

**Evaluation of Lessons Learned in Relation to the Regional  
Implementation Team for the Mediterranean Basin Biodiversity  
Hotspot**

**Final Report**

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on behalf of CEPF  
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## Executive Summary

This report assesses eleven years of investment in the Mediterranean Basin hotspot, focusing on the Phase 2 of investment since 2017 and on the lessons learned from the performance and delivery of the regional implementation team (RIT) currently led by BirdLife International in partnership with two of its national partner organisations in Serbia and Slovenia. The programme planned investments based on an approved Ecosystem Profile which identified Strategic Directions including enhancement of marine and coastal zones, freshwater biodiversity, high biodiversity and cultural landscapes and threatened plants.

Between 2017 and late 2023, the programme had awarded around 188 project grants to 130 organisations in 13 countries, totalling \$11.2 million. Due to some additional transitional funding being secured, not all grants have yet been finished. CEPF and the RIT raised an additional \$3.6 million during the course of the programme at portfolio level, while grantees reported USD 4.5 million as leverage at project level so far. Impacts include strengthened management at 57 Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs) covering 662,000ha. Projects were delivered in 45 Protected Areas and sought to enhance the status of at least 118 globally threatened species (39% of which were plants). 75% of grantees reported a significantly increased capacity as a result of CEPF investment and over 7000 people received training including over 300 botanists and support for more than 30 higher degrees. The programme influenced at least 39 national or provincial laws, policies and regulations.

The assessment was undertaken remotely through a mix of document review, interviews with key informants, notably CEPF and RIT staff, grantees, and members of the Mediterranean Advisory Committee. The report concludes that the RIT performed very strongly and effectively across most aspects of the programme. The operation of the RIT as four sub-regions (Balkans, Middle East, North Africa and Cabo Verde) worked extremely well. The team members were felt to have the knowledge, passion and commitment to deliver their role, and both questionnaires and interviews concluded that they had added value through their support at all stages of project development, management and review. They also assisted in a range of initiatives that had built civil society capacity and helped grantees to identify approaches and resources to follow up after completion of funded projects.

The team undertook 7 Calls for Proposals for Large Grants and 15 for Small Grants, organised a range of training and networking events and produced many good communications materials including hosting a series of webinars led by grantees. It was felt that the programme delivered a good balance of projects under the identified priorities and nearly all projects were felt to have been successful and achieved impact. Projects in some challenging counties such as Libya and Palestine had good outcomes. Reporting from the RIT to CEPF was stated to be of a high quality.

A number of challenges faced the programme through its investment period. The pandemic caused some training and networking events to be cancelled and hampered face to face review and technical support though the team was felt to have adapted well. Some countries notably Algeria and Egypt had limited programmes due to constraints on NGOs and difficulties of financial transfers. The project did not get as much input from the private sector as was envisaged and there was also limited traction with host Governments who could both make more use of project outcomes in national biodiversity reporting and also encourage replication

and scaling up of successful projects within their territories. The work on cultural landscapes was the least well understood and early progress was slow but eventually some very successful projects were implemented.

As well as continuing with successful approaches, a number of lessons learned and recommendations are made to tackle some of the challenges identified above and further improve the impact of any Phase 3 of the hotspot programme. Limited funding at the end of the Phase 2 has meant that the team has been operating on a shoestring and capacity will need to be increased again for a third phase, when hopefully it will be possible to invest in Turkey and strengthen programmes in parts of North Africa. More could be done to highlight the success and impact of the programme, especially targeted at national governments and other donors who may have the ability to help implement similar projects. It is also recommended to seek greater consistency in outcome indicators at project portfolio and global levels. It was felt that the very successful capacity building work of Phase 2 could be more comprehensive and given a more formal structure.

There are a number of areas where CEPF may be able to use the flexibility of its grant making programmes to increase impact. Scaling up the impact of successful projects through follow up grants and through complementary grants to NGOs working in the same or adjacent KBAs (which may be across international borders) worked well in Phase 2 and could be expanded. Peer to peer training and exchanges are valuable and could be included within the budget of grants awarded. Grants could also facilitate the development of national networks. Where clearly justified, there may still be a role for larger NGOs who are not part of the RIT to receive grants in order to assist local organisations to increase their capacity to deliver projects.

The programme has been very successful and it is recommended to operate a Phase 3 programme if funds can be secured. In this event it will be for CEPF to appoint one or more organisations to run the RIT and to negotiate with them a structure and operation that will continue and enhance this success.

## Acronyms

BLI	BirdLife International
CEPF	Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund
CfP	Call for Proposals
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DIMFE	Donor's Initiative for Mediterranean Freshwater Ecosystems
EP	Ecosystem Profile
EU	European Union
FFEM	Fonds Français pour l'Environnement Mondial
IUCN Med	The IUCN Centre for Mediterranean Cooperation
KBA	Key Biodiversity Area
Lol	Letters of Inquiry
MTA	Mid Term Assessment
PPI	Programme Petites Initiatives (Programme for Central and West Africa – managed by IUCN France))
PPI-OSCAN	Programme Petites Initiatives – OSCAN (Programme for Mediterranean - managed by IUCN Med)
RIT	Regional Implementation Team
SD	Strategic Direction
ToR	Terms of Reference

## 1. Introduction and background

The Mediterranean Basin hotspot is the second largest biodiversity hotspot in the world, at 2,085,292 km<sup>2</sup>, and the largest of the world's five Mediterranean-climate regions. It is also the only hotspot stretching over three continents: Europe, from Portugal to the southern part of the Balkan peninsula, bordered in the North by the mountain ranges of the Pyrenees, Alps and Balkan mountains ; Asia, with the eastern part of Anatolia and the Middle-East, down to the Sinai mountains, and Africa, with a narrow land ribbon stretching North of the Sahara desert, from the Nile delta to Tripolitania, and a much larger area encompassing plateaus and mountains of the Atlas, down to the Atlantic Ocean. West of the mainland, the hotspot includes the islands of Macaronesia. CEPF investment in the hotspot is nevertheless restricted to a subset of eligible countries (see section 1.3 below).



**Figure 1: The Mediterranean Basin hotspot boundary**

According to the ecosystem profile, the Mediterranean Basin is the third richest hotspot in the world in terms of its plant diversity. Approximately 30,000 plant species occur, and more than 13,000 species are endemic to the hotspot. A total of 1,110 Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs) were identified covering more than 40.7 million hectares, or approximately 19.5% of the total hotspot. Of the total, 512 KBAs contain coastal or marine habitat, highlighting the importance of these sites for both terrestrial and marine conservation. In addition, 17 biodiversity conservation corridors were identified containing 435 of the KBAs.

Many of the ecosystems reached an equilibrium long ago with human activity dominating the landscapes. However, this delicate balance is in a precarious state as many local communities depend on remaining habitats for fresh water, food and a variety of other ecosystem services.

The Mediterranean Basin is by far the largest global tourism destination, and pressure on scarce water resources resulting from major water investments as well as climate change has recently become the most important pressure on nature. CEPF investment in the Mediterranean Basin hotspot is essential to stem the threats, balance economic development with the needs of natural areas, and conserve biodiversity and ecosystem services in this vast region.

The Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF) is a joint initiative of l'Agence Française de Développement, Conservation International, the European Union, the Global Environment Facility, the Government of Japan and the World Bank 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 2012 CEPF launched a five-year programme of investment in the hotspot, which resulted in the award of 108 grants to 84 different organizations in 12 countries, with a total value of \$11million. In 2016, following a decision by CEPF Donor Council, the ecosystem profile was updated, through a participatory process involving more than 500 stakeholders, considering the political changes in the region and new information available on the hotspot's biodiversity. The new profile defined the strategy for CEPF investment for 2017-2022. The Phase 2 started in October 2017 with the first Call for Proposals, and new projects starting in early 2018. Phase 2 investment in this hotspot totals US\$14.08 million, for a program taking place through to early 2024.

<b>Mediterranean Countries</b>	<b>CEPF Eligibility</b>	<b>Endorsement Date</b>	<b>Comments</b>
<b>Albania</b>	Yes	September 2017	
<b>Algeria</b>	Yes	November 2020	The very late endorsement of Algeria implied short delays for implementation of project; additional administrative issues limited investment in the country.
<b>Bosnia &amp; Herzegovina</b>	Yes	January 2018	
<b>Cabo Verde</b>	Yes	December 2017	
<b>Egypt</b>	Yes	July 2018	Administrative requirements from Egyptian authorities limited investment in the country.
<b>Jordan</b>	Yes	October 2017	
<b>Lebanon</b>	Yes	October 2017	
<b>Libya</b>	Yes	October 2017	Security situation implied specific measures to award grant in this country
<b>Macedonia</b>	Yes	September 2017	
<b>Montenegro</b>	Yes	December 2017	
<b>Morocco</b>	Yes	November 2017	

<b>Palestine</b>	Yes	October 2019	Included in the programme following Decision of CEPF Donor Council DC35/5 of October 23, 2019, and subsequent endorsement from the Director General of the Environment Quality Authority
<b>Syria</b>	Yes	-	Current investments are impossible due to political and security reasons.
<b>Tunisia</b>	Yes	October 2017	
<b>Turkey</b>	Yes	-	GEF focal point informed CEPF in January 2018 that the profile would not be endorsed. No investment during Phase 2.
<b>EU countries : France, Spain, Italy, Croatia, Greece etc.</b>	No	-	Not eligible as EU member States
<b>OECD members: Monaco, Andorra, San Marino etc.</b>	No	-	Not eligible as not World Bank client

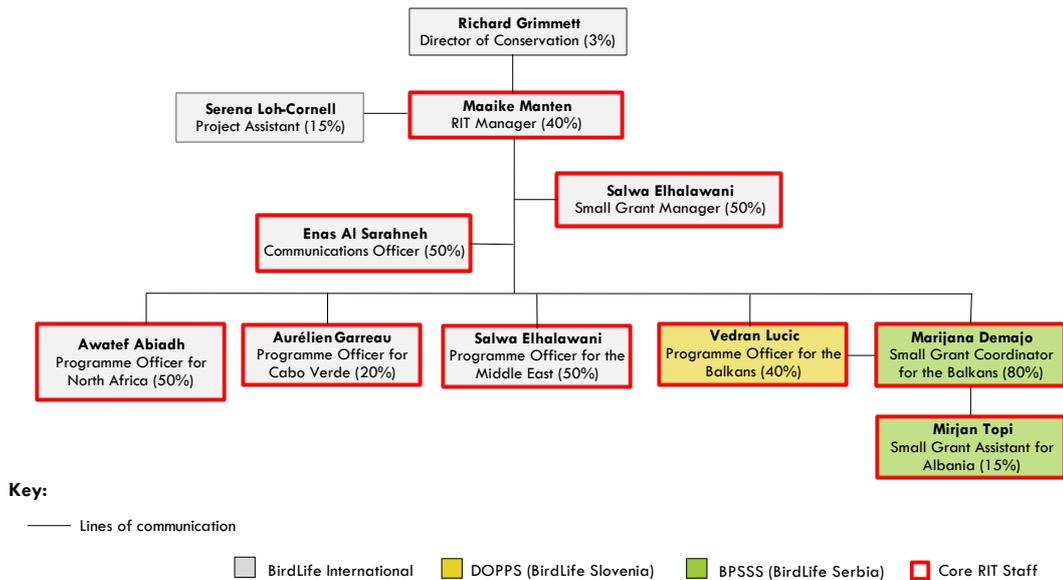
**Table 1. A summary of the eligibility of Mediterranean Basin hotspot countries for CEPF support**

The Final Assessment of CEPF Phase 1 (2018) and the Mid-Term Assessment of Phase 2 (September 2020) stressed the achievements of CEPF in the region and its importance for local civil society organizations (CSOs). Extensive consultation with CSOs also raised concerns about access to much needed funding after 2022, with the close of the MAVA Foundation, a major donor in the region, at the same time as CEPF. In this context, CEPF Donor Council approved an extension of Phase 2 for an additional 2 years, as an “interim” period, supported through funding from CEPF Core Donors, the MAVA Foundation, Fondation Audemars-Watkins and the Donors’ Initiative for Freshwater Mediterranean Ecosystems (DIMFE). This allowed for maintaining support to local NGOs that would be at risk in the absence of funding, and ensuring continuity of conservation action where it is most needed, while securing new resources for a Phase 3 of the programme.

