

# Strategic Partnerships



MAVA's approach to scaling up conservation impact



# Strategic Partnerships

MAVA's approach to scaling up conservation impact

Salla Ba      Nico Boenisch      Luís Costa      Charlotte Karibuhoye Said  
Thierry Renaud      Julien Sémelin      Holger Schmid      Ilke Tilders



# Colophon

This work is licensed for use under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License. Under this Creative Commons license, you may use it as you see fit, provided you a) reference the original manual (but not in any way that suggests that MAVA and FOS endorses this derived work), and b) issue the derived work under a similar Creative Commons license or equivalent.



This book was produced using the Book Sprints methodology ([www.booksprints.net](http://www.booksprints.net)). The content was written by the authors during an intensive collaboration process conducted online over two weeks in April and May 2021.

Book Sprints facilitation: Faith Bosworth

Copy editing: Raewyn Whyte and Christine Davis

HTML book design: Manuel Vazquez

Illustrations and cover design: Henrik Van Leeuwen and Lennart Wolfert

Font: Futura

## Citation

This document should be cited as: MAVA & FOS (2021). *Strategic Partnerships: MAVA's approach to scaling up conservation impact*. MAVA Fondation pour la nature / FOS.

# Table of Contents

<b>Colophon</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Executive summary</b>	<b>6</b>
The vision	6
Effective partnership functioning	6
Impact on a scale that matters	7
Learning through adaptive management	7
An enabling donor	7
A worthwhile journey	8
<b>Preface</b>	<b>9</b>
Purpose of this book	9
Background	10
Acknowledgements	12
About MAVA Foundation	12
About FOS Europe	13
<b>Chapter 1: Strategic Partnerships</b>	<b>14</b>
Defining a Strategic Partnership	14
The four pieces of the puzzle	15
Strategic Partnerships in the MAVA context	18
<b>Chapter 2: Effective partnership functioning</b>	<b>20</b>
Relevant and diverse partners	21
Shared vision and outcomes	23
Governance and leadership built on trust	24
Balanced power dynamics	26
Funding and resources	27

<b>Chapter 3: Impact on a scale that matters</b>	<b>31</b>
The need for scaling up	31
Mechanisms	32
Scaling up in practice — stories from the field	34
<b>Chapter 4: Learning through adaptive management</b>	<b>39</b>
The need to keep questioning	39
The big picture captured in a Theory of Change	41
The main steps of the process	43
The Mid-Term Evaluation	46
Adaptations in practice — stories from the field	50
<b>Chapter 5: Through the lens of the MAVA Foundation</b>	<b>54</b>
Transferring power to the Strategic Partnership	55
Changing our ways	57
Engaging beyond individual projects	59
<b>Final thoughts</b>	<b>62</b>

# Executive summary

## The vision

The world faces big challenges for nature, society, and the economy. The coming decade is the time we have to find solutions that put us on the right path towards a better future. Today's interconnected and interdependent world requires people and organisations from multiple backgrounds and interests to find a better way to work together on shared objectives in order to find these solutions.

MAVA Foundation, whose vision is to create a world where biodiversity thrives and the economy supports human prosperity and a healthy planet, had to step up and walk the talk. In 2016, MAVA embarked with its partners on a transformative journey, aimed at ambitious and sustainable impact through meaningful collaboration.

A Strategic Partnership can best be described as a collaboration between actors with different but complementary capabilities, working towards achieving shared conservation outcomes on a scale that matters.

This book describes MAVA's approach to developing Strategic Partnerships, which requires a combination of: effective partnership functioning, impact at a scale that matters, learning through adaptive management, and an enabling donor.

## Effective partnership functioning

Well-functioning and result-delivering partnerships thrive on shared knowledge, responsibility, and objectives. The partnership needs to be as diverse as the challenge is complex. Governance models break down established power dynamics and reduce conflict of interest; coordination mechanisms efficiently deploy each partner's complementary strengths towards joint action.

## Impact on a scale that matters

Strategic Partnerships allow partners to step out of the traditional logic of singular problems and individual projects into a higher-level logic of systemic interconnections and more diverse and related sets of ambitious outcomes at a larger scale. These partnerships imply a change in the way partners work, shifting from action-oriented towards impact-oriented approaches.

Different mechanisms for scaling can be considered to achieve impact at a scale that is relevant. The choice of mechanisms depends on the nature of the conservation challenge, partners' capacities and objectives, and opportunities for change. Partners could, for example, extend the scope of the intervention, aim at transforming the context, or even target a deep transformation of the system.

## Learning through adaptive management

MAVA has adopted the Conservation Standards as methodology to shape Adaptive Management. The Conservation Standards offer a common framework with four distinct steps: Scoping; Design of the Outcome Action Plans; Reflecting and Adapting; Strategic Learning and Sharing.

By jointly developing a Theory of Change (TOC), partners agree on the success they want to achieve, design an Outcome Action Plan (OAP) together, and understand how each partner individually contributes to the bigger picture. Regular and systematic monitoring allows joint decisions on adaptations to the strategy and the work plans.

## An enabling donor

Funding effective Strategic Partnerships requires donors to act as a convener and at times facilitator, but also to be an equal player and transfer, in effect, much of their power to the partnership. Donors should understand the true cost of achieving impact and be ready to *fund what it*

*takes*, including coordination costs, and invest in organisations and leaders.

## **A worthwhile journey**

After five years of implementation, we are convinced that the Strategic Partnership Approach helps partners jointly focus on ambitious conservation impacts. It broadens the perspectives of individual partners, and enables them to combine their talents, mandates, and skills effectively.

The approach is demanding and perhaps not applicable to every situation, but continue to be highly adaptable.

We hope that our journey, and our experience with the Strategic Partnership Approach, inspires you to team-up and fully collaborate with your partners to jointly address today's pressing conservation issues.

# Preface

## Purpose of this book

This book is a testimony to MAVA's approach to scaling up conservation impact by establishing Strategic Partnerships.

The approach has been developed and applied by MAVA and its partners since 2016. This book contains the most critical ingredients that we have unearthed along the way. We have sprinkled in plenty of application examples to illustrate the main concepts, as well as testimonials from MAVA partners, staff, and Board members.

Overall, we believe that the approach is transformative and can help the global conservation community to increase its impact. However, be warned: this approach will disrupt established power dynamics and requires perseverance, honesty, and empathy. Perseverance to truly collaborate on agreed upon goals and objectives; honesty to evaluate progress and impact of the work; and empathy to deal with the, at times,

harsh decisions needed that allow shifts of focus to where they are most needed.

