locating those skills from people who can help. Some training should be given to country coordinators where clear skills gaps are identified and can be filled.

The coordinators have monthly remote meetings with each other and central teams. It is important to maintain these. It would have been good for them to have had some face-to-face meetings as well to increase their appreciation of and collaboration with others work. It is recommended that Coordinators consider skill sharing where appropriate so that they can assist and learn from each other. However, this recommendation is made in the knowledge that they have many duties, and most are not full time working on CEPF.

Many ideas were offered on how the RIT could perform even more effectively than now. This could include additional activities such as more training or experience sharing meetings and events, or more skills available within the RIT, for example experts on capacity building or on communications. However, these will all require additional budget support so priorities will need to be carefully considered and evaluated. Given the extent of need, ideally the total financing available for a second phase would increase. This would allow both more important projects to be funded, and also a growth in the number of RIT staff and activities, enabling more specialized roles to be considered.



## Annexes

### Annex 1 Evaluation of Lessons Learned in Relation to the Regional Implementation Team for the Mountains of Central Asia Biodiversity Hotspot

#### **1) Background**

The Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF) is a joint initiative of l'Agence Française de Développement, Conservation International, the European Union, Fondation Hans Wilsdorf, the Global Environment Facility, the Government of Japan and the World Bank designed to help safeguard the world's biodiversity hotspots. As one of the founding partners, Conservation International administers the global program through the CEPF Secretariat.

In each of the biodiversity hotspots where it invests, CEPF selects a regional implementation team (RIT) to provide strategic leadership for the program. Each RIT consists of one or more civil society organizations active in conservation in the hotspot. The objective of the RIT is to convert the plans in the ecosystem profile into a cohesive portfolio of grants that contributes to CEPF's long-term goals for the hotspot.

In the Mountains of Central Asia Biodiversity Hotspot, the RIT, based in Almaty, Kazakhstan, was managed by WWF-Russia from 2019 to 2023. In 2023, the program was transitioned to temporary team. To date CEPF investment in this hotspot totals approximately US \$7,450,000 for work taking place from 2019 through 2024. The investment includes Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. (China and Afghanistan are also part of the hotspot. However, work was never approved for China, and while one grant was awarded in Afghanistan, it was almost immediately terminated due to the political transition that took place in 2021.)

To capture lessons learned in relation to the RIT for the hotspot, CEPF will commission an independent evaluation. This evaluation will consider the performance of the RIT in relation to the geography of the hotspot, the capacity of civil society there, the budget allocated to the RIT, and its achievement of individual deliverables as defined in its grant agreement with CEPF. It is entirely distinct and separate from the formal "final assessment" of the portfolio, which is undertaken at the end of an investment phase to evaluate the overall impacts of CEPF investment in a hotspot.

#### **2) Objective of the Evaluation**

The objective of the evaluation is to inform decisions around CEPF's future involvement in the Mountains of Central Asia Biodiversity Hotspot, in the event that future funding becomes available. This may include decisions by CEPF donors regarding selection of a RIT for a future phase of investment, and the optimum programmatic and management approaches for coordinating any future investment.

#### **3) Criteria for Evaluation**

The evaluation will look closely at the components and functions of the Mountains of Central Asia RIT, as set out in the terms of reference, and evaluate the performance of each member against the following criteria:

**i) Relevance**

Were the activities undertaken relevant to the ecosystem profile, RIT terms of reference, the geography of the hotspot, the capacity of civil society there, and the global monitoring framework of CEPF?

**ii) Efficiency**

How efficiently was the budget allocated to the RIT converted into results?

**iii) Effectiveness**

What were the strengths and weakness of the RIT structure and capacities with regard to effective delivery of results?

In addition to directly evaluating the performance of the RIT, lessons learned from the CEPF grants portfolio with regard to the RIT role will be compiled and reviewed in the context of against the following themes:

**iv) Coverage**

To what extent does the portfolio of grants awarded to date cover the strategic directions and investment priorities set out in the investment strategy for the hotspot?

**v) Impact**

To what extent have the targets set in the hotspot ecosystem profile for impacts on biodiversity conservation, human wellbeing, civil society capacity and enabling conditions been met?

**vi) Accessibility**

Does the grant portfolio involve an appropriate balance of international and local grantees, taking into account the relative strengths of different organizations with regard to delivery of the investment strategy and considering the priority given by CEPF to building the capacity of local civil society?

**vii) Adaptive management**

In what ways has the development of the grant portfolio been constrained by risks (political/institutional/security/health) or taken advantage of unanticipated opportunities?