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 Mediterranean Basin Biodiversity Hotspot, the role of RIT has been performed by BirdLife International, based in Cambridge, UK together with the BirdLife Partners in France (LPO), Slovenia (DOPPS) and Serbia (BPSSS). LPO left the consortium in 2022. The current structure and personnel of the RIT are shown below.

RIT members and support staff



**Figure 2: Current structure of the RIT**

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 Mediterranean Basin 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 wellbeing, 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 Mediterranean Basin biodiversity hotspot and identified any candidate organizations that could potentially perform the RIT role (either alone or as part of a consortium). This 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, 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.). All meetings were conducted on-line (See Annex 3, 4).

## 2.1 Criteria for Evaluation

The evaluation examined the components and functions of the Mediterranean Basin RIT, as set out in the terms of reference, and evaluate 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 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 were 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?

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

The formally Agreed Duties of the Regional Implementation Team in the Mediterranean Basin RIT provide the basis for assessing their performance according to the criteria above. These can be taken in conjunction with the proposal made by BirdLife International in their tender submission and the ensuing contract. 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 \$40,000 or in some cases 50,000)

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

The contract between CEPF and BirdLife included these 9 ToR but also a logframe which described these components slightly differently as eight Outcomes. However, the content of each is essentially the same and this evaluation is based on the ToR outlined above.:

### 2.3 Overview of the Strategic Directions and Investment Priorities for the Mediterranean

In evaluating the performance of the RIT, it is important to take note of the overall objectives and priorities of the investment programme for Phase 2 in the Mediterranean Basin.

Strategic direction	Investment priorities
1: Support civil society to engage stakeholders in demonstrating integrated approaches for the preservation of <b>biodiversity in coastal areas</b> .	1.1: Engage local stakeholders in conservation actions that address threats to key elements of biodiversity in priority KBAs in the coastal zone.
	1.2: Engage private sector stakeholders to adopt sustainable practices that deliver positive impacts for conservation in priority KBAs in the coastal zone.
	1.3: Support civil society to engage with local or national governments to mainstream biodiversity conservation into integrated coastal zone management, land-use and development planning processes.
2: Support the sustainable management of water catchments through integrated approaches for the conservation of threatened <b>freshwater biodiversity</b> .	2.1: Enhance the knowledge base on freshwater biodiversity and the importance of freshwater ecosystem services.
	2.2: Take action to reduce threats and improve management of selected sites in priority freshwater catchments with the participation of local stakeholders.
	2.3: Engage with government, private sector and other stakeholders to support integrated river basin management practices that reduce threats to biodiversity in priority CMZs.
3: Promote the maintenance of traditional land use practices necessary for the conservation of Mediterranean biodiversity in priority corridors of <b>high cultural and biodiversity value</b> .	3.1: Support local communities to increase the benefit they receive from maintaining and enhancing traditional, biodiversity-friendly land-use and agricultural practices.
	3.2: Promote awareness of the value of traditional, biodiversity-friendly land-use practices among local community and government decision makers, to secure their recognition and support.

Strategic direction	Investment priorities
	3.3: Encourage business actors in the trade chain to support and promote traditional, biodiversity-friendly land-use practices.
4: Strengthen the engagement of civil society to support the <b>conservation of plants</b> that are critically endangered or have highly restricted ranges.	4.1: Increase knowledge and skills to support assessment and planning for the conservation of plants and foster the emergence of a new generation of young professionals in plant conservation.
	4.2: Support integration of plant conservation into the management of protected areas.
	4.3: Support innovative actions for the conservation of important populations of plants, working with landowners and managers.
5: Strengthen the <b>regional conservation community</b> through the sharing of best practices and knowledge among grantees across the hotspot.	5.1: Support regional and thematically focused learning processes for CSOs and stakeholders.
	5.2: Support grantees to understand and engage with international conventions and processes.
6: Provide strategic leadership and effective coordination of CEPF investment through a <b>Regional Implementation Team</b> .	6.1: Build a constituency of civil society groups working across institutional and political boundaries toward achieving the shared conservation goals described in the ecosystem profile.
	6.2: Act as a liaison unit for relevant networks throughout the Mediterranean to harmonize investments and direct new funding to priority issues and sites.

**Table 2: Strategic Directions and Investment Priorities for the Mediterranean Basin**

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 programme of investment.

### 3. Existing evidence on the performance of the CEPF and the RIT in the Mediterranean

This section summarises the assessments and evaluations that had taken place prior to the commissioning of this current initiative.

#### 3.1 The end of Phase 1 assessment in 2017

This assessment focused on the overall impact of the investment programme and occurs at the end of any phase of hotspot investment. The practice of assessing the performance of the RIT at the end of each phase had not yet been set in place in 2017. The assessment was undertaken as an internal exercise with a view to informing the updating of the ecosystem profile and the investment priorities for Phase 2. However, it did provide some useful recommendations to guide the work of the RIT in Phase 2. These include:

##### Geographical focus

- Spreading risks across as many countries and sites as possible and identifying around 50% more KBAs for intervention than can be resourced – this because not all sites will receive projects either because of security issues or because NGOs are not currently engaged there. Some flexibility in choice of sites may be needed in ‘difficult’ counties for example where conflict limits access.

- Conversely, it makes sense to continue to support sites granted in Phase 1, where success has been achieved and can be built upon.

#### Programme management

- CEPF's niche is viewed as a focus on emerging national and local civil society organisations, and there should be an even greater focus on this in Phase 2. Greater coordination with other donors is critical to ensure that between them, they ensure coordination and avoid unnecessary duplication.
- Exchange of experience is highlighted as of great value. The mentoring role and support between more established and younger NGOs is recognised. Networking meetings are endorsed perhaps at national level between grantees, and at sub-regional level, these are most valuable on specific themes.
- To consider clustered grant making so that more than one organisation is supported at one site, to ensure that their complementary skills can achieve greater impact.
- Private sector engagement was identified as difficult, and it was suggested that the best place to start was with community-driven businesses, including on tourism, while exploring in-kind support from the wider sector.
- While policy influence is an important objective, it is best that organisations start by achieving experience and success on the ground – this provides the evidence and the credibility to better inform policy.

#### Thematic issues

- There was recognition that it is hard for NGOs to make progress on complex spatial programmes such as Coastal Zone and River Basin Management without strong support from and engagement with Government Authorities.

#### Period of investment

- It was recognised that many grants would benefit from a longer time period in order to consolidate achievements, this could be achieved by longer initial project duration, by allowing extensions, or awarding follow up grants.

Recommendations for greater focus in Phase 2 included more effort to engage the private sector, more on policy influence, and a review of the operation and effectiveness of the priority landscape corridors identified.

Assessing the programme of Phase 2, it can be seen that the majority of these issues were picked up by the RIT and CEPF for additional action. Many achieved considerable success, although perhaps inevitably, many of the points raised remain pertinent as thoughts turn to future investment periods. Some of the more active proposals involving meetings were certainly affected by the restrictions on travel as a result of the pandemic in 2020 and 2021.

### 3.2 The Phase 2 Mid-term Assessment in 2020

The RIT and the CEPF undertook an internal Mid-term Assessment (MTA) in 2020 in order to inform the implementation of the programme for the remainder of the investment period. This was a robust process entailing a number of questionnaires, consultation with grantees and

stocktake of progress to date. The originally planned face-to-face workshops were cancelled due to the pandemic.

The Assessment concluded by outlining priorities for the remaining investment period according to the progress to date across geographical range and strategic directions. Minor changes were made to the Portfolio indicators for a number of the Strategic Directions.

A number of processes were amended by the RIT as a result of the MTA. These included simplifying reporting procedures where possible to do so and writing additional guidance to help grantees complete necessary processes. Additional orientation calls and 'Masterclass' training events were also introduced, the latter especially in North Africa.

Other key issues raised included:

In Geographical terms CEPF would continue supporting all countries currently eligible, with an emphasis on North Africa for large grants, and looking for options to reinforce investment in Jordan.

CEPF would try to support more sub-regional and pan-Mediterranean initiatives (hotspot-level grants), to strengthen sharing of experience, scaling-up and to allow for a greater participation of Egypt and Libya.

These approaches have been broadly successful with an increase in grants in North Africa and some progress in Egypt. There have been some hotspot-wide initiatives by granting, and more by informal networking, although some planned events were inhibited by the pandemic.

In Strategic Direction 1 CEPF agreed to re-focus particularly on supporting traditional, sustainable fishing practices, associating local communities with conservation to continue supporting initiatives for the creation of new MPAs or co-management of existing MPAs. It was agreed to expand the eligible coastal areas in Libya and to a lesser extent in the Balkans, and to call for more regional cooperation in North Africa.

This led to new calls and increased the number of such projects in Tunisia, Cabo Verde and the Balkans. In addition, there were some new projects in Libya including one focused on fishermen and a collaborative project with Egypt.

In Strategic Direction 2, it was agreed to focus work on the Balkans primarily by strengthening and scaling up work at existing sites, to focus on more work on freshwater wetlands in Morocco, and to open the programme in the Middle East in response to reported urgent threats to wetlands in Lebanon.

This led to a number of new grants in the Balkans (as more funds were raised) including a number of grant extensions and follow on grants to consolidate progress in existing sites. There were 11 new grants in Morocco including 4 on SD2, and 3 new SD2 projects in Lebanon responding to this identified threat.

Strategic Direction 3 was opened for the Rif Mountains corridor in Morocco, and also for small, exploratory investment in the Balkans, focusing on one or two cultural landscapes. CEPF also agreed to support, through specific grants, the documentation of actions, the promotion of new activities, and lessons learned on biodiversity conservation in Cultural Landscapes.

This led to 5 Large Grants under SD3 in Morocco, and a total of 6 Small Grants in the Balkans exploring pathways to progress cultural landscapes.

The budget for Strategic Direction 4 was increased to allow for additional projects and strengthening of existing projects. Additional support was to be offered to Libya and Palestine, in particular as regards knowledge and capacity building of local stakeholders. CEPF also agreed to support regional exchange of experience and capacity building activities.

A number of grants were extended and broadened to allow additional activities. Two new grants were awarded under SD4 in Algeria representing some progress in this important country. Six projects were granted under SD4 in Palestine and some excellent stories emerged from these. The project also supported some grantees to attend the Mediterranean Plant Week events between 2021 and 2023.

Strategic Direction 5 was deliberately not used too much in the early part of phase 2 as the RIT wished to wait until some projects had been completed to assess its best use. At the time of the MTA the pandemic made future progress uncertain. A number of approaches were flagged including: to support two regional networks on sea turtle conservation, and on mediterranean forests. Engagement with civil society for conservation planning exercises and CSO platform building in countries was supported where a need has been expressed, such as Tunisia, Cabo Verde, and Palestine. CEPF would also use this budget line to support preparatory action for long term funding mechanisms, to capture impacts, to document good practices, to design learning tools or to engage new donors in investing in the region.

The SD5 budget has subsequently been used for a number of the activities outlined above including joint grants with PONT in the Prespa-Ohrid region to share best practices between CSOs in the region, and support to the sea turtle network in North Africa. It was also used for emergency purposes including in Beirut following the explosion in 2020.

Overall, the recommendations from the MTR have been implemented well. Work in some countries continued to be challenging but it led to real progress in some areas, for example Morocco and Palestine. Inevitably the pandemic slowed progress in SD5 and many recommendations certainly remain valid looking into the future.

### 3.3 Grantee perception Questionnaires

Two sets of data outlining grantee perception during Phase 2 are available and are held by CEPF secretariat. The first was undertaken as part of the Mid-term Assessment (see above). This entailed:

- A survey of 45 questions completed by up to 24 Large Grantees
- A survey of 38 questions completed by up to 43 Small Grantees

and included questions on the call for proposals, the application process and level of assistance provided, the contacting process including completion of tracking tools and safeguards, level of support with project implementation, reporting and administration and training and capacity building benefits.

The results were overwhelmingly positive as to the performance and support received during the first half of Phase 2, noting that for Large Grants, not all of these elements are the responsibility

of the RIT as they are managed directly by the CEPF, and also that over half of the responses received were from the Balkans.