This is not a *how-to guide*,<sup>1</sup> neither is it an exhaustive and conclusive report. Rather, by sharing our key learnings, MAVA would like to encourage government agencies, international NGOs, grassroots organisations, research institutes, and donors to truly collaborate on the most urgent environmental issues of this time. We hope that it inspires you to develop, join, strengthen, or fund a Strategic Partnership. As well as generating debate, we hope it will inspire all to consider how we can work together more effectively and how to have a meaningful impact at scale on the main challenges we face.

## Background

The coming decade will determine whether the world will remain within an ecologically safe operating space or not. During this period, humanity will need to radically change its relationship with nature, rethink and redesign the current way of living, and ultimately change society as we know it. Impact at large scale is needed. Now.

So, when in 2016, MAVA started planning for its final strategic cycle, preparing for the foundation's closure in 2022, it wanted to increase its ambitions, while at the same time securing its partners' achievements and ensuring their vital work continues.

But how to make this last step successful with the challenges becoming ever more complex? The conservation community is growing and committed as ever but does not really make the best of its collective strength and capabilities.

---

1. MAVA's How-To Guides can be downloaded from <https://fosonline.org/library/mava-a-m-guidance/>.

One of the foundation's values is *unifying* and MAVA has been encouraging organisations to work together for many years. MAVA saw the untapped potential of more strategic cooperation. To foster those collaborations more systematically, the foundation had to offer more than financial support and create a process that allows partners to unite around shared challenges and objectives.

In 2016, there were very few successful examples to build on. How could one bring together different conservation actors, agree on the main challenges, build plausible plans towards solutions, measure progress smartly, and maintain flexibility to adapt?

MAVA had to innovate and invent a new approach to philanthropy, one that also empowers its partners. In FOS Europe, the foundation found a partner with the same vision and the relevant expertise, and the Open Standards for the Practice of Conservation (Conservation Standards) provided a solid starting point.

For scoping and developing the partnerships, many consultation workshops took place, convening numerous partners and experts. By 2019, all Strategic Partnerships were fully established and had gone through the first iteration of their programmes, meaning that partners made tough decisions together, recalibrated their work, and adjusted their roles with an eye on the long-term sustainability of their collective impact.

*With a view to our closing, in 2016 we identified our criteria for success when closing in 2022. First and foremost was contributing to some major, concrete achievements in conservation. Closely linked to this was nurturing a capable community around the themes we have supported. The Strategic Partnership Approach was our answer for how to do both of those things at once. I am a strong believer in the power of collective action, and I am proud of this unique approach which is on track to deliver outstanding results.*

**André Hoffmann, MAVA Board President**

## Acknowledgements

The writing of this book has created a moment for MAVA and FOS Europe to share and reflect on experiences from this journey. It was written collectively using the Book Sprint methodology.

The authors would like to acknowledge the space and trust provided by the MAVA Foundation's Board and the Hoffmann family. Their belief in the power of collective wisdom and collaboration, combined with a willingness to *fund what it takes*, have formed the fertile ground on which MAVA's process for developing an effective Strategic Partnership Approach has flourished.

We would also like to thank all partners for engaging on this journey with us. The approach is built on the mountains of work they have moved, their perseverance, trust, and empathy. We hope that this document echoes our collective experience.

## About MAVA Foundation

The MAVA Foundation,<sup>2</sup> a family philanthropic foundation based in Switzerland, was born out of the vision and passion of Luc Hoffmann, an extraordinary naturalist who believed in the value and protection of the planet's wild splendour. Now led by André Hoffmann (Luc's son) and with the involvement of several other family members, the foundation's mission is to conserve biodiversity for the benefit of people and nature by funding, mobilising, and strengthening its partners and the conservation community.

The foundation supports conservation projects through three regional programmes in the Mediterranean, West Africa, and Switzerland, and a

---

2. For more information, please visit [www.mava-foundation.org](http://www.mava-foundation.org).

thematic programme focused on Sustainable Economy. MAVA also maintains an Impact and Sustainability Unit, to support the effectiveness and resiliency of its partners and to build a dynamic conservation community.

MAVA was created in 1994. Luc planned for the foundation to close in 2022. He wanted the foundation to have an impact on his own priorities, without imposing them over the long term.

## About FOS Europe

FOS Europe is part of the FOS Collective — together with Foundations of Success based in the U.S. and FOS Latin America.<sup>3</sup> FOS is dedicated to accelerating and amplifying the impact of the global conservation community. Across the world, FOS designs and facilitates participatory processes to bring together conservation practitioners, funders, and educators to share lessons and ask tough questions. Together with peers, FOS develops intellectually rigorous frameworks and tools, and as such has played a pivotal role in the development of the Conservation Standards.

FOS has worked with the MAVA Foundation since 2007 on issues related to planning, monitoring and evaluation, and adaptive management. In 2016, FOS and MAVA joined forces once again to develop and roll out this innovative approach to developing effective Strategic Partnerships. Now, harvesting the learnings of that process for wider sharing with the global conservation community is a dream come true.

---

3. For more information, please visit [www.FOSonline.org](http://www.FOSonline.org) .

# 1

## Chapter 1: Strategic Partnerships

### Defining a Strategic Partnership

A Strategic Partnership can best be described as the collaboration between actors with different but complementary capabilities, working towards achieving shared conservation outcomes on a scale that matters.

Such a partnership is more rigorous than the more common, often softer form of collaboration between loosely connected partners and projects. In Strategic Partnerships, partners share responsibility for implementing plans, and they consciously and collectively reflect and adapt their work in the interest of the desired conservation impact.

A Strategic Partnership functions as a *round table*, implying an ongoing discussion, in which all voices are relevant and heard. Hierarchical differences are kept to a minimum. One or more donors are an integral part of the partnership but are not in the driving seat when it comes to programming and strategic decision-making.

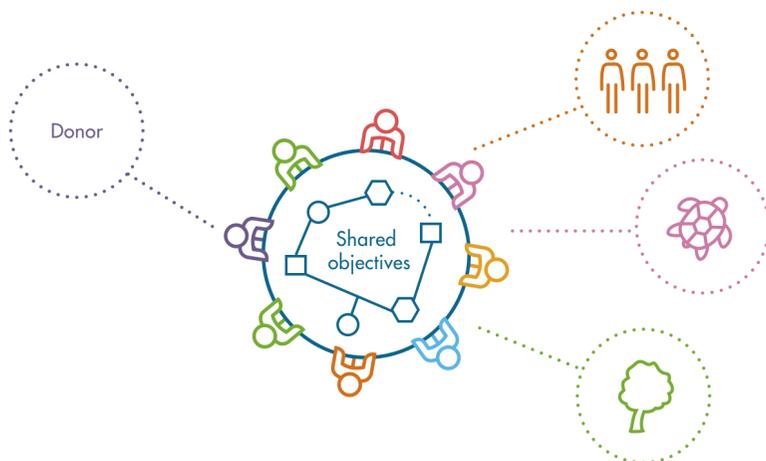


Figure 1: A Strategic Partnership functions as a *round table* with minimal hierarchy between partners

Partners share and jointly make use of the best available information to substantiate claims, foster transparency, and support decision-making. This helps partners move beyond individual stakes, typical roles, and politics — and focus on what matters most from a conservation impact perspective. A specificity of the MAVA approach is that partners together develop an Outcome Action Plan (OAP) — a high-level strategic plan that binds partners around shared objects that achieve a specific outcome. An OAP encompasses one or more projects. For more detailed information on the OAP please see "*The big picture captured in a Theory of Change*" section in Chapter 4.

