



LEARNING - Adaptive Management: Maximizing conservation impact of MAVA's multi-partner programmes

OUR FINAL TRANSFORMATION

Since its establishment in 1994, the MAVA Foundation has supported close to 1000 projects, each contributing to *a future where biodiversity flourishes, especially in the Mediterranean, coastal West Africa and Switzerland; where the global economy supports human prosperity and a healthy planet; and where the conservation community is thriving*. By the time that MAVA closes its doors in 2022, we will have invested close to 1 billion Euro in a truly impressive conservation portfolio. And by that time, the foundation expects, as a return on this investment, to leave behind a solid legacy of sustained conservation impact on prioritised issues and a vibrant conservation community that is ready and able to jointly keep up the Herculean efforts.

This expectation challenged our team and our partners to unearth their true potential by drastically increasing focus and collaboration. Along the way, we are transforming how we work: shifting from loosely related projects and partners working on similar themes to strategically aligned partnerships, jointly delivering on clear and prioritised outcomes. Changing the focus of discussions and reflections - and our management style - from the great work we do, to the question of whether we are actually achieving impact.

Finding our way in this process has been fascinating, though at times tedious, for all involved. Here are some of the main elements of our transformation:

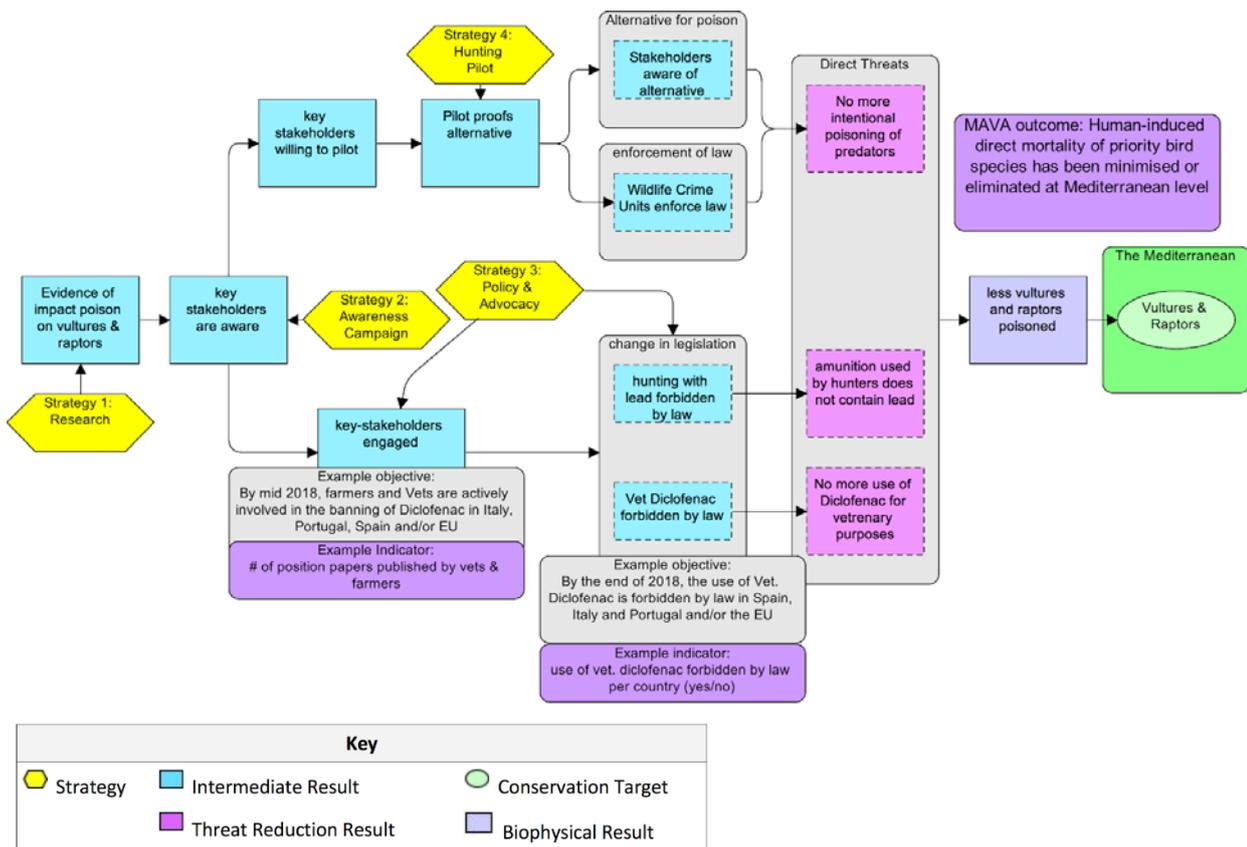
FINDING FOCUS