Some notable points from the Large Grantee assessment included:

- Some (30%) did find the overall application and design process difficult but 94% were satisfied or very satisfied with the support received from the RIT (especially the Programme Officers and RIT leader) and Grant Director;
- 73% had met their Programme Officer in person and all of these found the visit helpful;
- 96% were satisfied (31%) or very satisfied (65%) with the overall support received by their Programme Officer, with only 1 responder answering neutral;
- Most respondents did want more training on aspects such as safeguards, gender and gender tracking and financial management.

Some notable points from the Small Grantee assessment included:

- While a few found the application process difficult, 97% were satisfied or very satisfied with the support received from the RIT (especially the Small Grants Manager and Programme Officers) during the application process, and 94% with the support received on finance and admin documentation as part of contracting;
- 66% found the Civil Society Tracking Tool helpful for their organisation and appreciated the help given to compile and understand it. Again, many would like more training in this field, and also in gender, safeguarding and financial management. Some (up to 30%) would have appreciated more support on understanding gender aspects;
- Overall, 94% of responders found the support provided by the RIT to be helpful (38%) or very helpful (56%).

A further Questionnaire is provided to grantees at the conclusion of the grant implementation and reporting process to enable feedback at the project close. This is a set of 32 quantifiable questions as well as some free text. It has been completed by 40 Large Grantees and 24 Small Grantees so far. Once more the results were very positive with high scores for High and Satisfactory rankings, with just one set of negative scores from a grantee who had their agreement terminated. The results from the Small Grantees are more relevant to this evaluation since it is harder to separate out the experiences of the RIT as opposed to the CEPF Secretariat for the Large Grantee responders. In fact, the response rates and content for both are generally very similar. Among some notable responses from the Small Grantee responses:

- 75% of responders noted the support for the application process and the advice on budgeting were highly satisfactory;
- 95% of responders found the New Grantee orientation calls useful or very useful;
- Around 85% of the responders found the follow up on their financial reporting very useful, and of those 50% who had a financial site visit, a similar percentage found it very useful.
- Everyone found the technical support provided helpful or very helpful (92%). Of the 70% who had technical site visits almost all found it very useful;
- Most responders participated in some capacity building or training events. 75% found efforts to build their organisations capacity to be very effective;
- 87% found the RIT very responsive to questions raised and almost all agrees that the information and guidance they received was consistent.

- Overall, 17/24 responders gave top marks for their experience as a CEPF grantee (out of 7) and 4 others gave a mark of 6.

Slightly less positive were the comments on support for gender processes which 54% found adequate, 37% found somewhat adequate while 2 did not receive any support on this issue.

There was a more marked difference between Small and Large Grantees on issues of capacity building. Only 50% of Large Grantees had received any capacity building training and a similar percentage found it to be very effective. This could relate to the fact that some organisations receiving Large Grants have (or feel they have) less need of capacity building. Most training has been open to all grantees but this highlights a need to ensure that Large Grantees do have equal access to training support by the RIT/CEPF.

## 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.

It is important to note two issues which impact the findings:

This is an evaluation of lessons learned relating to management by RIT, not the overall conservation and socio-economic impacts of the programme. In practice this can be hard to separate as part of the role of the RIT is to implement a successful programme. Comment is made on occasion on the delivery of the programme 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. This should be broadly taken as a positive, since there has clearly been an effective – and at times seamless – working relationship between the two.

(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

As well as being a large hotspot, the Mediterranean Basin is particularly complex covering three continents and with 13 countries operational during Phase 2 of the investment. Some of these countries are challenging to work in due to conflict, political instability and/or restrictions placed on civil society. There are a wide range of ecosystem types and an equally varied socio-economic environment.

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. Unfortunately, two countries could not be included within the investment during this phase: Syria due to ongoing political tensions and conflict and Turkey, as their government chose not to sign up to the programme.

The RIT continued to operate the broad structure adopted during Phase 1 of the programme. This is built around the creation of four sub-regions – Middle East, North Africa, Cabo Verde and the Balkans. Each of these sub-regions has a Programme Officer who is based in or accessible to the included countries, working closely with the Small Grants Manager who operates across the hotspot. This has been a very successful approach and has ensured that the Programme Officers built up a strong understanding of the ecosystems and civil society under their charge, and have excellent relationships with, and are available to, the current and potential grantees.

The RIT appears to have operated in a very balanced way, taking clear ownership and responsibility for all of the Strategic Directions identified in the Ecosystem Profile. This particularly related to the four conservation orientated Directions. Some of these proved easier to establish than others and the RIT took action to enable each of them to operate successfully. Where the RIT lacked in depth expertise (specifically SD4 on Plant Conservation) they proactively established a Plant Working Group to offer advice on strategy and to provide additional capacity to review Letters of Inquiry (LoI). The SD3 programme on Cultural Landscapes was less well understood by potential grantees at the start of the programme but guidance documents were commissioned (through a call for proposals) which helped to kick start proposals in the Middle East and North Africa (and later in the Balkans as well).

The capacity of civil society varies markedly across the hotspot, although in all cases it was relatively weak at the time of the first investment. The investment in training and capacity building has been very successful with clear indicators of growth both through monitoring of the Civil Society Tracking Tool, and in the anecdotal performance of the NGOs both individually and as networks. The RIT proactively included the opportunity to identify and inject support for capacity building actions within each grant proposal. Challenges remain especially in parts of Middle East and North Africa and the SD5 programme on capacity building perhaps needs re-emphasising and more formal structuring in the future, although as with many other aspects, this is a matter for consideration across the suite of donors in the Mediterranean Basin to identify where leadership on this issue is best placed.

Each project in the Mediterranean programme 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 a lot of time and effort in successfully evaluating individual project outcomes and reports and feeding this into the global system. Some challenges were identified in allocating project outcomes to Portfolio and Global indicators. Perhaps in a future phase, the portfolio indicators can be improved, and a comprehensive monitoring framework established at local (grantee), portfolio (RIT) and global (CEPF) levels? 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. It is important that project outcomes are measured and reported accurately and as speedily as possible, although some need for amendment to such data at a later stage is probably inevitable.

#### 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 BirdLife International. These ToR are outlined in full in Annex 1.

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

The RIT has delivered this component highly effectively.

They have established a strong presence at sub-regional level with a cadre of skilled, committed, and passionate individuals with strong networking skills. The team demonstrably worked well together with good collaboration across sub-regions and use of complementary skills. They have a good knowledge and understanding of their areas of operations and good trust and working with the civil society there. There seem to be good trust and cooperation between the RIT staff, CEPF Grant Director, Grant Manager and CEPF team members.

The RIT has also worked well with other donors, institutions operating in the region and with host governments, where possible and necessary. A great example of coordination led by the RIT was the collaboration with the Prespa Orchid Nature Trust (PONT) with whom two joint calls were organised .

There is good agency and donor representation on the CEPF Advisory Committee which has been a strong contributor to the programme. It was originally intended that BirdLife should coordinate a Donor Roundtable for the Mediterranean – however it became clear that donors would prefer this to be convened by CEPF itself, although the RIT do support the process. On an operational level the Programme Officers work closely with other donors managing grant programmes and in two cases RIT members currently are also contracted to support other relevant grant programmes i.e. PPI in Cabo Verde, and the MedFund in North Africa. They have worked successfully to encourage donor coordination and there are many examples where they have helped to introduce NGOs to additional donor sources, who have then been able to use CEPF funds to leverage additional project support. In Cabo Verde a national donor round table is co-facilitated by the RIT Programme Officer.

The RIT has interacted well with host Governments, although sensitive issues might require the engagement of the Grant Director. Generally, relations with Governments are best managed by the grantees themselves but some government officials have been proactive in trying to organise and facilitate what are fledgling civil societies – this was the case with the positive input of the Environmental Quality Authority in Palestine for example.

There are a number of examples where CEPF/RIT have encouraged successful networking between grantees at both national and regional levels. In the Balkans there have been good collaborations between different NGOs working in the same KBA, encouraged by the RIT through joint meetings and in some cases joining grants together so that NGOs work together on aligned projects. In North Macedonia larger NGOs have been asked to offer capacity building support to smaller NGOs, for example in the preparation of organisational strategies. Turtle conservationists in Cabo Verde (as well as in West Africa) have been linked to NGOs seeking to develop a turtle conservation network in North Africa. NGOs in Cabo Verde are now organising their own formal national NGO network with a paid officer to coordinate fundraising and policy and advocacy agendas.

The RIT have been active in organising and attending critical events and conferences across the hotspot. As everywhere the attendance of such events was severely constrained by the Coronavirus

pandemic of 2020 and 2021 and practices for such events have changed radically since. This had some impact on events which would have encouraged more networking between grantees and with host governments and others. These remain important objectives and a strategy for ensuring that the objectives associated with such activities continue to be achieved should be a part of planning for any future investment phase.

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

This was one of the most challenging elements of the RIT's work programme for a number of reasons.

The relationships between Government and Civil Society are inevitably complex and vary hugely across the Mediterranean. There are tensions where NGOs may be promoting one course of action which goes against the policies or intentions of their government. 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.

The ecosystem profile promoted greater involvement with the private sector as an effective tool for conservation in the Hotspot. The private sector covers a wide spectrum from the implementation of grants by private companies to the generation of local enterprises as part of a sustainable local solution to biodiversity issues. There have been some successes in both spheres but the growth of the private sector in conservation programmes remains at an early stage.

The pandemic also had an impact on the RIT's attempts to directly facilitate greater action in this area. Previously, for example, workshops had been organized to bring together grantees and government officials to integrate the project outcomes with national processes such as CBD reporting and the development of National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans. These could not take place for some time and resurrecting such activities and even engaging Government in field visits has been difficult in many countries.

That said, there have been tangible successes in influencing Government policy as a result of the programme, and many follow-up activities to secure these benefits have been assisted by RIT members.

- During the five years of CEPF investment, projects led to 28 laws, policies or regulations being officially declared, on eight main topics. 20 of these came in the Balkans which is also a reflection of the current activity there in terms of law-making. A number of these involved local or Provincial Government – these are an important constituency, in addition to national administrations. In several North Africa and Middle East countries there has been progress, but advocacy for policy and legal change will often take longer to see concrete impacts.
- During phase 2, CEPF projects resulted in creation of 8 new protected areas and extension of 3 existing areas, totalling 21,619 ha.
- The influence of civil society can also be seen in combatting damaging infrastructure or development, harmful to ecosystems. There are a number of successes in this field for example the commitment from government to remove illegal construction at Lakes Ohrid and Galichica

(North Macedonia), the abandonment of a development at "Mabetex" Divjakë Resort (Albania), and of a dam project in the Bisri Valley (Lebanon), and the revision of a land use plan to protect wetlands at Sebkhet Sejoumi (Tunisia).

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 contribution to UNCBD and other agreements, and to facilitate the understanding and appreciation of successful projects so that others can replicate and upscale them. This could be given additional consideration in the preparation for a Phase 3 and could include attempts to engage Governments more directly both through meetings to ensure that CEPF outcomes feed into government reporting and decision-making at national and sub-regional level, and to engage Government officials in visiting and contributing to field projects.

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

The RIT has delivered this component highly effectively.

The RIT has communicated strongly with the CEPF team and many consultees have commented that they seem to form a cohesive team, and more so than in other hotspots. They also communicate strongly with other donors, institutions, and grantees through a full range of communication channels.

The programme has produced an excellent range of communication materials in the form of videos, presentations, quarterly newsletters, fact sheets, brochures and social media posts. These are widely available on the CEPF website and on the Mediterranean Basin hotspot webpage of the BirdLife International website. Lessons learned and other more specialist materials are also available on the BirdLife 'Hatch' Platform. This is largely an internal BirdLife Platform but the Mediterranean Basin hotspot section been made accessible to all CEPF grantees.

Aspects of face-to-face communications were severely impacted by the Pandemic and this has led to a longer-term change in behaviours as remote systems have markedly improved and increased efforts are made to reduce the environmental impact of travel. The RIT adapted well to doing business remotely. In the last year they have organised a number of Webinars where grantees have presented the outcomes of their work. Nonetheless some face-to-face exchanges have continued, for example in November 2023, four members of the RIT attended the CEPF RIT exchange meeting in Ecuador.