## The four pieces of the puzzle

We have identified four elements that define a successful Strategic Conservation Partnership — each one requiring focused attention from all partners involved.

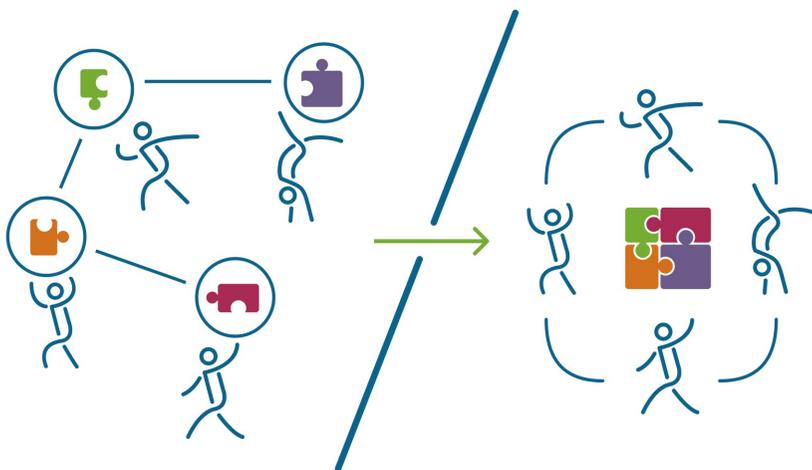


Figure 2: Strategic Partnerships require the combination of four key pieces: functioning partnership, impact at a scale that matters, learning through adaptive management, and an enabling donor

## 1. A strong, functioning partnership

To achieve impact on a scale that is relevant almost always requires participation of different types of partners, covering different mandates and talents and different geographies: from local to regional or international, and from partners focused on technical solutions to others shaping policies and regulations. The composition of a Strategic Partnership naturally evolves over time, following the pace at which the partnership matures, and of course following specific needs, emerging opportunities, and available funding. MAVA convened the initial set of partners, but subsequently, the partnerships made joint decisions about the further evolution of the group composition.

This approach requires partners to collaborate, and collaboration demands trust. All partners need to be heard and feel that their *collective wisdom* forms the basis for their joint conservation strategy. Functioning partnerships have a clear and accepted governance structure and an efficient and effective coordination mechanism. The governance model

clarifies the decision-making process and designing it well helps ensure the balancing of power, and the elimination or reduction of conflicts of interest (see the section on the steering committee in Chapter 4: *Learning through adaptive management*). Good coordination ensures that processes are efficient and channels of communication are working effectively. It takes dedicated resources, and from the start, MAVA made a conscious decision to fully fund collaboration and coordination mechanisms. Without having a dedicated budget for this, many partners would not have been able to afford to participate in the collaborative process. To ensure efficiency and avoid bureaucratisation, coordination should be kept lean and outcome-oriented.

## **2. Striving for impact at a scale that matters**

One of the biggest changes for all conservation actors involved in Strategic Partnerships — including donors — is to shift focus to achieving conservation impact at a larger scale: away from the restricted focus of each of the actors, towards a level of impact that fundamentally changes all priority factors that impact on nature. This means letting go of the often rewarding and concrete short-term result in favour of less visible activities related to changes in policy or influencing societal values and perceptions.

## **3. Learning through adaptive management**

Jointly developing a Theory of Change helps partners to articulate what success looks like and understand how each partner individually contributes to the bigger picture. Optimising the complementary role of each partner is a critical aspect of scaling up impact. Partners regularly and systematically analyse successes and failures using their monitoring data to substantiate claims. Regular round table style meetings serve to discuss main findings and jointly decide on necessary adaptations to the strategy and the work plans.

## **4. An enabling donor**

Having a donor that is committed to the partnership and its functioning makes life much easier. A donor often has substantial convening power,

can provide financial support beyond the normal project funding, and is often more neutrally positioned. These *superpowers* allow a donor to play a key role in enabling this collaborative way of working. To do this, the donor should be ready to rely on the collective wisdom and share power with the partnership. Ideally, the donor should also be ready to *fund what it takes*, understanding the true costs (financial or staff engagement) of the partnership as a strategic investment.

Each of the four puzzle pieces will be described in more detail in the following chapters.

## Strategic Partnerships in the MAVA context

In 2015, MAVA confirmed its closing in 2022. After having been a major funder in the conservation space over the last 25 years, the foundation wanted to ensure that at closure it left behind meaningful conservation achievements, viable organisations, and a thriving community of actors that continues the journey with other donors funding their efforts. This desire invited the foundation to rethink its approach to impact and sustainability, the design towards success, and the very way the foundation would work with its partners.

MAVA's four key values laid the ground for the design of the OAPs and Strategic Partnerships. Embodying its values, the foundation could nurture a strong and diverse network of partners that firmly believes in the power of its community. This led to adjusting the role of its grantees into equal partners contributing their technical know-how to the foundation's financial capabilities.

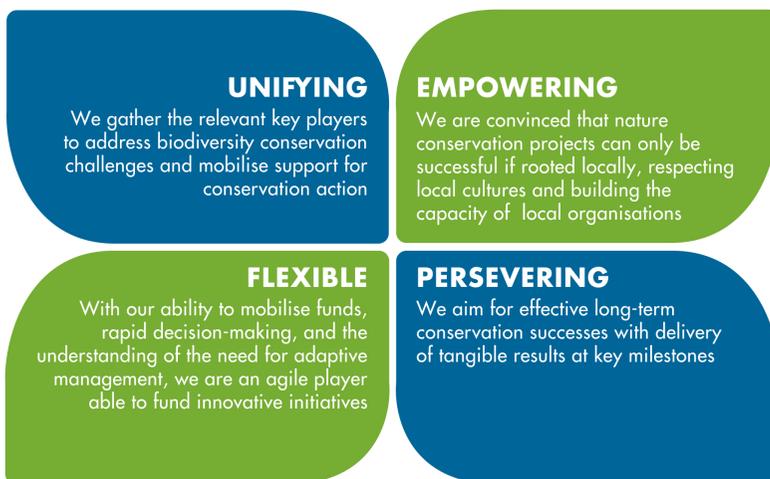
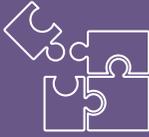


Figure 3: MAVA's Values

The process started in 2016, and the first Strategic Partnerships launched their OAPs in 2017. The plans were developed around a six-year strategy, broken into two phases of three years, with an in-depth mid-term self-evaluation and a final evaluation after six years. Projects were typically approved for three years unless the plans required shorter prototyping initiatives.