**4) Formally Agreed Duties of the Regional Implementation Teams**

The terms of reference of the Mountains of Central Asia RIT consist of nine components, which are:

**Component 1.** Coordinate CEPF investment in the hotspot

**Functions**

1. Serve as the field-based technical representative for CEPF in relation to civil society groups, grantees, international donors, host country governments and agencies, and other potential partners within the hotspot.
2. Ensure coordination and collaboration with CEPF's donors, in coordination with the CEPF Secretariat and as appropriate in the hotspot.
3. Promote collaboration and coordination, and opportunities to leverage CEPF funds with local and international donors and governments investing in the region, via donor roundtables, experiential opportunities or other activities.
4. Engage conservation and development stakeholders to ensure collaboration and coordination.
5. Attend relevant conferences/events in the hotspot to promote synergy and coordination with other initiatives.
6. Build partnerships/networks among grantees in order to achieve the objectives of the ecosystem profile.

**Component 2.** Support the mainstreaming of biodiversity into public policies and private sector business practices

#### **Functions**

1. Support civil society to engage with government and the private sector and share their results, recommendations, and best practice models.
2. Engage directly with private sector partners and government officials and ensure their participation in implementation of key strategies.

**Component 3.** Communicate the CEPF investment throughout the hotspot

#### **Functions**

1. Communicate regularly with CEPF and partners about the portfolio through face-to-face meetings, phone calls, the internet (website and electronic newsletter) and reports to forums and structures.
2. Prepare a range of communications products to ensure that ecosystem profiles are accessible to grant applicants and other stakeholders.
3. Disseminate results via multiple and appropriate media.
4. Provide lessons learned and other information to the Secretariat to be communicated via the CEPF website.
5. Conduct exchange visits with other RITs to share lessons learnt and best practices.
6. In coordination with the CEPF Secretariat, ensure communication with local representatives of CEPF's donors.

**Component 4.** Build the capacity of local civil society

#### **Functions**

1. Undertake a capacity needs assessment for local civil society.
2. Support implementation of a long-term strategic vision for the hotspot geared toward enabling civil society to "graduate" from CEPF support.
3. Assist civil society groups in designing projects that contribute to the achievement of objectives specified in the ecosystem profile and a coherent portfolio of mutually supportive grants.
4. Build institutional capacity of grantees to ensure efficient and effective project implementation.
5. Build capacity of civil society to engage with and influence government agencies.
6. Build capacity of civil society to engage with and influence the private sector.

**Component 5.** Establish and coordinate a process for large grant (>\$20,000) proposal solicitation and review

**Functions**

1. Establish and coordinate a process for solicitation of applications.
2. Announce the availability of CEPF grants.
3. Publicize the contents of the ecosystem profile and information about the application process.
4. With the CEPF Secretariat, establish schedules for the consideration of proposals at pre-determined intervals, including decision dates.
5. Establish and coordinate a process for evaluation of applications.
6. Evaluate all Letters of Inquiry.
7. Facilitate technical review of applications (including, where appropriate, convening a panel of experts).
8. Obtain external reviews of all applications over \$250,000.
9. Decide jointly with the CEPF Secretariat on the award of all grant applications of more than \$20,000.
10. Communicate with applicants throughout the application process to ensure applicants are informed and fully understand the process.

**Component 6.** Manage a program of small grants (≤\$20,000)

**Functions**

1. Establish and coordinate a process for solicitation of small grant applications.
2. Announce the availability of CEPF small grants.
3. Conduct due diligence to ensure sub-grantee applicant eligibility and capacity to comply with CEPF funding terms.
4. Convene a panel of experts to evaluate proposals.
5. Decide on the award of all grant applications of \$20,000 or less.
6. Manage the contracting of these awards.
7. Manage disbursement of funds to grantees.
8. Ensure small grant compliance with CEPF funding terms.
9. Monitor, track, and document small grant technical and financial performance.
10. Assist the Secretariat in maintaining the accuracy of the CEPF grants management database.
11. Open a dedicated bank account in which the funding allocated by CEPF for small grants will be deposited, and report on the status of the account throughout the project.
12. Ensure that grantees complete regular (based on length of the project) technical and financial progress reports.
13. Prepare semi-annual summary report to the CEPF Secretariat with detailed information of the Small Grants Program, including names and contact information for all grantees, grant title or summary of grant, time period of grants, award amounts, disbursed amounts, and disbursement schedules.

**Component 7.** Monitor and evaluate the impact of CEPF's large and small grants

**Functions**

1. Collect and report on data for portfolio-level indicators (from large and small grantees) annually as these relate to the logical framework in the ecosystem profile.
2. Collect and report on relevant data in relation to CEPF graduation criteria for the hotspot.
3. Collect and report on relevant data for CEPF's global monitoring indicators.
4. Ensure quality of performance data submitted by large and small grantees.