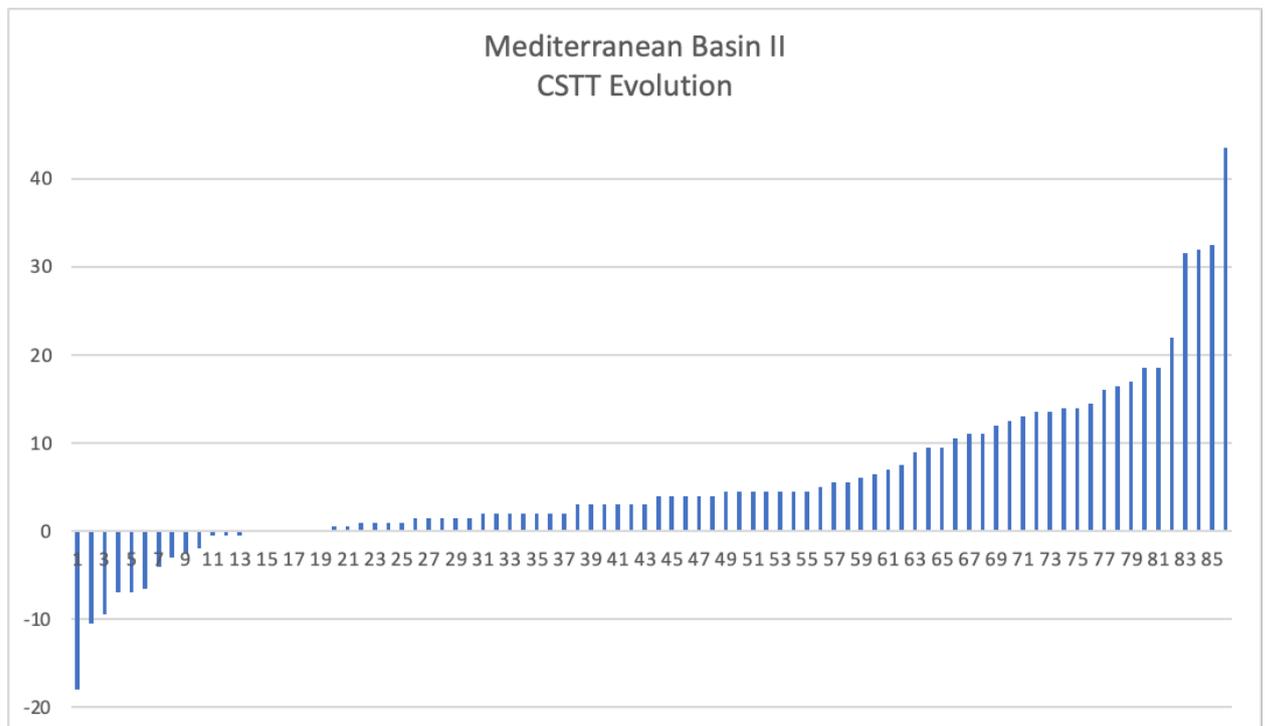
One additional communication need that could be expanded is the production of materials aimed less at the general public and more at Government and decision makers. Several consultees felt that more needs to be done to ensure that Government officials are aware of project successes and lessons learned, 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 has delivered this component highly effectively.

The RIT has performed very strongly on Capacity building of local civil society. Almost all the Grantees consulted stated that they really appreciated this aspect of the support given to them by the Programme Officers and the wider RIT. This is confirmed by the results of the questionnaires referred to above and summarised in Annex 4. This related to the support given to applicants throughout the process of project development, and contracting which included the use of ‘Masterclass’ training events for new applicants and hands on assistance throughout the process. However, it also extended to wider support given to capacity building activity throughout project implementation and beyond. The RIT has proactively acted to add a component to the small grant template, asking applicants to identify organisational development weaknesses, and to have the opportunity for action on these to be supported as part of the Grant. This has led to a number of training events, organisational strategic plans and experience sharing actions between grantees.

This is reflected in the measures of the Civil Society Tracking Tool. A CSTT analysis was run in June 2023 on 86 organizations who had completed project reporting:



**Figure 3: Level of capacity building among CEPF grantees 2017-23**

Out of the 86 organizations for which data is completed:

- 10 (12%) saw a decrease of their score by more than 2%
- 21 (24%) remained relatively stable (change limited to -2/+2 points)
- 25 (30%) saw a limited increase of their score (between +2 and +5 points)
- 31 (46%) saw an important increase with a change of five or more points between baseline and final assessments. Of those 10 saw an increase of 15 points or more, reflecting improvements throughout the organization.

There is much additional anecdotal evidence through the experience and actions of Grantees which adds to this picture of a more vibrant civil society, both within individual organisations, and within the NGO sector as a whole, especially in countries including Tunisia, Cabo Verde, North Macedonia and Albania. Of course, CEPF are not the only donor assisting these NGOs but they have certainly been an important component of helping these organisations to build their capacity and experience.

In some countries, challenges remain. It has been hard for NGOs to fully realise the benefits of CEPF grants for their wider organisations, particularly in parts of the Middle East and North Africa, due to security, legal and financial constraints.

Subject to discussions with other donors about their different niches in NGO support, this should continue to be a core part of CEPF's activity. Some consultees suggested that a more structured approach could be taken to aspects of training with perhaps modules on different aspects of organisational development which could be made widely available to civil society in the region. Consultees also felt that they would like further assistance with how to influence Government and engage with private sector interests most effectively.

Component 5. Establish and coordinate a process for large grant (>\$20,000\*) proposal solicitation and review (\* note that this threshold was increased to \$40,000 and then \$50,000 during the course of Phase 2)

The RIT has delivered this component highly effectively.

The RIT has played a full and constructive role in the development and operation of the Large Grant Programme in the Mediterranean. Between October 2017 and July 2021, CEPF launched 7 Calls for Proposals for large grants, for which 282 letters of inquiry (LoIs) were received. Around 17% 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 in particular the four Programme Officers. They are involved with CEPF in preparing and launching the calls for proposals, establishing an evaluation process and obtaining external expert reviews, making decisions on the applications, and communicating with applicants to ensure they understand the process and also the eventual outcome. Excellent practice for both Large and Small Grant applicants was to provide feedback to unsuccessful applicants in detail, so that they fully understand the reasons for the negative outcome and are better prepared to reapply in the future.

Feedback from both grantees and from CEPF was that the RIT played an important, constructive and effective role in this process.

Component 6. Manage a program of small grants (≤\$20,000\*) (\* note that this threshold was increased to \$40,000 and then \$50,000 during the course of Phase 2)

The RIT has delivered this component highly effectively.

This component is the core business of the RIT and again seems to have been very successfully delivered. During the investment period, 15 Calls for Proposals were issued for Small Grants, resulting in 408 applications. There was a success rate of around 26%. For the Small Grant programme, 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, managing the award, contracting, disbursement and grant compliance on

these projects, including all aspects of reporting and financial management. This was led by the Small Grants Manager in collaboration with the Programme Officers in each sub-region and the RIT leader. They also submit detailed semi-annual reports to the CEPF Secretariat and compile information for the CEPF grants management database.

The RIT has a comprehensive system in place to ensure avoidance of any conflicts of interest. Where organisations have any association with the RIT (for example national partners of BirdLife International) then at least two independent external reviewers are sourced, and any decision to award a grant is subject to the approval of the CEPF Grant Director. The has moved towards seeking external reviewers for all shortlisted grant applications to ensure best possible decision making. This is to be commended and a number of consultees including CEPF advisory group members expressed a willingness to contribute to reviewing any applications relevant to their expertise.

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

The RIT has delivered this component highly effectively.

The RIT has focused strongly on ensuring good monitoring and validation of technical and financial reports and ensuring that project, hotspot and global impact data are available. Harmonising each of these is challenging and there can be some delays in validation at busy periods and inevitably some amendments and additions to date emerge following the project completion.

The RIT has performed very strongly in the level of support given to 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 Questionnaires and by the interviews with grantees. The decentralised structure of the RIT has enabled reasonable levels of field visits and on-site support, although hampered during the period of the pandemic.

Many grantees noted that the support given went well beyond the minimum level necessary, and included additional training and capacity development, helping the grantee to network, and also helping to identify additional sources of financial and technical support.

Alongside project implementation the Programme Officers and wider RIT team 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 some countries. Grantees appreciated the assistance given although some would like further training and support in future.

The RIT worked with CEPF Secretariat to conduct regular reviews and assessments of progress. The Mid-Term Assessment was conducted remotely including via national workshops This process seems to have been successful and produced useful practical guidance on how to improve monitoring and reporting and fill any gaps in delivery of investment priorities. A Final Assessment has also been drafted although completion of this is pending the current transitional nature of the programme, with many granted projects still to complete and report on outcomes.

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

This Component has not been delivered in full, although there is a long-term strategic vision for the Balkans (completed during Phase 1).

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, political and socio-economic factors across the Hotspot, making a unified vision problematic;
- Changes in the wider donor environment with constant flux in the availability and priorities of a number of donors, for example the closure of MAVA Foundation during Phase 2;
- A more fundamental debate around the meaning of civil society sustainability and ‘graduation’. Organisations change and grow and have different needs but arguably even the largest NGOs in the world are still highly dependent on donor and public support.

Perhaps as a result of the above efforts to produce additional visions, for example in North Africa stalled. A process in Tunisia started but political changes which could have impacted upon the effectiveness of NGOs at the made long term planning and decision making difficult. The Balkans vision is seen as a useful contribution to future strategy and has been picked up and used by the EU in their accession programmes. The decision not to have a vision for the entire basin and to remove this target was made together between the RIT and CEPF Secretariat (and approved by the CEPF Executive Director).

There is still a need to consider aspects of long-term strategy in particular around the issue of donor coordination and reviewing the appropriate niche for CEPF and other agencies, given the current spectrum of donor support and the levels of funding and priorities of each agency. This issue should be considered further over the next year as part of the preparation for any future investment phase.

Perhaps one conclusion is that civil society in the Mediterranean will continue to be dependent on external support for many years. Requirements and funding opportunities will vary hugely across the hotspot and are best assessed at national or sub-regional level. A number of consultees noted that a key objective for any civil society organisation is not necessarily to become free of the need for grant support but to diversify income sufficiently to reduce dependence on any one income stream.

#### Component 9. Reporting

The RIT has delivered this component highly effectively.

There seems to have been smooth operation of RIT communication with and reporting to CEPF throughout the project. CEPF Grants Managers reported excellent delivery of high-quality reports. These have on occasion been delayed as a result of delays in receiving adequate reports from the many grantees, who have nonetheless mostly reported well, recognising that for some it’s a challenging process. Technical reports have also been delivered on schedule. There seems to be a good relationship and trust between CEPF and the RIT, and many grantees do not always distinguish between the two entities.

As an aside, a number of grantees commented that the approach of the RIT and CEPF to financial reporting is very welcome. They observed that the financial reporting is rigorous and can be hard, but that this is absolutely correct and has helped them to better understand and deliver the high standards required. This in turn puts them in good position to attract funding from other agencies in the future.

Supervision missions and other hosted events and travel have of course been limited by the pandemic and the subsequent rather permanent changes in practice. However, the missions that have occurred - most recently to Brussels in September 2023, were followed up with written reports, and are reported as successful. The RIT also appears to have given strong support and coordination to field visits by CEPF staff, Advisory Committee members and other donors.

## 4.2 Efficiency

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

CEPF invested about \$ 12.89 million in the Mediterranean Basin during Phase II as at the end of June 2023 – representing 92.9% of the available budget – leaving a remaining budget of \$985,789 to cover the end of the “transition period”. Most of the remaining funds are already committed for the extension of the RIT covering July 2023-February 2024 (\$ 260,000), and for Small Grants in favor of freshwater biodiversity under an agreement with DIMFE (\$ 540,000), leaving only a small budget for extending existing grants and some emergency activities.