This approach did not reduce the overall number of projects funded by MAVA, but helped focus on the higher level discussion. The thought unit moved from around 250 individual projects to 25 Strategic Partnerships.

# 2



## Chapter 2: Effective partnership functioning

One finger cannot lift a pebble

Together with its partners, MAVA embarked on a journey to define meaningful conservation outcomes, that could be achieved within six years by partners combining their talents and strengths. This commitment required pioneering spirit, some improvisation, dissolution of power hierarchies, and occasional path correction.

A key ingredient of a Strategic Partnership is its functioning. Creating and sustaining functioning partnerships is not easy, and there is no fixed recipe to fall back on. But there are five factors that we have found are key for well-functioning partnerships:

1. Relevant and diverse partners
2. A shared vision and outcomes
3. Governance and leadership built on trust
4. Balanced power dynamics
5. Funding and resources

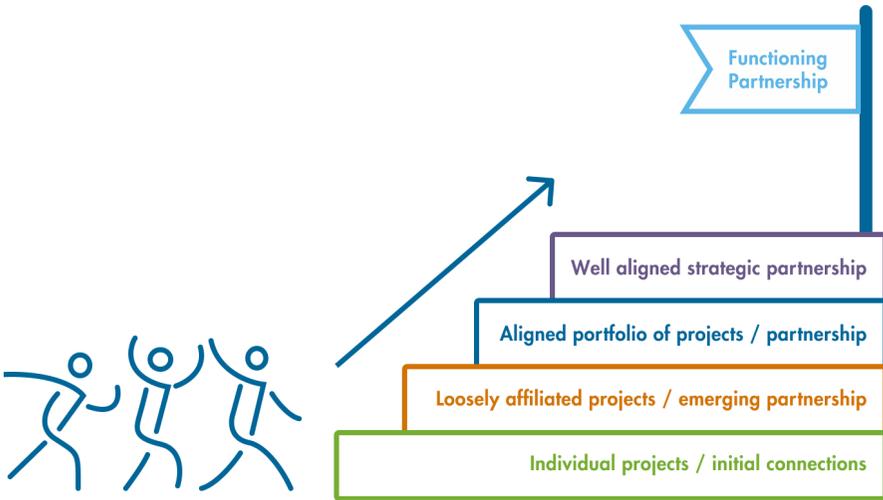


Figure 4: Different stages of building functioning partnerships

## Relevant and diverse partners

Strategic Partnerships demand convening a broad spectrum of critical players around the same table: professional associations, local and national NGOs, international NGOs, government departments,

researchers, and universities. These organisations are often not used to (or able to) see eye-to-eye, let alone develop and implement joint initiatives and learn from them collectively. In many cases, this was the first time these actors had strategic discussions together.

Strategic collaboration between diverse partners only works if every partner organisation is ready to participate actively, comes with a drive for collective impact, and accepts and cherishes the variety of perspectives of all partners. This involves a willingness to share power, which can be particularly demanding for larger organisations that already have a dominant role and high capacity. It consists of weighing the pros and cons of letting go of part of this dominance for a more significant impact and new networks. For smaller organisations, this means learning to think and work on a larger scale and, above all, to take one's place and effectively play one's role in a more complex constellation. Partners need to accept the new rules of the game, engage with organisations from different cultures or agree to align their objectives to those of the partnership.

*We had to broaden our network and were "forced" to work with other institutes and agencies who were not familiar with us. It has become a fantastic opportunity to work closely with highly skilled individuals and in themes where we were not experts, pushing our limits and giving us a team's perspective, and grounds for future work together, that would have not been possible otherwise.*

**Iván Ramirez, BirdLife International**

Donors such as MAVA have the power to convene diverse groups of actors who can venture beyond current thinking, develop new ideas and eventually converge around a shared vision and shared objectives which they jointly set out to achieve. Building on each other's capabilities, insights and relationships allows a broader and more differentiated understanding of the context and eventually of the collective pathway towards impact — a truly Strategic Partnership emerges.

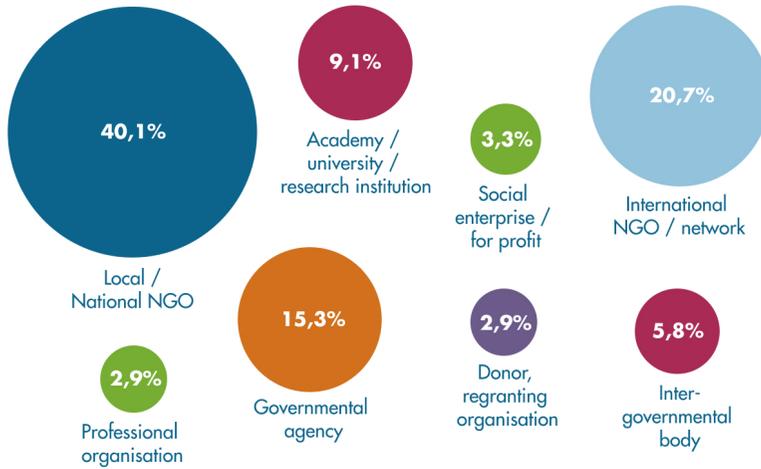


Figure 5: Strategic Partnerships initiated by MAVA are diverse and include different types of partners

## Shared vision and outcomes

Strategic Partnerships require an agreed-upon vision and outcomes that all partners share. These are the glue holding the partnership together. Each partner needs to understand how it contributes to the bigger whole. A joint understanding of the context of the programme, the outcome everybody is striving for, and the strategic pathway leading to that outcome are at the heart of every successful partnership. Chapter 4 *Learning through adaptive management* spells out how the Strategic Partnerships initiated by MAVA have been practising adaptive management to adjust outcomes and objectives over time. Critical reflection and adaptive management require, from partners, flexibility, and openness to change.