5. Verify completion of products, deliverables, and short-term impacts by grantees, as described in their proposals.
6. Support grantees to comply with requirements for completion of tracking tools, including the Management Effectiveness Tracking Tool.
7. In coordination with CEPF Secretariat, conduct a mid-term assessment and a final assessment of portfolio progress (covering large and small grants).
8. Conduct regular site visits to large and small grantees to monitor their progress and ensure outreach, verify compliance and support capacity building.
9. Provide guidance to grantees for the effective design and implementation of safeguard policies to ensure that these activities comply with the guidelines detailed in the CEPF Operations Manual and with the World Bank's environmental and social safeguard policies. Provide additional support and guidance during the implementation and evaluation cycles at regular field visits to projects.
10. In coordination with CEPF Secretariat, conduct a final assessment of portfolio progress and assist with preparation of report documentation.

**Component 8.** Lead the process to develop, over a three-month period, a long-term strategic vision for CEPF investment

#### **Functions**

1. Mobilize expertise and establish an advisory group to ensure that the long-term vision engages with appropriate stakeholders.
2. Undertake a review of relevant literature to ensure alignment of the long-term vision with other initiatives and avoid duplication of effort.
3. Consult with key stakeholders to solicit their input into the development of the long-term vision.
4. Synthesize the results of the literature review and stakeholder consultations into a long-term strategic vision document.
5. Present the draft long-term vision to key stakeholders and revise the document according to their comments.
6. Prepare a progress report for presentation to the CEPF donors' Working Group.

**Component 9.** Reporting

#### **Functions**

1. Participate in initial week of RIT training.
2. Participate in two "supervision missions" per year; each to include at least two days in the office and a visit to grantees in the field (approximately two weeks).
3. Prepare quarterly financial reports and six-monthly technical reports.
4. Respond to CEPF Secretariat requests for information, travel, hosting of donors and attendance at a range of events to promote CEPF.

## **5) Duties**

A consultancy firm (hereafter "the consultant") is required to undertake an evaluation of lessons learned to inform reinvestment in the Mountains of Central Asia Biodiversity Hotspot, in the context of the abovementioned objective (Section 2). The consultant is required to field a team with experience of evaluating biodiversity conservation programs, and with adequate knowledge of the countries covered by the RIT.

The evaluation will consider the performance of the RIT in relation to the geography of the hotspot, the capacity of civil society there, the budget allocated, and their achievement of deliverables as defined in their individual grant agreement with CEPF. It

will also consider the impacts of the investment to date (in terms of biodiversity, human wellbeing, civil society capacity and enabling conditions for conservation), based on the findings of the mid-term assessment for the hotspot and annual portfolio overviews.

Finally, the consultant will review the institutional landscape in the Mountains of Central Asia Biodiversity Hotspot and identify candidate organizations that could potentially perform the RIT role (either alone or as part of a consortium). The consultant will prepare a list of potential candidate organizations with information to include a brief description of the organization, their grant-making experience, their experience managing a project similar to that of the RIT and the pros and cons associated with their assuming the role of RIT as lead or consortium member.

The evaluation will begin with a desk review based on the following documentation:

- The ecosystem profile for the hotspot.
- The final proposal for the RIT grant.
- The RIT grant agreement plus any amendments.
- Semi-annual performance reports prepared by the RIT.
- Supervision and monitoring reports prepared by the CEPF Secretariat.
- Summary data on the grant portfolio in the hotspot, exported from CEPF's grant management system.

The desk review will be complemented by interviews with relevant CEPF Secretariat staff, relevant RIT staff, staff of the host organization, a selection of CEPF grantees and applicants, and other relevant stakeholders (e.g., representatives of other donors, government agencies, etc.). The consultancy may be conducted virtually, and may also include in-person interactions, if deemed necessary. The consultant will be expected to organize all necessary meetings with stakeholders.

## **6) Deliverables**

There will be three deliverables from the consultancy. The consultant will be responsible for preparing a report on lessons learned regarding the RIT role, suitable for inclusion in a future ecosystem profile. The consultant will also be responsible for preparing a confidential report, on the programmatic and financial performance of the RIT, and the identification of potential candidate organizations. The chapters in this confidential report will not be included in a future ecosystem profile. These two documents will inform investment decisions by CEPF and its donors, should there be a future phase of investment in the Mountains of Central Asia Biodiversity Hotspot. Both documents must be in English. The third deliverable is a (virtual) briefing for the CEPF Secretariat on the findings of the consultancy, to include a presentation of results and discussion.

## **7) Timeframe**

The evaluation will be conducted between 1 November 2024, and 15 March 2025. Draft

deliverables will be prepared no later than 31 January 2025 and submitted to the CEPF Secretariat for review. Final deliverables, incorporating comments from the CEPF Secretariat, will be completed by 28 February 2025. The tentative date for a virtual presentation to CEPF is 5 March 2025.