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

Strategic Direction	Budget (\$)	Contracted Grants			Budget Balance (\$)	Percentage Contracted
		Total Amount	Large Grants	Small Grants		
SD1-Coastal	\$ 3,180,000	\$3,224,887	17	27	-\$44,887	101%
SD2-Freshwater	\$ 3,098,565	\$2,571,603	15	25	\$526,962	83%
SD3-Cultural Landscapes	\$ 2,492,155	\$2,480,911	15	17	\$11,244	100%
SD4-Plant Conservation	\$ 1,850,000	\$1,714,803	7	31	\$135,197	93%
SD5-Regional cooperation	\$ 595,000	\$506,100	2	16	\$88,900	85%
SD6-RIT	\$ 2,664,280	\$2,395,908	(1)	0	\$268,372	90%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$13,880,000</b>	<b>\$12,894,211</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>116</b>	<b>\$985,789</b>	<b>92.9%</b>

**Table 3 Allocation of Resources per Strategic Direction**

While the investment in Countries was as follows:

Country	Number of Grants			Budget		
	All Grants	Large Grants	Small Grants	All Grants	Large Grants	Small Grants
Cabo Verde	11	5	6	\$1,009,641	\$880,400	\$129,241
Algeria	3	1	2	\$35,297	\$5,064	\$30,234
Egypt	3	0	3	\$66,260	\$0	\$66,260
Libya	7	1	6	\$213,510	\$119,352	\$94,158
Morocco	17	12	5	\$1,719,529	\$1,635,927	\$83,602
Tunisia	26	10	16	\$1,704,156	\$1,483,529	\$220,627
Regional, North-Africa	2	2	0	\$338,768	\$338,768	\$0
Jordan	6	3	3	\$487,984	\$423,053	\$64,931
Lebanon	19	5	14	\$1,086,548	\$866,216	\$220,332
Palestine	8	2	6	\$453,356	\$328,803	\$124,553

Regional, Middle East	1	0	1	\$28,700	\$0	\$28,700
Albania	24	3	21	\$862,969	\$532,507	\$330,462
Bosnia and Herzegovina	12	5	7	\$753,757	\$612,287	\$141,470
Montenegro	14	1	13	\$593,090	\$226,307	\$366,783
North Macedonia	13	3	10	\$625,296	\$431,311	\$193,985
Regional, Balkans	3	3	0	\$475,060	\$475,060	\$0
Hotspot-Level	3	0	3	\$44,382	\$0	\$44,382
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>172</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>116</b>	<b>\$10,498,303</b>	<b>\$8,358,584</b>	<b>\$2,139,719</b>

**Table 4 : Grants by Zone of Implementation (Number of Grants and Total Amount)**

Most of the objectives of expenditure were met, with some minor over and underspends. Notably investment in the Middle East increased from the first phase, and almost doubled in Cabo Verde as the capacity of civil society there grew. There were some reasons for country variations which are explored below.

The cost of the RIT (SD6) administration and management aims to be no more than 15% of the total budget. By mid-2023 this had risen to 18.5% of the budget. This reflects the relatively high costs of operating in this region and the necessarily decentralised structure. This has been further compromised by the current transitional phase which seeks to maintain a minimum level of RIT activity but has a reduced financial capacity to issue new grants. RIT staff are currently operating at levels of employment well below full time so it appears that the RIT management has responded appropriately to keep operating costs to a minimum.

It is also apparent that the role of the RIT is quite extensive in the Mediterranean and appears to have more duties than some other RITs. As part of promoting greater programme sustainability the 2017 Ecosystem Profile proposed: *Broadening the role of the RIT: the RIT's role contributes to sustainability through delivery of effective grant management, associated capacity building, making linkages to Government and private sector entities, promoting recognition of the role of CSOs in society, and working with partners on long term, innovative financing mechanisms.* This broadening of the role will inevitably increase some of the operational costs.

## 4.2 Effectiveness

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

As described above, the RIT has facilitated effective delivery of the programme. The decentralised 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 launches and media publicity;
- Consistent ongoing availability of RIT staff to assist with initial project scoping, clarification of eligibility and appropriate approaches to project development, contracting and collation of baselines data and tracking tools;

- Assistance at all stages of project development;
- Advice on project closure and post project sustainability;
- Introductions to other grantees and other organisations who can assist in follow on capacity building, fundraising or policy work;
- Opportunities to help to document their projects and engage with webinars and other project dissemination.

In the latter half of the implementation period, there have been some staff changes as the original Programme Officers and RIT leader moved on. This and the relocation of Programme Officers for example with the Cabo Verde post relocating to France and the new Middle East PO being based outside the region could have disrupted progress. Grantees paid credit to the smoothness of these transitions including frequent field visits, such that they did not feel any disruption. The reduction in available hours for RIT staff in the last year or so has inevitably meant pressure on workloads. However no serious problems were reported as a result of this.

**4.3.2 What programme 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 strong working relationship means that many activities have been seen as indivisible to grantees, and other stakeholders. This is to the credit of both teams. Equally it is not possible to fully separate broader non project benefits - such as capacity building facilitated by CEPF, from those of other donors working with the same organisations in the same places. However, there are a number of activities and approaches raised by consultees which appear to have led to impacts beyond the minimum standards expected in the contractual arrangements between CEPF and the RIT.

- Critically, consultees noted that CEPF projects have often been one of the first projects of significant size that their organisation has received and that CEPF has a key role in taking risks and giving trust at early stages of NGO development. The success of these projects has led to them gaining the confidence of and funding from other donors. They saw the RIT as key in this, in that the additional support and training received had helped them to succeed, also often accompanied by identification of and/or introduction to the other donors;
- 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 introduction to other NGOs or networks undertaking similar work for example sea turtle networks, or initiatives to create protected areas for plants in Lebanon and Palestine. At project development stage, the RIT team in the Balkans had brought together small networks of NGOs interested in working around the same KBAs, for example at Lake Ohrid and Lake Skadar. These led to information exchanges and closer working relationships, and in some cases to complementary projects which appeared to achieve more than the sum of their individual parts;
- The RIT have worked to ensure that grants awarded are as fully informed as possible prior to making decisions on investment. The RIT has a strong set of complementary skills and knowledge which are used to inform technical assessment of projects. A gap in knowledge on plants was recognised and led to the development of a Plants Technical Working Group to give more strategic advice. This was in addition to the normal process of commissioning external reviews of projects. While this external review process is required for grants of over \$250,000 the Mediterranean RIT have moved to normalise the use of external reviews more widely across

most shortlisted project applications. This improves decision making and enables additional knowledge to be brought to the attention of grantees at an early stage of the project.

- The RIT have been very proactive on capacity building issues and introduced a section into the Small Grants template which enabled applicants to identify additional organisational weaknesses and achieve funding within the project to address those needs. Additional components of capacity building introduced included the 'Masterclass' training offering structured training at the start of the project process for NGOs new to CEPF. Formal training on fundraising and project proposal writing was also much appreciated.
- 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 organised and structured training programmes, so that the benefits so far given to individual or small groups of NGOs could be extended to a broader cadre of organisations.
- Finally, it should be noted that many Grantees were very complimentary about the individual team members within the RIT, often those they dealt with most often and saw as the face of the RIT/CEPF team. They saw them as very committed individuals with a passion for their work and who were always available to help them, often outside of working hours and taking the trouble to give more help than they strictly needed to. This was much appreciated.

#### 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 in 4.2 above, the grant award programme has been close to its targets in relation to the distribution across Strategic Directions and sub-regions. The details of some aspects of delivery on each SD and some countries is discussed below. The RIT/CEPF team have evidently monitored this performance closely throughout the period and adjusted both formal calls and informal interventions to encourage more projects in particular countries, sites or themes where it was felt they needed more promotion. This is evidenced by the total of 22 calls for proposals, some of which were tightly focused. This represents a large amount of work although it was noted that the process becomes easier as experience builds.

##### 4.4.2 Observations on Strategic Directions

The expenditure on each Strategic Direction is broadly on track – that for Coastal Zones (SD1) and Cultural landscapes (SD3) are at or over budget while SD2, SD4 and SD5 are under budget although with a number of projects still to complete. Note that in the ecosystem profile, not all SDs were eligible in all sub-regions - e.g. Cabo Verde was only eligible for SD 1 and 4, the Middle East only for SD 3 and 4, etc. This was relaxed in some cases after the MTA.

SD1 on Coastal Zones is seen to have been very successful. Some countries - notably Cabo Verde – have used this direction predominantly. There has been a strong focus on projects which protect coastal biodiversity (Investment Priority 1.1) but also many projects with a substantial involvement of fishermen to seek more sustainable practices (IP 1.2). There is a recognition that large scale Integrated Coastal Zone Management projects are difficult both to conceptualise but also to achieve the necessary influence on Government policy (IP 1.3). However there have been a number of initiatives which have developed co-management of marine and coastal protected areas with Government agencies.

SD2 on Freshwater ecosystems has delivered very successfully on building a knowledge base and working with local stakeholders to reduce threats (IP 2.1 and IP 2.2). Again, there is a recognition that river basin management is complex and requires significant levels of Government buy in (IP 2.3). Some of the best examples of collaboration between different projects have come from initiatives around the large freshwater lakes in the Balkans. This investment priority is the most underspent at 85% of anticipated budget, and it has generally been more difficult to invest in freshwater projects in some of the other sub-regions.

SD3 on Cultural Landscape appears to have been quite hard to invest in at the start of the project, with a degree of uncertainty amongst both the RIT and the potential grantees as to what would make a successful project and some complexity in understanding the nature of traditional farming practices and their positive and negative impacts on biodiversity. Guidance was solicited through proposals in both North Africa and the Middle East and this seems to have been successful in clarifying the types of projects which could work. Subsequently some very successful projects have emerged from this strategic direction. These projects have been accompanied by considerable lesson learning and it's important that these are well disseminated so as to encourage scaling up and replication of such activities which by their nature occur over very large parts of the Mediterranean landscape.

SD4 on Plants has been very successful in terms of outcomes with a lot of new species data, large numbers of trainees with newly found skills (Investment Priority 4.1), and good protected areas and innovative outcomes which make excellent stories for communicating the programme (IP 4.2, IP 4.3). As mentioned above this is one of the areas where a voluntary working group was recruited to give the RIT access to specialist knowledge.

Finally, SD5 has been successful, especially in terms of new learning, experience sharing and networks (IP 5.1). There has also been a significant contribution towards the activities of international conventions (IP 5.2). However, this was hampered by the loss of travel opportunities during the pandemic and there seem to have been fewer national workshops to feed project outputs into CBD and related reporting, than was anticipated, or which occurred in Phase 1 of the programme. This also led to an underspend against budget on this Direction. Several consultees proposed that this programme be strengthened in future both through national level advocacy activities and also by a more structured organisational development and training programme.

#### 4.4.3 Observation on delivery in Countries

The majority of eligible Countries in the hotspot have seen significant investment. A few have been quite difficult for a number of political and security reasons. Unfortunately, Turkey did not endorse the Ecosystem Profile and so investment could not take place in one of the most important countries in the region for biodiversity. Restrictions on the funding of NGOs limited investment in Egypt and Algeria (as well as the late endorsement in the latter country). Grants were more easily made to private sector companies in Egypt, and universities in Algeria. Insecurity as well as complications in transferring money limited investment in Libya although flexibility was shown in which sites were invested in. Given the constraints, the programme here can be considered at least a partial success.

More positively the decision of the CEPF Donor Council to allow investment in Palestine led to a very successful set of projects with good support from the Government. Investment in both Bosnia-

Herzegovina and Morocco was slow to start with but liaison with civil society in these two countries and targeted proposals enabled levels to rise and for successful projects to be completed.

#### 4.5 Impact

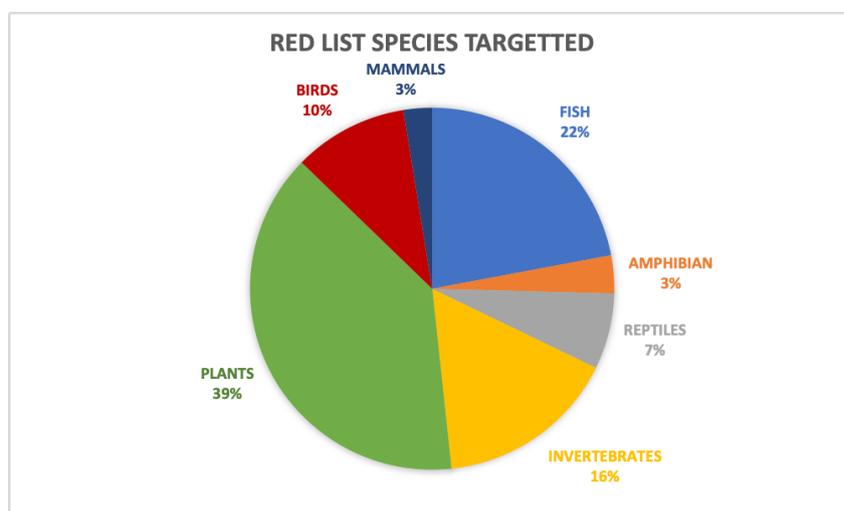
*To what extent have the targets set in the hotspot ecosystem profile for impacts on biodiversity conservation, human wellbeing, civil society capacity and enabling conditions been met?*

The efforts made by both CEPF and the RIT have led to successful outcomes in most areas which have benefitted all four pillars of CEPF's work. This report is not intended to be a full assessment of project impact and a brief summary only is included here.