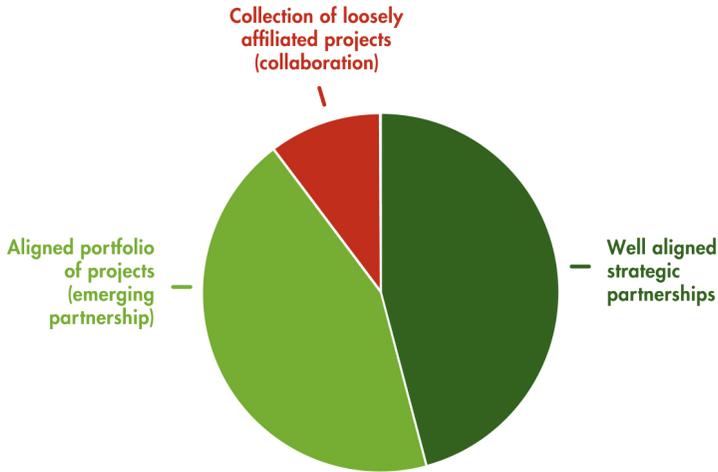


Figure 6: How MAVA partners characterised the Strategic Partnerships that they are participating in after two years of joint implementation

## Governance and leadership built on trust

Working in partnership requires all partners to shift focus from their own organisation's view and stakes to the bigger picture of a joint programme, including other organisations. That change process requires leadership from a donor or one or more partners and a robust coordination and governance mechanism that ensures:

- Equal representation of diverse actors
- Shared decision-making, shared power
- Shared responsibility for overall programme implementation

To meet these requirements, Strategic Partnerships initiated by MAVA have formalised the governance of the joint programmes in steering committees composed of all project implementing partners and guest organisations relevant to the OAP. The committees meet regularly to consider the progress and effectiveness of the programme. Partners follow agreed-upon rules collectively, play clear roles and fulfill specific responsibilities in the

partnership. In some cases, the leadership rotates between partners. A cross-cutting principle for all partnerships is their openness to learn and improve collectively.

*If it's done well, the result of such a collective programme yields better results and ensures ownership of involved partners.*

**Daniel Ziegerer, Sanu durabilitas**

Approximately 90% of partners in Strategic Partnerships initiated by MAVA describe the collaboration among partners as characterised by trust, mutual respect, and regular and effective interaction. Trust and understanding must emerge over time. At the start of the first phase, there was greater competition for funds among the partners, limiting the partnership's full potential. In the second phase starting in 2019, with established relationships and an understanding of other partners' priorities and their roles in the programme, the focus shifted towards the impact partnerships could have together.

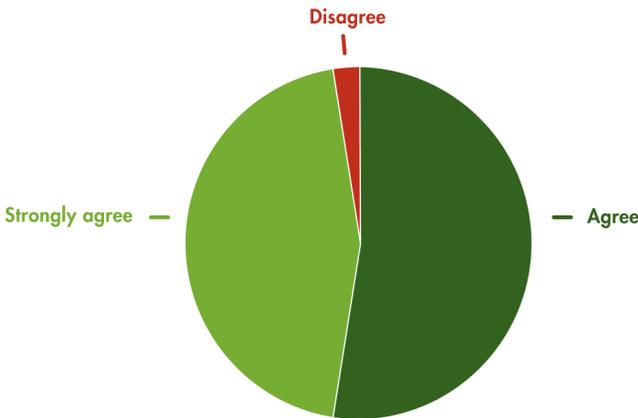


Figure 7: Level of agreement of MAVA partners that their interests and priorities are represented in the OAPs

## Balanced power dynamics

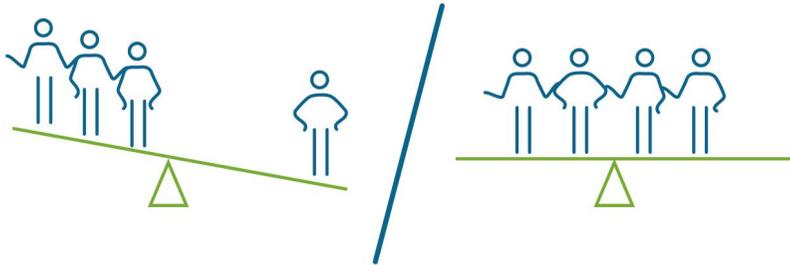


Figure 8: Balancing power and providing opportunities for all partners to play an effective role in the partnership

Smaller organisations are rarely involved in large projects, let alone in multi-stakeholder multi-country programmes. International NGOs have extensive experience with implementing independently or leading on large projects and are used to playing a dominant role in strategy definition and implementation, not always sharing the decision-making fully. Governments are often used to unilaterally defining and implementing conservation programmes, with very little involvement of civil society, if any. At the same time, research centres rarely collaborate with conservationists in the implementation of conservation measures beyond research. It is also the case that final agreements will be disproportionately influenced by persons who are particularly eloquent or strategic at providing their input at crucial times during the process.

*Because collaboration is easy to say and exceptionally hard to do, it requires empathy, ability to handle complexity, and build working relationships that don't rely on power and control.*

**Oliver Greenfield, Green Economy Coalition**

Power may mean institutional power, personal dominance, or a historically significant background. A trustful and functioning partnership is based on a

balanced power where partners feel they can contribute as equals, depending on their scale of involvement and capacity, but that does not happen automatically. Balancing power requires a constant learning process for all involved. Potential tensions need to be recognised and managed. Partners need to develop ways to deal with these tensions over time and with practice and create a space where each partner's contribution is mobilised and recognised. This collective responsibility empowers partners to learn from each other and the collective process and to share their knowledge and wisdom. Realising that the process gradually established a level playing field, MAVA has diminished its role in active orchestration over time.

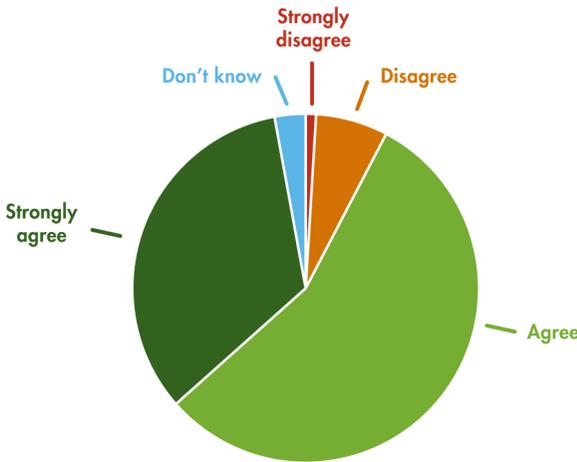


Figure 9: After two years of implementation, 93 per cent of organisations participating in Strategic Partnerships initiated by MAVA recognise a shared responsibility for achieving collective goals

## Funding and resources

All the previous key factors are crucial but need proper funding to make the process feasible and impactful. Getting funds may not depend on a single enabling donor but rather on all partners and a joint commitment to

fundraise from various donors. Collective fundraising is often a factor bringing together partners who choose this process to collaborate toward conservation impact rather than competing for funds.

In our case, MAVA has been the enabling donor who, thanks to its funding power, has convened partners and catalysed the process. MAVA is encouraging partnerships to seek funds from other sources to support their work to sustain collective efforts beyond 2022 — MAVA's closing date.

Moreover, every partner organisation must have a governance mechanism, internal procedures, and inner administrative resources that allow it to respond in a flexible way to the needs of the effective functioning of the OAP process.