The consultant shall also provide the CEPF Secretariat with periodic verbal briefings and meet with Secretariat staff, as requested.

The total amount of time for the assignment is 20 days and should include: allocations for literature review and interviews with CEPF Secretariat staff, RIT staff and grantees; preparation of the draft deliverables; a briefing for the CEPF Secretariat on the findings; and finalization of deliverables following incorporation of Secretariat comments.

## **8) Reporting**

The consultant will work under the close supervision and direction of the senior director for monitoring, evaluation and outreach, or any other individual that the CEPF Secretariat may designate.

## Annex 2 Documents consulted during this evaluation

1. CEPF (2019) Ecosystem Profile Mountains of Central Asia Biodiversity Hotspot.  
<https://www.cepf.net/sites/default/files/mountains-central-asia-ecosystem-profile-english.pdf>

Associated with the ecosystem profile are the following documents:

Profile Summary: <https://www.cepf.net/sites/default/files/mountains-central-asia-ecosystem-profile-summary-english.pdf>

Visual Summary: <https://www.cepf.net/resources/documents/mountains-central-asia-ecosystem-profile-visual-summary-2017>

Cartoon summary: <https://www.cepf.net/resources/documents/mountains-central-asia-cartoon-summary-2017-0>

MCA Factsheet: <https://www.cepf.net/resources/other/mountains-central-asia-fact-sheet-2016-0>

Map: Conservation Outcomes: <https://www.cepf.net/resources/maps/map-mountains-central-asia-conservation-outcomes>

2. CEPF (2022) Midterm Assessment: Mountains of Central Asia Biodiversity Hotspot
3. CEPF Mountains of Central Asia Annual Portfolio Overviews – available for 2020, 2021, 2023
4. Contract between CEPF and WWF Russia for the operation of the MCA hotspot RIT
5. Biannual Operational Reports from RIT to CEPF
6. Supervision mission reports - 6 between 2022 and 2024 issued by CEPF and the RIT.
7. Other technical and financial reports from the RIT to CEPF
8. CI/GEF: Gender mainstreaming in a multi-tiered fund: An example from the CI-GEF's Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund

Small Grant and Large Grant LoI templates

Post-project grantee Questionnaire responses where available

Some of the above documents will be confidential and not freely available. Many are available on [Mountains of Central Asia | CEPF](#). Contact CEPF if access to other documents is required.



### Annex 3 Consultations undertaken during this evaluation

These are the people spoken to directly in meetings seeking their ideas and recommendations for the Mediterranean RIT. Note that some additional stakeholders were contacted but it was not possible to speak to them during the period of the Evaluation.

Name	Position	Date spoken to:
<b>Staff of CEPF</b>		
Nina Marshall	Senior Director, Monitoring, Evaluation and Outreach	Several times Nov to Dec 2024
Daniel Rothberg	Grant Director	Several times Nov to Dec 2024 11/20/2024
Oliver Langrand	Executive Director	
Jack Tordoff	Managing Director	
Caroline Borek and Antonia Cermak-Terzian	CEPF Grant Manager for Central Asia, Director, Grants Management	11/20/2024 11/15/2024
<b>Staff of the RIT</b>		
Lizza Protas	RIT Manager	Several times Nov to Dec 2024
Grigory Mazmanians	Independent expert	11/13/2024
Anastasia Mazneva	Small Grants Coordinator	11/27/2024
Dilnara Jalilova	Finance Officer	12/18/2024
Lina Valdshmit	Country Coordinator, Kazakhstan	11/28/2024
Mihail Yakovlev	Country Coordinator, Kyrgyzstan	11/21/2024
Khirsav Shermatov	Country Coordinator, Tajikistan	11/26/2024
Begench Atamuradov	Country Coordinator, Turkmenistan	11/22/2024
Aleksandr Grigoryants	Country Coordinator, Uzbekistan	12/09/2024
Jamila Asanova Kaisha Atakhanova	Staff of ARGO (formerly part of RIT)	11/28/2024
<b>CEPF Grantees</b>		
(Small Grantee unless noted LG)		
<u>Kazakhstan</u> Vera Voronova	Association for the Conservation of Biodiversity of Kazakhstan (LG, SG)	11/26/2024
Nurlan Ongarbayev	Biodiversity research and conservation center community trust (BRCC) (SG)	11/18/2024
<u>Kyrgyzstan</u> Banur Abdieva Takhmina Zakirova		11/20/2024