MAVA has moved from more loosely related projects to looking at the big picture and focusing on threat reduction. MAVA's work is organised around different programmes: (1) the Mediterranean; (2) Coastal West Africa; (3) Sustainable Economy; (4) Switzerland; and (5) a transversal unit to ensure impact and sustainability of the previous four programmes. Over the years, focal themes organically emerged within each of these programmes. With our partners, we have since further distilled these themes and reformulated them into 25 outcomes, pinning down the desired conservation impact of this last grant-making phase (2016-2022) around threat reduction objectives (see Julien Sémelin's blog, "[The question of our impact](#)" and an overview of the programmes on [MAVA's Website](#)). Threat reduction objectives focus on, for example, reducing by-catch of birds and turtles in West Africa and reducing unsustainable agricultural water use across basins in the Mediterranean.

Each of the 25 outcomes form the anchor of a co-created Outcome Action Plan (OAP). At the heart of each OAP lies a theory of change, explaining how the involved partners together think their collective work will lead to achieving the desired outcome. This theory of change spells out the key results needed to achieve the outcome and the relationship between these results. The results are accompanied by indicators that can help assess and discuss progress along this theory of change.



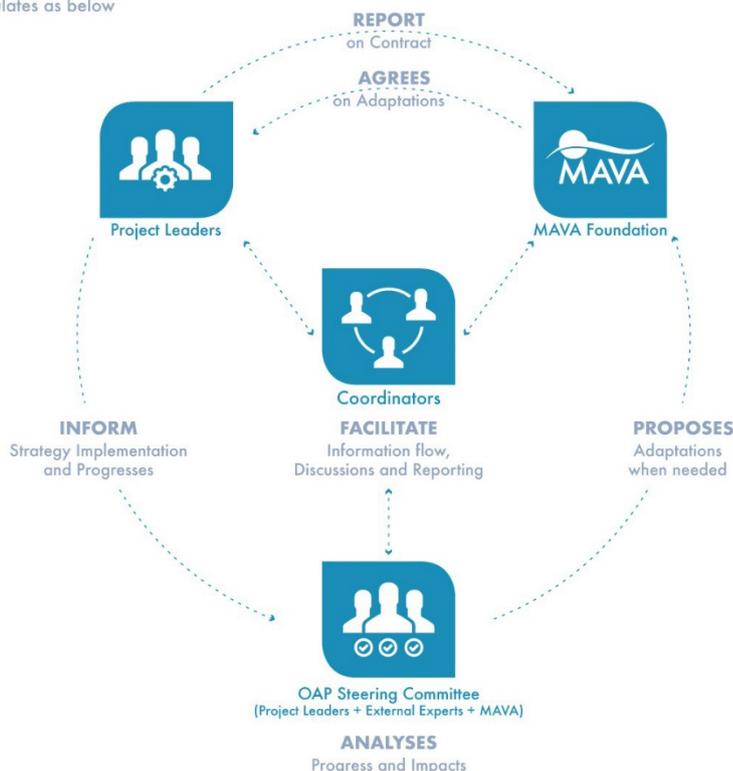
Photos: 2016 Workshop for developing the Outcome Action Plan - [Protecting breeding sites for sea turtles](#)



Schema 1: Adjusted theory of change to curb poisoning of vultures and raptors in the Mediterranean