*The various partners within an OAP may have previously shared interests and goals, but there may also have been some competition for funding between them. Working together within MAVA OAPs helps to build trust by developing, implementing, evaluating, and adapting projects as a team. MAVA's legacy will then be visible not only in the impacts achieved by conservation projects on the ground but also in the way conservation organisations in the Mediterranean work together: in a trusting partnership that is much stronger than the sum of its members could ever be.*

**Stefan Feger, EuroNatur**

# THE DIVERSITY OF MAVA-FUNDED STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

---

Strategic Partnerships have taken remarkably different shapes and forms. In total, MAVA has supported 23 different partnerships, each with a distinct conservation focus and each responding to a particular context. There is no *one size fits all*. Instead, different variables shape reality.

*The size of the partnership:* The number of partners collaborating in a Strategic Partnership varies enormously. Mostly, this is a consequence of the level of complexity and scale of the OAP.

Size may range from five partners in the Strategic Partnership on Natural Capital to 45 partners in the one on marine conservation in the Mediterranean.

*The type of partners in the partnership:* Partnerships can be diverse and can include the participation of many different types of actors. There is no real limitation as to who a partner can be, rather trust and level of openness are the decisive factors.

Contrast can be shown through the exclusive participation of environmental NGOs in the Mediterranean's Strategic Partnership on river basins and the stronger involvement of government and conventions in West Africa's partnership on oil and gas.

*The complexity of the conservation issue:* Some partnerships focus on a well-defined specific issue, while others focus on a complex set of interrelated issues. This decision has huge consequences for the size and types of partners in the partnership.

Complexity can range from a specific and/or site level partnership, such as seagrass conservation at site level in West Africa, to broad landscape level

partnerships, such as the Mediterranean's Cultural Landscapes (a complex topic that involves traditional practices and impact on biodiversity, economy, and markets).

*The maturity of ties between partners:* Some partnerships build on long-standing relationships and collaboration. Other partnerships are just starting up. This history of collaboration has consequences for the type of partners around the table and for the way governance evolves. Some partnerships have developed over time from being coordinated and convened by MAVA to being much more self-steering. Other partnerships started as self-governed, assisted by a certain degree of facilitation by MAVA.

In cases such as Mediterranean's Strategic Partnership on coastal wetlands, traditional partners have been working together for decades, whilst for others, like West Africa coastal wetland conservation, partners from different countries came together for flyway wetland conservation in a new partnership.

*Different structures of the partnerships:* Different sizes or types of partners may lead to different leadership models and functioning of the partnership. Models can mean the leadership of one single organisation on behalf of the group; a shared or rotating leadership of the partnership; or a structure of direct and indirect partners<sup>4</sup> with different roles in the partnership.

This can be illustrated by the example of seabird conservation in West Africa, where one organisation is managing the partnership, in contrast to the complex governance model of the partnership on cultural landscapes in the Mediterranean which includes rotation or election of a managing organisation for a period of time under specific rules of internal governance agreed upon by all members.

---

4. Direct partners are organisations having a grant agreement with MAVA. Indirect partners are organisations implementing part of the work but have funding agreements with their own direct partners, and not with MAVA directly.

# 3



## Chapter 3: Impact on a scale that matters

Only those who risk going too far, can find out how far they can go

### The need for scaling up

The radical environmental changes of today demand that responses and approaches are scaled to match the speed and magnitude of the challenges. Often, conservation initiatives are not able to have impact on a scale that really matters. Local solutions do not always spread across larger regions. Successful conservation interventions often remain piecemeal and highly site-specific, have high transaction costs, and do not have sufficient impact to slow biodiversity loss, while threat factors continue to amplify.

Strategic Partnerships are a direct response to this need as they create enabling conditions for (or even *force*) partners to step out of the traditional logic of individual projects and to look collectively into more ambitious outcomes at a larger scale.

For example, focusing efforts to protect a migratory species in a few sites in West Africa will have limited impact. A Strategic Partnership however, can focus on protecting a species across its entire flyway. It can identify all needed interventions ranging from addressing legal issues to site protection.

*The challenges presented by the conservation and sustainable use of the resources of our environment are so immense and complex that only joint and concerted actions can enable us to meet them in the long term. Achieving this is dependent on real work together that ignores any institutional egoism and MAVA has the merit of having pushed the main actors of the sub-region in this dynamic, thanks to involvement in the development and implementation of OAPs.*

**Gabin Agblonon, Wetlands International Africa/West Coast and the Gulf of Guinea**

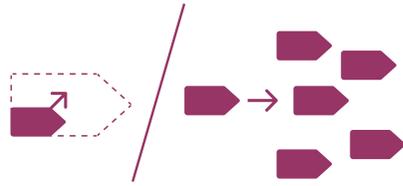
Key ingredients help ensure that a Strategic Partnership embraces a vision on a scale that matters. Initial workshops define the scope and the composition of the partnership. Together, partners agree on ambitious, yet realistic goals and outcomes. Partners clearly articulate how individual projects add up and specify what mechanisms are used for scaling up impact.

## Mechanisms

When thinking about scaling up, it might help to differentiate between the concepts of *scaling out*, *scaling up* and *scaling deep*.<sup>5</sup>

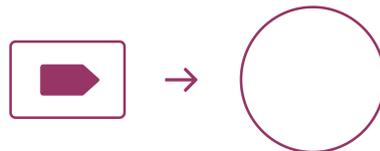
*Scaling out* means doing more of the same at a larger scale. There are three different options for doing this:

- Expand original projects, i.e., enlarge the geographic or thematic scope of the same project. For example, scale out the restoration of a wetland site to the entire watershed.
- Replicate original projects, i.e., copy project ideas to a suite of other projects doing the same thing in different scopes. For example, scaling out by restoring many more wetlands, using the same approach.
- Diffuse innovation, i.e., help others to pick up the concept and spread it faster with higher bandwidth.



*Scaling up*, however, means investing in higher-level strategies that focus on transforming the context in which conservation takes place, for example, through policy and legal changes, changes in the economic system, or changes in public awareness.

*Scaling deep*, in turn, is about a deep transformation of the system by changing moral beliefs and social norms.



---

5. Nick Salafsky and Richard Margoluis with Foundations of Success. 2021. *Pathways to Success: Taking Conservation to Scale in Complex Systems*. Island Press, Washington DC.

An example of that is the flight shame that emerged in Europe in 2018. In the space of just a few months, it suddenly became unacceptable to fly, especially short distances. This had a measurable impact on airlines and the aviation industry more broadly.

## Scaling up in practice — stories from the field

Which mechanisms are used differs greatly between partnerships. It depends, of course, on the level of complexity of the conservation challenge and the opportunities for change. But it is also a function of the talents and mandate of the partners and their shared conservation vision.