Azat Alamanov Farida Balbakova <u>Tajikistan</u>	Public Association Center for Civic Initiatives "Leader" (LG, SG)  Global and Local Information Partnership (GLIP) (LG, SG)	11/21/2024
Jovidon Boboev Manizha Boboeva	Public Organization "Ganji Tabiat" (LG, SG)	12/05/2024
Ikrom Mamadov Khurshed Alimov  Mirzo Mirzoev	Youth Group on Protection of Environment (LG, SG)	11/27/2024
<u>International Organisations</u>	Tajikistan Nature Foundation (LG)	11/21/2024
Viktor Novikov Firuza Ilarionova	Zoi Network (LG)	11/18/2024
Stephane Ostrowski	Wildlife Conservation Society (LG)	11/12/2024
Ajay Barai	Regional Director, World Wide Fund for Nature International (RIT)	11/25/2024
Dilfusa Zakirova	ACTED (LG)	12/12/2024
David Gill, Michaela Butrova-McGurk	FFI (LG)	12/10/2024
Maksim Kulikov	University of Central Asia (LG)	12/13/2024

The following organizations also submitted written responses to a questionnaire:

Kazakhstan: Association of Environmental Organizations, BRCC, Kagaranda Ecocentre, Jabagly Manas, Kolsay, Shk Khantagy, Ugam.

Kyrgyzstan: Friends of Nature, Green energy.

Tajikistan: Ganji Tabaat, LeaderOlima.

Turkemenistan: Agzybir Hereket, Nature Preserving Society, Tebigy Kuwwat, Ynanch Vepa.

## Annex 4 Interview Questionnaires for Consultees and Outline evaluation framework

<p><b>CEPF Mountains of Central Asia Hotspot Evaluation Questionnaire</b></p> <p><b>Questionnaire focused on CEPF and other Advisers.</b></p> <p>(Note that each interview was refined somewhat to be relevant, appropriate and focus in on the issues most likely to be of interest and relevance to the evaluation).</p>
<p><u>Introduction and Background</u></p> <p>1. Please briefly describe your engagement with the CEPF Central Asia program, and which members of the team you have mainly worked with. Which grantees/sub-regions were involved</p>
<p><u>RIT Operation and Effectiveness</u></p> <p>2. In your opinion, what have been the major strengths of the RIT throughout the investment period and what challenges have been encountered throughout implementation?</p> <p>3. Were others donors and institutes involved – how do you see CEPF and the RIT compared with them?</p> <p>4. Are there any issues which you think are specific to elements of the CEPF delivery. Have some grant types or ecosystem priorities worked better than others? What were the factors responsible for meeting or exceeding targets?</p> <p>5. How effective was the RIT in building the capacity of local CSOs operating in the region. Were any measures particularly successful or less successful?</p>
<p><u>Impact</u></p> <p>6. In your opinion, which activities have had the highest impact? Why?</p> <p>7. Also, which activities do you think have had the lowest impact? Why? How can the potential impact of these activities be enhanced?</p>
<p><u>Sustainability and risks</u></p> <p>8. To what extent has the project been successful in making progress towards civil society playing a larger long-term role in conservation in the region? Are there groups now working more closely together as a result of the investment?</p> <p>9. What are the actual or potential threats to the sustainability of the implemented activities in terms of financial, political socio-economic, and environmental factors?</p>

10. What measures have been taken to ensure inclusion/mainstreaming of women's concerns or other disadvantaged groups throughout implementation of the programme?

Lessons learned and recommendations.

11. If you were starting the new programme soon, what changes would you make to the RIT?

12. Based on your experience, what are the major lessons learned in terms of: a. Design; b. Execution and implementation; c. Monitoring and evaluation; d. Adaptive management; e. Sustainability; and f. Impact

13. What are your overall recommendations for the improvement operation of any future RIT in this hotspot?

**CEPF Mountains of Central Asia Hotspot Evaluation Questionnaire**

**Questionnaire focused on current and former members of the RIT**

(Note that each interview was refined somewhat to be relevant, appropriate and focus in on the issues most likely to be of interest and relevance to the evaluation).

Introduction and Background

1. Please briefly describe your role on the CEPF MCA programme, and anything about how your role has evolved since you started/over the period of the project.

#### RIT operation and management

2. How do you engage with other members of the team and with CEPF. How do you work with and communicate with your line manager/line reports. How has the CEPF Secretariat supported your work with the RIT throughout the implementation?

3. How did you organise your workload and decide priorities within the different RIT components eg grant management, capacity building, communications, monitoring and reporting?

4. How do you manage your contact with potential and actual grantees? What have been the main challenges in working with your stakeholders – capacity, communications, delivery. How have you (attempted to) overcome these challenges

5. What methods of dissemination has the RIT used to share information with various stakeholders, e.g. participating communities, researchers, training institutions, policy institutions etc

#### Effectiveness

6. Are there any issues which you think are specific to your element of the CEPF delivery, or more general. Have some grant types or ecosystem priorities worked better than others? What were the factors responsible for meeting or exceeding targets?