##### 4.5.1 Biodiversity Conservation

Threatened species;

Overall, CEPF projects have benefited 139 globally threatened species (following categories of the IUCN International Red List: 22 CR, 60 EN and 57 VU). Generally, the species benefiting are some taxa which often attract less profile and investment from conservation programmes.



**Figure 4: Relative prevalence of species taxa in granted projects**

Protected Areas and KBAs:

Overall, CEPF grantees have worked so far in 57 KBAs, resulting in improvement of management practices in 662,876 hectares.

During phase 2, CEPF projects resulted in the creation of 8 new protected areas and extension of 3 existing areas, totaling 21,619 ha. The creation of protected areas is a lengthy process, and we expect several other protected areas to be declared in years to come as result of projects. In phase 1 the eventual figure was almost twice that reported at the end of the investment period.

Projects have supported management of 45 sites which are under some form of protected area status. Assessment using the Management Effectiveness Tracking Tool 40% of these have shown a significant increase in management effectiveness, while a further 40% had shown a limited improvement.

#### 4.5.2 Strengthening Civil Society

Outcomes according to the Civil Society Tracking Tool are shown in Section 4.1 above and demonstrate a significant growth in civil society capacity. A further assessment of 85 organisations was made across the five thematic areas of delivery, strategic planning, human resources, and organizational and financial planning. Results showed that NGOs grew in all areas but particularly in organizational and financial planning.

NGOs in the Balkans and Middle East demonstrate generally higher existing capacities and the increases are therefore proportionately smaller. Increase in capacity is higher in North Africa and particularly so in Cabo Verde. This is supported by anecdotal comment from the RIT who also note the many unmeasurable facets of individual and organizational growth, and the cohesion of the sector as a whole, where many organizations are now collaborating in national or local networks and on issues such as strategic planning, transboundary site conservation and policy and advocacy.

#### 4.5.3 Human Wellbeing

Three aspects of this are considered here although there are no data yet analyzed for some aspects.

Firstly, the structured training to students and local communities has enabled successful training of at least 7152 people (4047 male and 3105 female). There was a strong focus on training of young professionals and students for example 301 students trained through 31 projects on botany and plant conservation, and assistance with about 30 MScs and PhDs on conservation-related topics.

Support to community livelihoods has come especially the SD3 projects in cultural landscapes for example at Shebenik Jabllanice National Park - the largest in Albania. This project sought to arrest the decline in alpine pastures due to the loss of conservation friendly grazing as people moved to towns. Shepherds were provided with water points, solar electricity and internet access, as well as the establishment of tourism enterprises. The success of this work has led other donors to start to replicate and scale up these activities. Similar evidence from projects in Morocco and Jordan has been observed where farmers and women's groups had been trained in the development of sustainable local products and incentivised to maintain 'nature friendly' grazing management.

CEPF prioritises gender empowerment and equality and uses different tools for tracking/supporting gender empowerment. The Gender Tracking Tool (GTT) is about measuring an organisation's understanding of and commitment to gender issues, and the Gender Toolkit provides guidance on project design and implementation with regard to gender issues. The RIT has promoted this issue through discussion in masterclasses and supervision missions etc. It was discussed that all projects have a gender dimension and there are opportunities everywhere. For example, in many countries women will never become fishers but there are other roles that they can play in the fishing industry. There is huge regional variation, and whereas in some countries gender equality is considered normal, for others it is more challenging. The example was given of Libya where a number of grantee NGOs now have 1 or 2 women on their Boards. While this represents modest progress, it can nonetheless alter the dynamics of how that organisation address issues and approaches project implementation.

#### 4.5.4 Enabling Conditions

This considers improving knowledge for conservation planning, influencing policies for biodiversity mainstreaming, and influencing investment and leveraging. Certainly, the investment programme has influenced policies at national and provincial levels. Many avenues to mainstream biodiversity considerations into decision making were explored, depending on the local political context, during the five years of CEPF investment, leading to 28 laws or regulations being officially declared, on eight main topics including on protected area designation, species protection, ecosystem management and planning – a figure to be compared with results of phase 1 when 15 policies and regulations were influenced.

There was a feeling from consultees that there is still more opportunity to influence progress in this area. While the relationship between civil society and government remains challenging in a number of countries in the hotspot, consultees would like to see more efforts made to disseminate the results of successful projects to government so as to raise awareness of the positive outcomes that have been achieved. Part of this approach would involve an active program of inviting government delegations to visit field projects so as to appreciate the impacts both on biodiversity conservation and people's livelihoods.

#### 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?*

In contrast to the first phase, a far higher proportion of the budget was allocated to national rather than regional organisations, with 91% of projects and 89% of the budget comparing with 75% of grants and 61% of the budget in phase 1. This reflects the growing capacity of local organisations, and a number of Phase 1 Small Grantees became Large Grantees in Phase 2. Large organizations funded in Phase 2 were mostly those from EU countries within the hotspot who were working to support civil society in the eligible countries. This shift in approach was endorsed at the end of Phase 1 by a number of the larger organisations themselves who concurred that they often had greater access to other sources of funding than smaller local NGOs. These larger organisations may still have a role in contributing at a strategic level to the CEPF programme in future as they may have additional contacts and experience which augment those available to either the smaller grantee organisations or to the RIT themselves.

This represents an important niche of CEPF in promoting smaller civil society organisations and grantees were appreciative of this, noting that CEPF support often took a risk in investing in them and built their capacity, confidence and credibility to subsequently seek funding from other established donors. 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.

Two grantee consultees were private consultancy companies whose main business was commercial contracts. One of these was a national consultancy while the other was based in France but supported their subsidiary on North Africa. This represents an approach to engaging the private sector which both felt many other donors would be resistant to. They appreciated that CEPF accepted them as genuine members of civil society and saw this as an interesting opportunity to engage in conservation work at a much lower remuneration than their normal work. They felt that

the interaction with local civil society had been of benefit to both parties and there may be other private companies who would welcome similar opportunities to contribute to conservation.

#### 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?*

Following the advice of the Phase 1 evaluation, there was a conscious policy from CEPF and the RIT to seek to spread grant awards widely throughout civil society in eligible countries of the Mediterranean and to identify more priority sites than resources would support, in the knowledge that some areas would not be tackled during Phase 2 either for security reasons, or because civil society was not currently operating across all KBAs or priority corridors. At the same time, it was suggested that, while new sites would always be considered, impact could be ensured by continuing to invest in areas where previous projects had been successful and could be built on.

This approach, notwithstanding a willingness to take some risks in countries and localities which were difficult, helped to ensure that a high proportion of projects secured successful outcomes. The corollary of this could be that there would be a few failures where conditions simply would not permit projects to be successfully completed. In fact, out of more than 172 projects awarded, only around 5 were terminated, and even here almost all grant funding was retrieved. This represents a very high level of success in what are some high-risk areas and this reflects the high level of scrutiny, diligence and support by the RIT and CEPF. Where grants were considered high risk, more stringent measures were introduced, for example monthly highlight and financial reporting.

Certainly, there have been a number of constraints across the region. As discussed above some countries remain challenging to operate in, both in securing Government support and in basic actions including financial transfer. Success here and elsewhere required a high degree of flexibility. In some cases, this required some loosening of constraints around project locations for example in Libya where conflict limited grantees to operating outside of some priority KBAs (although still in highly biodiverse areas). Training programmes were also adjusted, for example within prospective Libyan grantees facilitated to travel to Tunisia for training.

The programme also exhibited a high degree of flexibility in assisting projects to complete their work successfully, including allowing alterations to budget and activities where clear justifications could be given, and allowing no cost extensions. Where completing projects encountered particular difficulties outside of their control or unexpected opportunities, then small amounts of additional funding were released which helped these problems to be overcome or opportunities seized. Finally, it was recognised that long term conservation success requires effective organisations to be sustained, and there were a number of examples of support to overcome crisis, for example support to Lebanese NGOs to repair offices and vital infrastructure following the Beirut explosion of August 2020.

## 5. Lessons learned from the Implementation of Phase 2 of the Hotspot

The following section attempts to draw together 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 programme over the last six years. I have attempted to group them in a logical order but there are of course many overlaps.

### Overall structure and performance of the Mediterranean programme.

The Mediterranean Basin is a large and complex hotspot, spanning three continents, more than 20 countries and numerous languages. Managing a programme across the eligible states is complex and cannot effectively be done from a single central location. The division into four sub-regions, each with a Programme Officer has been highly effective and should continue. No alternative structures for this basic unit of operation were proposed by any consultee. Wherever possible the Programme Officers should operate from within or adjacent to the relevant sub-region, although there are some nuances to this by way of political situations, travel logistics and legal and administrative complexities of employment.

The variety of languages in the Mediterranean Basin is also complex and the ability of the RIT to operate in six major languages (Albanian, Arabic, English, French, Portuguese and Serbo-Croat) has made a huge difference to their ability to engage with stakeholders across the eligible countries, and to sense checking of technical and financial reports.

The RIT has played a critical role in the delivery and success of the CEPF Programme. 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, all of this activity comes at a cost. The Mediterranean is an expensive region to operate in, and the large distances involved mean that supporting projects and undertaking monitoring and evaluation all add to these costs. CEPF anticipates that the costs of managing the RIT will be not normally be in excess of 15% of the total grant budget. This has proved hard to maintain in the Mediterranean and may not be realistic given the current expectations on the RIT, let alone with additional activities. The level of these costs 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’.

Given the wide physical separation of the RIT members, achieving good team cohesion is critical. This has been greatly assisted by a well-managed weekly meeting, experience sharing and occasional face to face events and joint field missions. The latter notably includes an annual weeklong CEPF/RIT retreat. These occurred in Brussels, Istanbul and Hyeres in the last 3 years although previously the pandemic had prevented them from happening.

### Donor environment and coordination

The Mediterranean Basin has a broad and fluid donor environment. CEPF fills an essential niche which currently centers on significantly contributing to biodiversity conservation through the

channel of local and national civil society organisations. CEPF does record leverage - which includes co-financing for the grant, as well as follow-on funding for project continuation or for related funding. CEPF and the RIT raised an additional \$3.6 million during the course of the programme at portfolio level, while grantees reported USD 4.5 million as leverage at project level so far. Beyond this, CEPF plays a catalytic role with many examples where young organisations have completed CEPF grants and gone on to secure larger funds from elsewhere. Examples of this were offered from Montenegro and also of a CEPF funded assessment leading to the major investment in a wastewater treatment works at Lake Ohrid, North Macedonia.

Many consultees stressed the importance of CEPF retaining its strong focus on biodiversity outcomes. CEPF is rare in this aspect. This is to the credit of all CEPF's donor organisations and should not be lost, for example by broadening the scope of donors to any who maybe demand different priorities.

Ongoing liaison with the other donors is extremely valuable, not least to continually monitor priorities and identify any gaps. CEPF could play a key role in ensuring this liaison is effective, for example through greater involvement in coordinating the donor roundtable.

#### Project management and Grant management

CEPF has funded a huge range of successful grants across the Mediterranean Basin. Of course, there are many important lessons arising from these individual projects, some of which have been captured in webinars, and other documentation.

Consultees described some impressive impacts where several projects were funded for example at Lake Skadar and the Ulcinj Salinas in Montenegro. Often there has been great benefit from extending grants or awarding follow on activities. In considering priorities for a possible Phase 3, strong consideration should be given to where follow up from Phase 2 projects can still offer benefits.