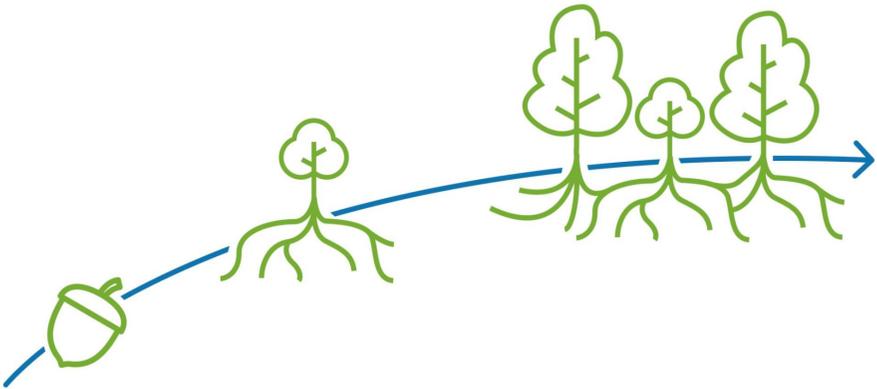


Figure 10: Scaling up incorporates different phases in evolution and different scaling mechanisms

## Testing and replicating models to make cities circular

How cities are designed for space optimisation determines which products can be used and reused and the material retained in the system after a products end of life.

The Circular Economy Strategic Partnership first developed a conceptual and data-based model that laid out what interventions could lead to a more

circular economy and what advantages this would deliver for a city. Testing some of these interventions in frontrunner cities allowed the project team to learn and then compile a reservoir of inspirational and replicable use cases.

The conceptual model and use cases were then made available to more cities through existing city networks that were added to the partnership in the testing phase. The initial dissemination activities and some first replication cases were funded by MAVA. Larger, network-wide diffusion is, however, expected to happen through existing network mechanisms (scaling out).

## **Changing the global paradigm around the economics of nature**

Economic decision-making, be it on the level of national governments or individual companies, needs to take nature fully into account so that nature can remain functional. The Nature Economy Strategic Partnership is transporting this different way of thinking to the places of economic decision-making so that it broadens the purpose of the economic activity.

From the very beginning, the partnership was advocating for fundamental change in the system (scaling deep). Initially, the respective partners undertook collaborative research, promoted emerging tools for accounting of nature in economic activity, and activated their respective networks to engage in national and international processes. Best available knowledge and use cases were made available to actors across civil society, business, and governments, multiplying the distribution in their own channels and adding to the emergence of a new narrative of an economy with nature.

## **Towards a more holistic approach to the conservation of sea turtles in West Africa and the Mediterranean**

In West Africa, sea turtles are facing numerous threats, including accidental catch by fisheries, destruction of habitat, poaching, and pollution. The West-Africa Sea Turtle Strategic Partnership initially prioritised the protection of three key breeding sites in two countries: Boa Vista and Maio in Cabo-Verde and Bijagós archipelago in Guinea-Bissau.

Scientific research revealed that the Banc d'Arguin National Park in Mauritania is a globally important feeding ground for green turtles. The need to scale out was obvious, and this additional site was added to the Strategic Partnership.

Something similar happened in the Mediterranean. Another Sea Turtle partnership scaled out site protection by linking experienced actors (in Greece, Cyprus, and Turkey) with actors working in less known and well protected sites (especially in Libya, Lebanon, or Tunisia). Through capacity building and support for site management, the level of protection of sea turtle nesting sites has been scaled out to all major Mediterranean nesting sites.

## **Replicating fisheries' best practices across the Mediterranean**

A pan-Mediterranean Strategic Partnership is aiming to reduce the negative impacts of fisheries in the region. Vulnerable marine species such as cetaceans, sea turtles, sharks, and seabirds are accidentally caught by fishing boats, and sensitive marine habitats such as seagrass and coralligenous beds are degraded by fishing gear.

On an operational level, partners started to collaborate around the Alboran Sea, the Strait of Sicily, the Balearics/Gulf of Lion, the Adriatic Sea, and the Aegean Sea/Levantine Basin. Across various sites, partners have been developing and piloting best practices related to a) no-take zones; b) funding mechanisms for Marine Protected Areas; and c) new fishing techniques. These best practices have then been replicated (scaling out)

across the marine basins, sometimes within, but often outside the mandate of the current partnership. For instance, an on-board observer programme expanded from zero ports at the start of the partnership, to 50 after two years, and more than 70 ports in its last phase.

On a higher level, partners have been working on the formal adoption of improved fishing techniques by the Regional Fisheries Commission (scaling up) — which would greatly speed up the uptake of these practices.

A more systemic change also hinges on consumer choices for sustainable fish. Different opinions on the exact definition of sustainability are — for now — hampering the partnership's ability to scale effectively.

### **Linking wetlands and river basins through cross-partnership collaboration**

Two different Strategic Partnerships focus on reducing harmful infrastructural development and excessive water abstraction in the Mediterranean. They focus on distinct scales: one on river basins, the other on wetlands. Where work happens in the same place, these partnerships collaborate — which is logical given the ecological upstream/downstream interdependencies between wetlands and river basins. For example, work initially focusing only on the protection of Ghar El Melah coastal wetland in Tunisia has been extended to include water use in the Medjerda river basin shared between Algeria and Tunisia.

On a higher level, both partnerships are collaborating to influence policymaking, for example, by lobbying the European Commission and the Ramsar and Barcelona conventions to provide better support and exert some pressure on national authorities to improve legal protection and ensure ecological restoration of river basins and wetlands (scaling up).



*We are extremely interdependent, as rivers ultimately drain to coastal waters. Thus, rivers are also focal points for managing coastal resources. Our partnerships immediately recognise the need to work together in a holistic approach to design and apply effective strategies to reduce the impact of the human imprint on wetlands. Each partnership has its own programme, but we share common resources, tools, and tactics to work together whenever possible, and we are convinced that this is a smart approach to have a higher impact.*

***Lorena Segura, Tour du Valat***

# 4



## Chapter 4: Learning through adaptive management

Craftspeople are only as good as their tools

### The need to keep questioning

MAVA's Strategic Partnerships all have ambitious conservation aims, and the underlying threats are typically complex. On top of that, the work takes place in a rapidly changing socio-political and economic context. The success of conservation efforts is far from certain, and the risk of failure is very real and requires partners to continuously search for ways to increase their chances of success. This might sound easy, but often requires a change in the way partners work: from action-oriented towards impact-oriented, from celebrating the great work done to contemplating whether that great work leads to impact.

The main questions are simple: (1) Are we doing the right things? Did we pick the right conservation interventions and are we implementing them well enough, on the right scale, with the right intensity?; (2) Are we having an impact? Are we seeing changes in the way people think about, manage, and use natural resources — are habitats and species recovering or stabilising; and (3) What else do we need to do, or what do we need to do differently to have more impact?