7. Were there particular delays or challenges with the grant process at different stages? Eg: issuing calls for proposals, undertaking review of proposals, contracting to grantees, etc.

8. How have you coordinated with other institutions, CSOs, donors etc to ensure that any gaps or overlaps are minimised

9. In what ways has the development of the grant portfolio been constrained by risks (political/institutional/security/health) or taken advantage of unanticipated opportunities?

10. How effective was the RIT in building the capacity of local CSOs operating in the region. Were any measures particularly successful or less successful?

#### Monitoring and Evaluation

11. What was your role in monitoring and evaluation of grants contracted by the CEPF? Were there any particular challenges or delays in this process?

12. Have any challenges been encountered with regards to financing? E.g. Late disbursement of funds or grants, or problems of transfer?

Impact

13. In your opinion, which activities have had the highest impact? Why?

14. Also, which activities do you think have had the lowest impact? Why? How can the potential impact of these activities be enhanced?

Sustainability and risks

15. To what extent has the project been successful in making progress towards civil society playing a larger long-term role in conservation in the region? Are there groups now working more closely together as a result of your work?

16. What are the actual or potential threats to the sustainability of the implemented activities in terms of financial, political socio-economic, and environmental factors?

17. What measures have been taken to ensure inclusion/mainstreaming of women's concerns or other disadvantaged groups throughout implementation of the programme?

Lessons learned and recommendations.

18. In your opinion, what have been the major strengths of the RIT throughout the investment period and what challenges have been encountered throughout implementation?

19. If you were starting the new programme soon, what changes would you make to the RIT?

20. Based on your experience, what are the major lessons learned in terms of: a. Design; b. Execution and implementation; c. Monitoring and evaluation; d. Adaptive management; e. Sustainability; and f. Impact

21. What are your overall recommendations for the improvement operation of any future RIT in this hotspot?

## **CEPF Mountains of Central Asia Hotspot Evaluation Questionnaire**

### **Questionnaire focused on Grantees.**

(Note that each interview was refined somewhat to be relevant, appropriate and focus in on the issues most likely to be of interest and relevance to the Grantee).

#### Introduction and Background

1. Please provide an overview of your organization. What sector(s) is your organization involved in; and what activities is it engaged in, and where the CEPF grant (s) fitted into this
2. What are the challenges faced by local CSOs in the context of the areas where you operate and how did your grant address these challenges and constraints?

#### Engagement Process

3. How did you find out about the grant opportunity from the RIT?
4. To what extent are you satisfied with the level of communication and support received from the RIT? How can this be improved in the future?
5. In the future, how can the RIT improve the level of communication and support it provides to applicants?
6. Compared to other donors, how would you consider the support and level of communication that the RIT provides to grant applicants?

#### Project Implementation and Management

7. What are the major management challenges faced by your organization in delivering its responsibilities? E.g. stakeholder capacity, internal capacity, post-COVID-19 global financial conditions, etc. How were/can some of these challenges mitigated? Please provide details.
8. To what extent has support from the CEPF and/or the RIT helped to mitigate the challenges you faced in implementing your project?

#### Capacity Building

9. What support have you received from the RIT in building your organization's management, technical and financial capacities?

10. To what extent has this support been effective in improving your organization's technical, management, and financial capacities?

11. What challenges, if any, did your organization face in terms of the a) disbursements of grant funding and b) technical assistance from the CEPF/RIT to your organization? What impacts, if any, did these challenges have on the overall progress of your project?

#### Stakeholder Engagement

12. What are the different ways in which various stakeholder types, including other grantees, local communities, public, and private sector, etc., have been engaged in your project activities?

13. What measures are taken to ensure that women and indigenous communities are actively involved in your project's activities?

14. What have been major challenges faced by the project when collaborating with each type of partners and stakeholders? E.g., extensive variety of partners, limited capacity, etc.

15. What support has the RIT provided, if any, in facilitating greater stakeholder engagement over the course of your project's implementation?

#### Sustainability

16. What support, if any, was your organization provided to improve the effectiveness of your organization's implementation and long-term sustainability?

#### Lessons learned and recommendations.

17. Based on your experience, what are the major lessons learned from implementing the project in terms of overall management arrangements, effectiveness and progress towards results, and long-term impact and sustainability of project activities?

18. What type of support would you like to see future RITs provide to local civil society organizations similar to your size and capacity?

19. What recommendations would you make to RIT/CEPF to enable them to improve the operation of any future investment in Central Asia?



**Short Questionnaire circulated in Russian to small grantees only**

Organizations providing answers will not be identified individually but answers will be used to gather overall conclusions

Name of person, their organization and contact e mail

Can we acknowledge your help in this survey? Yes/No

Engagement from the RIT throughout the grant process (grant application, grant management)

1. To what extent are you satisfied with the level of communication and support received from the RIT?
2. How can this be improved in the future?