OUR PARTNERS AT THE WHEEL

The **FLOW OF INFORMATION** circulates as below



MAVA has moved from working with individual projects to working with key partners on the OAP-level. Each OAP is run by a steering committee involving MAVA programme managers and partners. During annual or bi-annual steering committee meetings, the steering committee convenes a broader set of partners and stakeholders receiving MAVA funding to systematically review and fine-tune their work in order to learn and improve. Once adaptations are approved, they are ploughed back into the OAP, allowing it to evolve over time according to growing insights and expanding partnerships. The core tools accompanying this process are (1) the theory of change; (2) a scorecard used by partners to indicate progress towards key results and outcomes; and (3) the overall work plan.

OUR COMMON LANGUAGE & APPROACH

Each OAP and each steering committee are different in terms of focus, complexity, history, maturity and dynamics. Therefore, the detailed workings of the adaptive management process of each OAP and each steering committee are different. What they all share, however, is the use of the [CMP Open Standards](#) which helps all our teams to speak the same language, use a rigorous approach to conservation planning and management, and prepare to learn from one another.

MAVA and its partners are accompanied by [FOS Europe](#) - the European branch of Foundations of Success (FOS), an organisation specialised in adaptive conservation management. FOS Europe brings valuable experiences from similar processes elsewhere in the world and inspires others by sharing MAVA's experiences. They help us build the capacity and adjust our tools and processes to practice adaptive management.



Photos: 2018 Steering Committee of Coastal Lagoons in Oristano for [Enhancing the conservation of conservation of coastal wetlands in the Mediterranean Basin](#)

OUR PAIN & GAIN

Now that most of the architecture of the OAPs is completed, we are moving towards fully functional steering committees. Here are some of the lessons learned to date:

- **Strong, clear focus has helped refine our story:** Our collective work is much more focused, and the quality of our projects has improved considerably thanks to the collaboration and synergy between partners. The use of a theory of change has helped immensely to better explain our strategy to partners outside our world (including other donors), as it clearly explains our focus, what assumptions we are making and what we are trying to achieve. Our work is paying off.
- **Organic process is time-consuming but worthwhile:** It has taken a substantial amount of work and time from MAVA staff and partners to jointly design the different OAPs, the steering committees and the adaptive management systems... almost two years! Sometimes the process was unclear and frustrating, swinging back and forth between a bottom-up definition of the overarching theory of change for each OAP inspired by the on-going work on the ground, and top-down alignment of individual projects to this theory of change. Often, organisations were not able to send the same representatives to subsequent meetings - jeopardising continuity in thought and overall buy-in. With the benefit of hindsight, we could have designed a more compact process with clearer steps, instead of letting the process evolve organically over time. What kept us from doing this is our strong belief that there are no standard recipes and solutions - there is no one size that fits all, making us reluctant to force teams to follow a pre-defined process. Rather, we chose for each OAP to shape its own process in the belief that this would increase ownership, leadership and help teams transform on their own terms. Time will only tell if this was the right decision.
- **A different mindset is needed when thinking about impact at the programme level:** Our move to scale-up from projects to programmes, implied that we suddenly needed to be able to navigate

across scales and learn to assess the relevance and impact of individual projects in the context of programmatic, often regional outcomes. This required some adjustment time. For example, we needed a lot of time to figure out what we really needed to know on a OAP-level to improve effectiveness. Individual partners struggled to differentiate between indicators and thresholds at a project-level and at the OAP-level. Also, learning to design OAP-level scorecards to track impact implied technically complicated discussions and a mind-shift of partners. This has taken more time than anticipated, but is expected to pay-off.

THE ROAD AHEAD

Over the coming years, we hope to see steering committees build strong, cohesive and reactive partnerships that jointly deliver real impact and are better equipped to demonstrate it. We hope that the way we are currently set up stimulates critical thinking and real debate, forcing the urgently needed break-throughs on pressing conservation issues. In 2019 - using the results from a mid-term evaluation - we and our partners will pause and reflect on how we can jointly improve and support the sustainability of our initiatives and these coalitions of stakeholders beyond 2022.

We'll make sure that we share our lessons learned along the way.