A number of areas were noted where the RIT has developed innovations which appear to have been useful and which go beyond the normal requirements of CEPF. If these are deemed successful then they could be adopted by CEPF for use in future Phases and indeed in other hotspots. For example:

- the insertion of a section asking applicants to consider their capacity building needs and to include one element of this within their project activities and budget.
- Asking applicants to research and consider the context of their application to encourage them to understand existing data and information so as to improve their proposal and avoid duplicating work.
- Small calls for particular themes, for example Karst systems in Bosnia-Herzegovina
- More extensive use of external project reviews in order gain additional understanding of the context and quality of short-listed applications

It is important to remain grantee focused. Grantees appreciated all the support and guidance during the project preparation and contracting phases, and the practice of trying to get the last grant installments paid quickly to avoid cash flow issues.

## Capacity Building

The RIT has made a very strong contribution to capacity building, both within the context of the development and implementation of projects, but also in a wider organisational perspective. This is fundamental to CEPF's mission. Notable inputs have been to the development of organisational strategies and plans, the introduction of training events on project design and project proposal writing, and the training opportunities for young taxonomists. Good use has been made of the grantee network, as other more experienced individuals and institutions are often best placed to assist others.

The CSTT has been a critical tool to measure this increase in capacity. At the same time, most consultees felt that it can tell only part of the story. Sometimes the wider benefits of organisational support are best expressed in stories and experiences communicated by the benefitting individuals themselves.

A number of organisations have been assisted to form informal or formal networks of grantees at the local, national or sub-regional level. This can be hugely beneficial to all. The best formed example is the evolving NGO network on Cabo Verde. These networks work best when they have some clear objectives for where collaboration can add value.

Some of the capacity building has been reactive in response to issues arising in one place. 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 organisational development.

CEPF have 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 has the comprehensive use of gender disaggregated data. Engaging women in small local enterprise development has been an effective route to empowerment. In conservative societies, getting at least some women's representation e.g., on NGO Boards can start to shift the style and content of discussion.

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

Long term visions for civil society were planned but have only been developed in the Balkans – the resulting document was well received and has been used by other donors including the EU. More generally these concepts require better definition as few NGOs are genuinely self-sufficient, even the larger ones requiring external income for much of their work. CEPF is not intended to be a donor in any single hotspot for the very long term. Their role may be best considered as building capacity and resilience. More sustainable NGOs have sufficient internal capacity and diverse income sources such that they can survive the loss of any one income stream.

The investment has generated some excellent outcomes and some projects which in themselves have potential to be scaled up and replicated within their or neighbouring counties. Some of the outcomes from SD3, which have found ways of supporting and retaining traditional agricultural systems which benefit biodiversity but which are becoming economically or culturally archaic, are great examples of this. Excellent communications have been used to promote these but thought needs to be given to how to better promote outcomes to decision makers in government and other donors, so as to encourage policy support and larger scale funding support.

Specifically, some of the work in Cabo Verde provides excellent examples of success which could be shared with other island archipelagos, particularly around the application of research and the networking between sister NGOs.

#### Thematic and Geographical issues

The focus on KBAs does give a strong focus alongside the larger connecting habitat corridors. Views were expressed about taking a sharper or lesser focus on other sites outside of KBAs. Most felt that the approaches to KBAs and strategic directions was about right. In countries where there is limited survey knowledge, or where key species occur outside KBAs, it will be important to retain flexibility.

Although some countries are difficult to engage in, some have been more successful than could have been expected. There have been some excellent outcomes from the recent investment in Palestine, and NGOs in Libya have delivered some good work in spite of ongoing security concerns. CEPF needs to continue to balance reasonable risks in order to grow capacity and undertake vital conservation work in more challenging environments.

## 6. Main conclusions and recommendations

The CEPF Programme is currently entering a transitional phase with a severely reduced staffing within the RIT, pending a clear funding model to emerge which everyone hopes will lead to a Third Phase of the Hotspot investment programme. Meanwhile, a number of grants are just finishing at the end of 2023, while 2 Large Grants and 13 Small Grants will still be running through to October 2024. At the time of writing funds have been secured to sustain the RIT through 2024.

Pending a final decision and additional successful fundraising for Phase 3, 2024 presents an opportunity to review the ecosystem profile, and identify the priorities for investment during a next phase. During this period CEPF will also need to decide which organisation 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 organisation is subsequently selected for this task.

CEPF's operational model in the Mediterranean Basin has been very successful since its commencement in 2012. This reflects the strengths of the hotspot approach, the contribution of the RIT and the good working relationship between the two. Notably consultees stressed:

- that CEPF is the only donor who develops an evidence base and has a clear focus on biodiversity;
- that the structure and operation of the RIT has worked really well, especially the four sub-regions;
- the ecosystem profile is the product of a strong consultative process and is respected by all and clear in its objectives;
- that BirdLife International as the RIT has performed strongly and that its constituent team have been committed, supportive, impartial and formed an excellent team with complementary skills. Notably, changes of staff have occurred with minimal impact on the support given to grantees. RIT staff have an intimate knowledge of the region and particularly of civil society;
- that good progress has been made despite many individual challenges in constituent countries and the detrimental impact to all of the pandemic.

A number of recommendations are made for consideration by CEPF and the RIT for the transitional period and for the development of a potential third phase. Few of these are absolutes because there are complex, inter-weaving factors involved, and the managers of the programme have far more knowledge of these issues than can be gained in a short evaluation.

#### Grant impact

CEPF should consider how to better measure the impact and contribution of a programme of investment of this type. It was felt that, while the programme was hugely successful, it was hard to assess what overall contribution it had made, bearing in mind the scale of the challenge and the contributions of other donor organisations. Some components of this could be:

- Increased harmonization between the Global and Portfolio indicators so that project grantees can more easily see how their contribution fits, and vice versa;
- Some further development of the monitoring and evaluation within the Mediterranean programme so that there is some more quantified and realistic measure on impact which can be tracked. The RIT could consider appointing someone as an M and E lead Officer if resources allow;
- Some more detailed assessments of the impact of some of the more significant projects, 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. Such assessments were made in the Eastern Afrotropical biodiversity hotspot, and could be undertaken by RIT staff or by independent evaluators.

#### Donor environment and coordination

CEPF could more fully evaluate the enabling impact of their grants in so far as they are felt by grantees to lead to additional funds being raised from other donors. Grantees could also be asked at the end of the programme, to identify any further grants which they genuinely thought had been leveraged as a result of the success of an earlier CEPF grant.

Beyond the donor roundtable and some initiatives at national level, perhaps donors could collaborate more on project promotion and communication where they have collaborated on projects in the same area or theme. Beyond the potential awareness raising benefits of this, it's a good principle that all donors should acknowledge the role that each other has played in a successful outcome.

#### 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 organisations collaborate for more impact. These are felt by consultees to have demonstrated this greater impact where they have happened. These might include an increase in transboundary projects which become more feasible as organisations gain capacity and network more;
- Some more strategic grants, for example to undertake regional or national biodiversity surveys in lesser-known regions or countries. These could be collaborative between several local NGOs or sourced to a larger organization to coordinate;

- Where possible a more regular set of calls at predicted intervals, with thought given to some phasing of reporting to smooth out RIT workloads. Some consultees stressed the importance of ensuring that all calls are very clear about who is eligible and what types of projects will be supported;
- But also, more targeted calls where appropriate for example similar to that made for Karst ecosystems in Bosnia-Herzegovina, or where investment priorities are lagging behind;
- The comprehensive use of external reviews where it can add value and context and aid better decision making on short-listed grants. The Technical Working Group formed for plants provides one vehicle for this, and some Advisory Committee members may also be willing to assess grants if any doubts exist;
- Where it would help to build trust and relationships some Governments may be willing to help to organise and facilitate project development, as has been the case in Palestine.

### Capacity Building

Capacity building should continue to be a high priority for CEPF investment and effort, unless or until the donor landscape changes to indicate this is better led by other donors. Almost all consultees felt that capacity building of their staff and organisations was one of the major positive outcomes of their engagement with CEPF.

Strategic Direction 5 should probably continue in a similar form, although elements of capacity should still be addressed within other strategic directions, for example the training of young botanists under SD4. SD5 should retain the flexibility to react but could be more formally structured so that there are some overarching themes which are designed to benefit a wider suite of civil society actors. The training given in project proposal writing 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 organisations beyond individual projects. Some ideas for this include:

- Financial training is frequently noted as one of the most important aspects of capacity building since this is a weakness in so many of the grantees;
- Training in community engagement - how to get local people involved and supportive (they could be engaged in more projects via citizen science);
- 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;
- Policy and Advocacy training to equip grantees with skills and confidence to interact more with government, whatever the challenges in a particular country.

Alongside this, consideration should be given to whether there are additional ways of measuring the impact of capacity building programmes, even if these are more qualitative than quantitative.

### Networking and exchange of experience

There have already been a number of formal and informal national networks of grantees (and other civil society organisations) formed, often stimulated by CEPF's work. These are not CEPF's responsibility but their formation and aspects of their operation could be supported, either through RIT staff support, or through grants to hold events, meeting or cover other costs. Such networks function best when they have clear objectives. They would also be a vehicle to have collaborative

meetings with Government agencies, which offers an excellent vehicle for soft advocacy of CEPF successes and lessons.

Overall, there was strong support for more peer-to-peer visits, experience exchanges by face to face and remote means, national and sub-regional themed meetings. Some events that were planned but cancelled due to the pandemic but may be worth reconsidering in future, for example relating to rivers and hydroelectricity in the Balkans. It's suggested that such national workshops can be organised and run by one or more local NGOs through a grant rather than directly by the RIT.

#### 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 organisations. This could be through staff resources (for example a Capacity Building Officer) or by targeted support by way of follow up grants, or some small annual maintenance support (some grantees do currently undertake follow up visits to sites beyond project duration at their own cost but not all will be in a position to do this).

An increasing number of projects are supporting small enterprises in project sites who are producing goods which could be seen to be 'nature friendly' and therefore worthy of a price premium. These would normally attract a higher price, reflecting (in some cases) the additional environmental benefits and costs. One consultee noted that the market for such 'nature friendly' products remains very limited e.g., in Middle East. The questions arises as to whether CEPF could help by granting one or more appropriate organisations to promote such goods to international markets?

This issue also relates back to the issue of scaling up and replicating successful projects. 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 programmes elsewhere.

Possible ways of increasing traction with Government are to produce more communications geared directly at them, to invite Government officials to attend more field visits to project sites, and to organise more regular networking meetings, including to ensure that project data and lessons are fed into national biodiversity reports.

#### Thematic and Geographical issues

Proposals for changes to the Ecosystem profile and strategic directions are beyond the scope of this evaluation. However, some ideas were presented, and discussions held, and the following are included for the record. Generally, most felt that the Ecosystem Profile needed some updating but that expensive and time-consuming re-writing should not be necessary.

All consultees broadly supported the existing strategic directions and, perhaps unsurprisingly, no one suggested halting any of them.

There was some support for looking for genuinely marine, as opposed to coastal, projects within SD1.

SD3 remains the theme that people feel still needs further support and development, particularly in the Balkans where it started only in 2021. Here it is still challenging to understand the connections between culture and biodiversity, and how to achieve effective implementation. Perhaps some guidance of the kind already produced in North Africa and the Middle East would help, and some strategy setting at the national levels?

There are also strong linkages within the existing strategic directions to climate mitigation and adaptation which need to be explored. This reflects the view of a number of consultees that climate adaptation should be brought into the programme in some way. 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.

All are agreed that it is highly desirable to seek to bring Turkey into the programme in Phase 3, as one of the most important Mediterranean countries for biodiversity. It was noted that this does need an injection of funds in order not to divert from other areas. Some countries may continue to be difficult, and CEPF should be wary of investing more funds if outcomes are uncertain. In such countries and hopefully also in future in Syria, at the least civil society could be engaged through training opportunities including in adjacent countries.

#### Programme management and effectiveness

Many ideas were offered on how the RIT could perform even more effectively than now. A starting point for this is that in a fully funded Phase 3, the current level of staffing needs to increase, at least to a Full-time RIT Leader, Small Grants Manager and full-time equivalent Programme Officers in the Balkans, Middle East and North Africa, plus a part-time officer for Cabo Verde, a Communications Officer and perhaps an M&E officer. Other specialist roles such as a Capacity Building Officer, will depend upon the needs identified through a revised ecosystem profile and suite of strategic directions.