Project Implementation and Management

3. What were the major technical and financial challenges faced by your organization in delivering your project?
4. To what extent has support from the CEPF and/or the RIT helped to mitigate the challenges you faced in implementing your project?

Capacity Building

5. What support have you received from the RIT in building your organization's management, technical and financial capacities? What else could be done in the future?

Stakeholder Engagement

6. What are the different ways in which stakeholders, including other grantees, local communities, public, and private sector, etc., have been engaged in your project activities?
7. What support has the RIT provided, if any, in facilitating greater stakeholder engagement over the course of your project's implementation?

Lessons learned and recommendations.

8. Based on your experience, what are the major lessons learned from implementing the project in terms of project management, effectiveness and impact of results, and long-term impact and sustainability of project activities?
9. What type of support would you like to see the RIT provide in future to local civil society organizations similar to your size and capacity?
10. What recommendations would you make to the RIT and CEPF to enable them to improve the operation of any future investment in Central Asia?

## Draft Evaluation Framework

These questions will form the basis of preparation for interviews. Not all questions will be relevant for all interviewees. These questions will not normally be asked verbatim but will be the questions I seek to answer through reviewing documents and through conducting the interviews, and to report back in the subsequent reports. Once I have started to read documents and formed a clearer idea of some of the issues, I will use this framework to develop a set of questions tailored to each interviewee type.

1. Evaluation of <u>Relevance</u> (these questions also address lessons learned on <u>Coverage</u> )	Inputs and sources
<p><i>Relevance- Were the activities undertaken relevant to the ecosystem profile, RIT terms of reference, the geography of the hotspot, the capacity of civil society there, and the global monitoring framework of CEPF?</i></p> <p><i>Coverage - To what extent does the portfolio of grants awarded to date cover the strategic directions and investment priorities set out in the investment strategy for the hotspot?</i></p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- how did the <i>geographic focus</i> of the grant program respond to priorities identified in the EP?</li> <li>- how did the <i>thematic focus</i> of the grant program respond to priorities identified in the EP?</li> <li>- within the priority geographies and themes, have priority actions for <u>coastal biodiversity</u> been funded through the grant program?</li> <li>- within the priority geographies and themes, have priority actions for <u>freshwater biodiversity</u> been funded through the grant program?</li> <li>- within the priority geographies and themes, have priority actions for <u>corridors of high cultural and biodiversity value</u> been funded through the grant program?</li> <li>- within the priority geographies and themes, have priority actions for <u>plants</u> been funded through the grant program?</li> </ul>	<p>Ecosystem profile; KBA and Red List; grant database;</p>
<p><b><i>To what extent has the RIT delivered on its ToR?</i></b></p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- has the RIT planned and allocated resources to address the Nine components of the TOR?</li> <li>Component 1. Coordinate CEPF investment in the hotspot;</li> <li>Component 2. Support the mainstreaming of biodiversity into public policies and private sector business practices;</li> <li>Component 3. Communicate the CEPF investment throughout the hotspot;</li> <li>Component 4. Build the capacity of local civil society;</li> <li>Component 5. Establish and coordinate a process for large grant (&gt;\$20,000) proposal solicitation and review;</li> <li>Component 6. Manage a program of small grants (≤\$20,000);</li> </ul>	<p>ToR; Consultation with RIT and CEPF</p>

Component 7. Monitor and evaluate the impact of CEPF's large and small grants;	
Component 8. Lead the process to develop, over a three-month period, a long-term strategic vision for CEPF investment;	
Component 9. Reporting.	
<b><i>How has the RIT responded to the challenges and opportunities of the hotspots' geography and biodiversity?</i></b>	
- how has the approach taken been influenced by the geography and biodiversity of the hotspot?	EP; RIT; CEPF, independent sources
<b><i>How has the RIT responded to the challenges and opportunities of the hotspots social, economic and political context?</i></b>	
- how did the RIT's planning and grant-making respond to social, economic and political factors identified in the EP and elsewhere?	EP; RIT; CEPF, independent sources
<b>2. Evaluation of <u>Efficiency</u> (these questions also partly address lessons learned on <u>Accessibility</u>)</b>	
<i>Efficiency - How efficiently was the budget allocated to the RIT converted into results?</i>	
<i>Accessibility - Does the grant portfolio involve an appropriate balance of grantees, taking into account the relative strengths of different organizations with regard to delivery of the investment strategy and considering the priority given by CEPF to building the capacity of local civil society?</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- what is the overall proportion of funds spent on direct conservation action, capacity building and other themes?</li> <li>- what is the overall volume of work (priorities addressed) achieved through grant-making?</li> <li>- how does the distribution of grants funds relate the objectives of CEPF defined in the EP?</li> <li>- does the <i>geographic distribution</i> of grant funds relate to priorities?</li> <li>- how does the <i>thematic focus</i> of grant funds relate to priorities identified in the EP?</li> </ul>	grant database; Audited accounts; grantee interviews; draft portfolio final assessment;
<b><i>Who received grant funds?</i></b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- what was the mix between international, national and local CSO recipients?</li> <li>- what was the mix of different types of CSOs (based on mission, constituency)</li> </ul>	grant database
<b>3. Evaluation of <u>Effectiveness</u> (these questions also address lessons learned on <u>Accessibility</u>, <u>Adaptive Management</u> and <u>Impact</u>)</b>	
<i>Effectiveness - What were the strengths and weakness of the RIT structure and capacities with regard to effective delivery of results?</i>	
	Inputs and sources