There is no easy solution to both increasing the level of activity by the RIT and keeping costs within acceptable limits. Some points were raised which should be considerations in this:

- Clearly separating out what might be termed 'administrative overheads' and those actions which are directly related to furthering the objectives of the programme including capacity building and networking in order to enhance the overall funding available to the region, and which all should understand are necessary functions;
- Limiting the overall number of staff in the RIT by seeking to combine any part time roles, if a candidate can be found who has the skills to undertake both tasks;
- Increasing the total size of the programme (i.e. more funding for grants) should introduce economies of scale and keep the overall overhead percentage in check.

## Annexes

### Annex 1 RIT Evaluation Terms of Reference

#### 1) Background

The Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF) is a joint initiative of l'Agence Française de Développement, Conservation International, the European Union, the Global Environment Facility, the Government of Japan and the World Bank 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 Mediterranean Basin Biodiversity Hotspot, the role of RIT is performed by BirdLife International, based Cambridge, UK. CEPF investment in this hotspot totals US\$14.08 million, for a program taking place from 2017 through 2023. The investment includes the following countries: Albania, Algeria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cabo Verde, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Montenegro, Morocco, North Macedonia, Palestine and Tunisia.

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 Mediterranean Basin 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 Mediterranean Basin 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 Mediterranean Basin 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 ( $\leq$ \$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 Mediterranean Basin 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 Mediterranean Basin 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 Mediterranean Basin 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 September 2023, and 15 December 2023. Draft deliverables will be prepared no later than 15 November 2023 and submitted to the CEPF Secretariat for review. Final deliverables, incorporating comments from the CEPF Secretariat, will be completed by 15 December 2023. The tentative date for a virtual presentation to CEPF is 11 December 2023.

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

CEPF (2017) Ecosystem Profile Mediterranean Basin Biodiversity Hotspot. Also available as a 2019 popular brochure summary

CEPF (2020): Mid-Term Assessment CEPF Investment in the Mediterranean Basin Hotspot September 2020

CEPF (2023): (Draft) Final Assessment of CEPF investment in The Mediterranean Basin Hotspot (Phase II – 2017-2023)

CEPF: TOGETHER Local solutions for nature conservation Lessons from the Mediterranean (project brochure)

CI/GEF: Gender mainstreaming in a multi-tiered fund: An example from the CI-GEF's Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund

Cynosure for CEPF (2022): Evaluation of lessons learned in relation to the regional implementation team for the Guinean forests of West Africa biodiversity hotspot

Emerald Network for CEPF (2022): Evaluation of Lessons Learned to Inform Reinvestment in the Madagascar and Indian Ocean Islands Biodiversity Hotspot

Mojmir Mrak and Milan Ružić for CEPF (2016): Long-Term Strategic Vision for Graduating Civil Society from CEPF Support in the Balkan, Mediterranean Basin Biodiversity Hotspot

Contract between CEPF and BirdLife International for the operation of the Mediterranean Basin hotspot RIT

Annual Portfolio Overview Reports and biannual Operational Reports from RIT to CEPF

Other technical and financial reports from the RIT to CEPF

Notes from and reports to Mediterranean Advisory Committee meetings

Small Grant and Large Grant LoI templates

Supervision and mission reports produced by Mediterranean Basin RIT following field visits.

Post-project grantee Questionnaire responses

Some of the above documents will be confidential and not freely available. Many are available on

[Mediterranean Basin | CEPF](#)

[Mediterranean biodiversity hotspot - BirdLife International](#)

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 Oct to Nov 2023
Pierre Carret	Grant Director	Several times Oct to Nov 2023
Oliver Langrand	Executive Director	11/10/2023
Caroline Borek	CEPF Grant Manager for Mediterranean	11/15/2023
Antonia Cermak-Terzian	Director, Grants Management	11/17/2023
<b>Staff of the BirdLife RIT</b>		
Maaïke Manten	RIT Manager	Several times Oct to Nov 2023
Awatef Abiadh	Programme Officer for North Africa	11/01/2023
Aurélien Garreau	Programme Officer for Cabo Verde	11/02/2023
Salwa Elhalawani	Programme Officer for the Middle East and Small Grants Manager	10/23/2023

Vedran Lucic	Programme Officer for the Balkans	10/20/2023
Marijana Demajo	Small Grants Coordinator for the Balkans	10/23/2023
Mirjan Topi	Project Assistant for Albania	10/23/2023
Enas Al Sarahneh	Communications Officer	10/30/2023
Liz Young (nee Smith)	Previous RIT Manager	11/14/2023
Borut Rubinic	Previous Programme Officer for the Balkans	10/26/2023
<b>CEPF Grantees</b>	(Small Grantee unless noted LG)	
Rym Zakhama/Akrem Dridi	Atutax, Tunisia SD1	11/02/2023
Edouard Jean	Association les Amis de Capte Tunisie SD3	11/08/2023
Alexandre Thouzeau	Fondation Biotope, Morocco (LG) SD3	11/16/2023
Albert Taxonera	Associacao Projeto Biodiversidade (LG), Cabo Verde SD1	11/02/2023
Keider Neves	Biosfera (LG) Cabo Verde SD1	11/09/2023
Silvan Roque	Terrimar (Cabo Verde) SD1/4	11/02/2023
Majdi Salameh	Amjad and Majdi Salameh Company (LG), Jordan SD3	11/20/2023
Anton Kalilieh	Nature Palestine Society SD4	11/09/2023
Petra Pop Ristova	MillieuKontakt (LG), North Macedonia SD2 SD2	11/09/2023
Gjoko Zoroski	Ecotourism 2016, North Macedonia SD3	11/02/2023
Jelena Popovic	Montenegrin Ecologists Society SD1/2/4	11/08/2023
Migena Kukli	Shoqata AlbNatyra SD3	11/08/2023
<b>Government Stakeholders</b>	Position	Date spoken to
Dr Issa Albardeiya	DG, Environmental Resources Directorate, Palestine	10/30/2023
<b>RIT Advisory Committee members</b>		
Paule Gros	MAVA Foundation (now independent)	11/07/2023

Dr Jean Jalbert, Dr Raphael Bille	Director General and Programme Director, Tour du Valat	11/08/2023
Dr Maher Mahjoub, Catherine Numa, Carla Danelutti	Director, Biodiversity Specialist, Programme Coordinator IUCN Mediterranean Programme	11/08/2023
Dr Fabrice Bernard	Delegate, Conservatoire du Littoral	11/10/2023

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

<p><b>CEPF Mediterranean 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 Mediterranean programme, 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>

7. 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

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?

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?

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 Mediterranean 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 Mediterranean 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?

28. 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

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

**CEPF Mediterranean Hotspot Evaluation Questionnaire**

**Questionnaire focused on current and previous 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?
<u>Sustainability</u>
16. What support, if any, was your organization provided to improve the effectiveness of your organization's implementation and long-term sustainability?
<u>Lessons learned and recommendations.</u>
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 the Mediterranean?

### **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.

<b>1. Evaluation of <u>Relevance</u> (these questions also address lessons learned on Coverage)</b>	<b>Inputs and sources</b>
<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>	
<p>- how did the <i>geographic focus</i> of the grant program respond to priorities identified in the EP?</p> <p>- how did the <i>thematic focus</i> of the grant program respond to priorities identified in the EP?</p>	<p>Ecosystem profile; KBA and Red List; grant database;</p>

<p>- within the priority geographies and themes, have priority actions for <u>coastal biodiversity</u> been funded through the grant program?</p> <p>- within the priority geographies and themes, have priority actions for <u>freshwater biodiversity</u> been funded through the grant program?</p> <p>- 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?</p> <p>- within the priority geographies and themes, have priority actions for <u>plants</u> been funded through the grant program?</p>	
<p><b><i>To what extent has the RIT delivered on its ToR?</i></b></p>	
<p>- has the RIT planned and allocated resources to address the Nine components of the TOR?</p> <p>Component 1. Coordinate CEPF investment in the hotspot;</p> <p>Component 2. Support the mainstreaming of biodiversity into public policies and private sector business practices;</p> <p>Component 3. Communicate the CEPF investment throughout the hotspot;</p> <p>Component 4. Build the capacity of local civil society;</p> <p>Component 5. Establish and coordinate a process for large grant (&gt;\$20,000) proposal solicitation and review;</p> <p>Component 6. Manage a program of small grants (≤\$20,000);</p> <p>Component 7. Monitor and evaluate the impact of CEPF’s large and small grants;</p> <p>Component 8. Lead the process to develop, over a three-month period, a long-term strategic vision for CEPF investment;</p> <p>Component 9. Reporting.</p>	<p>ToR; Consultation with RIT and CEPF</p>
<p><b><i>How has the RIT responded to the challenges and opportunities of the hotspots’ geography and biodiversity?</i></b></p>	
<p>- how has the approach taken been influenced by the geography and biodiversity of the hotspot?</p>	<p>EP; RIT; CEPF, independent sources</p>
<p><b><i>How has the RIT responded to the challenges and opportunities of the hotspots social, economic and political context?</i></b></p>	
<p>- how did the RIT’s planning and grant-making respond to social, economic and political factors identified in the EP and elsewhere?</p>	<p>EP; RIT; CEPF, independent sources</p>
<p><b>2. Evaluation of <u>Efficiency</u> (these questions also partly address lessons learned on <u>Accessibility</u>)</b></p>	
<p><i>Efficiency - How efficiently was the budget allocated to the RIT converted into results?</i></p>	

<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>Who received grant funds?</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 Effectiveness (these questions also address lessons learned on Accessibility, Adaptive Management and Impact)</b>	
<i>Effectiveness - What were the strengths and weakness of the RIT structure and capacities with regard to effective delivery of results?</i>	
<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>	
<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>	
<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>	
<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> </ul>	Consultations with RITs and Grantees

<p>- were there specific efforts to encourage the participation of high-priority, under-represented groups/categories of CSO as grantees/beneficiaries?</p>	
<p><b><i>How effective was the RIT's approach to awarding and managing grants?</i></b></p>	
<p>- was there timely decision-making on grant award and grantee requests?</p> <p>- how well did the RIT respond to requests for support and weaknesses identified in grantee projects? Were grantees happy with the support they received?</p> <p>- was the RIT flexible enough in allowing grantees to change their plans in response to obstacles and opportunities?</p> <p>- was grantee reporting timely and adequate?</p> <p>- did the RIT deal correctly with any applications where there could have been any perceived conflict of interest (especially BirdLife International partners)</p>	<p>Consultations with RITs and Grantees</p>
<p><b><i>How well was learning and adaptive management applied by the RIT?</i></b></p>	
<p>- 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?</p> <p>- were lessons learned from early grants applied to improve subsequent ones?</p> <p>- did the RIT monitor progress with grant-making against objectives and make adjustments (e.g. in later calls for proposals)?</p> <p>Were lessons learned from the first investment programme adopted and implemented?</p> <p>Was the mid term review process effective. Were lessons adopted and implemented?</p>	<p>Consultations with RITs and Grantees, independent sources</p>
<p><b><i>How effectively has grantee capacity been built?</i></b></p>	
<p>- did the RIT address CSO capacity issues as identified in the EP?</p> <p>- what actions have been taken to address capacity gaps that constrain the grants programme?</p> <p>- how appropriate was the RITs approach to grantee capacity building?</p> <p>- what impact did any capacity building activity have on subsequent grantee performance?</p>	<p>Consultations with RITs and Grantees</p>
<p><b><i>What programme impacts are attributable to approaches or actions undertaken by the RIT?</i></b></p>	
<p>- to what extent can positive impacts (as found by the final assessment or other evaluations) be attributed to the RIT's structure and approach?</p> <p>- 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)?</p>	<p>Consultations with CEPF, RITs, Govts, NGOs and Grantees</p>

<b>Additional questions addressing the wider context</b>
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Key questions include:
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| - 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? |
| - Have there been changes in the funding circumstances for CSOs operating in the hotspot since the EP?   |
| - How did the RIT/CEPF program coordinate with other grant programmes around the Mediterranean to ensure good coordination?  |
| - What recommendations can be made to guide the development of any future RIT in the Mediterranean hotspot so as to make it even more successful and effective?.                   |
| - 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?                |