<p><i>Accessibility - Does the grant portfolio involve an appropriate balance of international and local grantees, taking into account the relative strengths of different organizations with regard to delivery of the investment strategy and considering the priority given by CEPF to building the capacity of local civil society?</i></p> <p><i>Impact - To what extent have the targets set in the hotspot ecosystem profile for impacts on biodiversity conservation, human wellbeing, civil society capacity and enabling conditions been met?</i></p> <p><i>Adaptive management- In what ways has the development of the grant portfolio been constrained by risks (political/institutional/security/health) or taken advantage of unanticipated opportunities?</i></p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- what were the structure, planning and decision-making processes of the RIT and how well did they support the delivery of the RIT's tasks?</li> <li>- what capacity did the RIT have available and was this adequate and in the right places for delivery of the TOR?</li> </ul>	Consultations with RITs and Grantees
<b>How effective was the RIT's approach to promotion and proposal development?</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- was information on the program widely distributed to relevant audiences?</li> <li>- was lack of capacity a constraint for proposal development, and did the RIT respond effectively to this?</li> <li>- were there specific efforts to encourage the participation of high-priority, under-represented groups/categories of CSO as grantees/beneficiaries?</li> </ul>	Consultations with RITs and Grantees
<b>How effective was the RIT's approach to awarding and managing grants?</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- was there timely decision-making on grant award and grantee requests?</li> <li>- how well did the RIT respond to requests for support and weaknesses identified in grantee projects? Were grantees happy with the support they received?</li> <li>- was the RIT flexible enough in allowing grantees to change their plans in response to obstacles and opportunities?</li> <li>- was grantee reporting timely and adequate?</li> <li>- did the RIT deal correctly with any applications where there could have been any perceived conflict of interest</li> </ul>	Consultations with RITs and Grantees
<b>How well was learning and adaptive management applied by the RIT?</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- what changes in political, social or economic context impacted on the objectives of the programme and grant-making? Was the RIT aware of these changes and were they able to respond as necessary? Could anything else have been done to resolve them?</li> <li>- were lessons learned from early grants applied to improve subsequent ones?</li> <li>- did the RIT monitor progress with grant-making against objectives and make adjustments (e.g. in later calls for proposals)?</li> </ul>	Consultations with RITs and Grantees, independent sources

Were lessons learned from the first investment programme adopted and implemented?	
Was the mid term review process effective. Were lessons adopted and implemented?	
<b><i>How effectively has grantee capacity been built?</i></b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- did the RIT address CSO capacity issues as identified in the EP?</li> <li>- what actions have been taken to address capacity gaps that constrain the grants programme?</li> <li>- how appropriate was the RITs approach to grantee capacity building?</li> <li>- what impact did any capacity building activity have on subsequent grantee performance?</li> </ul>	Consultations with RITs and Grantees
<b><i>What programme impacts are attributable to approaches or actions undertaken by the RIT?</i></b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- to what extent can positive impacts (as found by the final assessment or other evaluations) be attributed to the RIT's structure and approach?</li> <li>- what efforts have been made to synthesize and promote the results of grantee projects, and are there identifiable impacts beyond individual grant level (e.g. on policies, design of conservation programs, management of protected areas)?</li> </ul>	Consultations with CEPF, RITs, Govts, NGOs and Grantees

<b>Additional questions addressing the wider context</b>
Key questions include:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Have there been changes in the legal/political circumstances for CSOs operating in the hotspot since the EP? Could anything more have been done to resolve outstanding problems?</li> <li>- Have there been changes in the funding circumstances for CSOs operating in the hotspot since the EP?</li> <li>- How did the RIT/CEPF program coordinate with other grant programmes around the Mediterranean to ensure good coordination?</li> <li>- What recommendations can be made to guide the development of any future RIT so as to make it even more successful and effective?.</li> <li>- What wider lessons have been learned and what recommendations on this or other related matters are relevant for future CEPF programs in the hotspot or generally?</li> </ul>