Having regular meetings for joint reflection means that learning cycles are short and enable regular adaptations. Using evidence (i.e., the best available knowledge) is crucial for ensuring accountability and transparency, and it counterbalances politics and power dynamics. Practising adaptive management is, therefore, a pivotal puzzle piece for effective Strategic Partnerships. The way we did this is largely inspired by the Conservation Standards. Detailed guidance was provided to partners in the form of a series of how-to-guides.<sup>6</sup>

---

6. MAVA's How-To Guides can be downloaded from <https://fonline.org/library/mava-am-guidance/>.

# CONSERVATION STANDARDS AS OUR COMMON LANGUAGE

---

The Open Standards for the Practice of Conservation<sup>7</sup> (Conservation Standards) provide a common framework and set of best practices that explicitly incorporate principles of collaboration, evidence-based conservation, and adaptive management.

They are developed by the Conservation Measures Partnership (CMP), a global partnership of conservation organisations committed to increasing the impact of conservation.



**Conservation  
Standards**

## **The big picture captured in a Theory of Change**

An Outcome Action Plan (OAP) is MAVA terminology for a high-level strategic plan that binds a set of partners in a joint mission towards achieving a specific outcome (e.g., reducing fisheries by-catch of marine turtles in priority areas in the Mediterranean). It is important to note that the OAP is the unit of thought for practising adaptive management, so not its constituent projects.

---

7. <https://conservationstandards.org/about/>.

At the heart of each OAP is a Theory of Change (TOC). TOCs are a powerful tool for planning and adaptively managing conservation initiatives. They help partners focus, be explicit, visualise synergies, and communicate with stakeholders and donors. A TOC is also very useful to anchor programme-level objectives, goals, and plot indicators that allow partners to assess progress towards achieving them. The TOC constitutes the hypothesis of how partners assume their collective work will lead to achieving the desired outcome.

*MAVA organised exchanges so that collaborators share a Theory of Change and plan and report according to it. This was a way to make sure we have a systemic (beyond our own limits) perspective while being able to focus our respective contributions; a shared framework for converging actions was set, maximising the chance we enhance our impacts.*

***Stephane Arditi, European Environmental Bureau***

To test the TOC, partners practice adaptive management. Monitoring data are captured in scorecards, which provide the framework for assessing whether partners implement strategies successfully and collectively achieve the desired results.

**Strategies** are broad areas of work with a common focus, carrying specific activities/projects

**Results** are changes in the outside world that lead to a threat reduction (**outcome**)

**Conservation targets** are elements of biodiversity that the partnership has chosen to focus its efforts on.

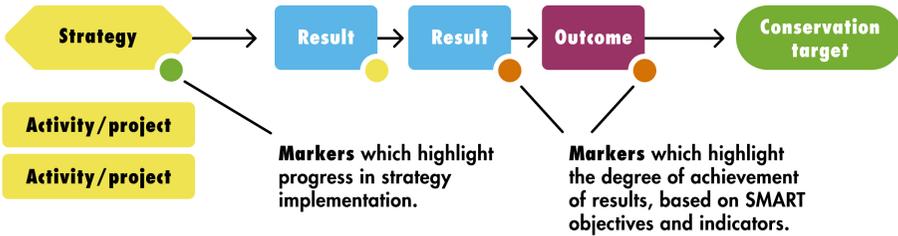


Figure 11: Overview of the main components of the Theory of Change

## The main steps of the process

*Setting up the Strategic Partnership and developing our OAP has often been marked by moments of doubt. Today, thanks to planning and adaptive management tools, but above all to the Strategic Partnerships built, we have noticed a real change in terms of the impact and sustainability of our actions.*

**Marie Suzanna Traoré, RAMPPO (Regional Network of Marine Protected Areas in West Africa)**

MAVA's process encompassed four steps: (1) Scoping; (2) Designing of the OAPs; (3) Reflecting and Adapting; and (4) Strategic Learning and Sharing. Each one of these steps is elaborated on in more detail below.

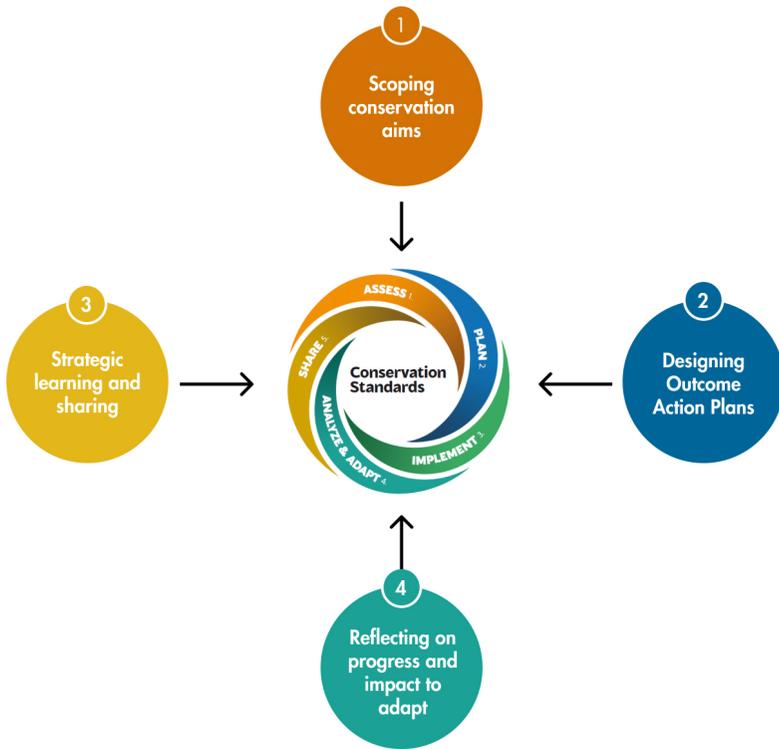


Figure 12: MAVA's four steps tie into the steps of the Conservation Standards

## 1. Scoping conservation aims

Based on a thorough situation assessment with various partners, MAVA selected critical conservation outcomes within its geographic and thematic scope. These outcomes became the anchor for the design of OAPs.

## 2. Designing Outcome Action Plans

The design phase comprised two distinct steps: the design of the OAP, and the design of the constituent projects.

To design the OAPs, MAVA convened relevant partners around the outcomes identified in the scoping phase. These partners together drafted a TOC as the *content glue* for the emerging partnership.

Against the backdrop of the TOC, partners then agreed on logical *work packages*, while making full use of the diversity of partners, their mandate, and skills and talents. These work packages were then further developed into projects.

The projects in turn formed the basis for three-year funding agreements between MAVA and a particular (set of) implementing partners. There was total transparency on how the total OAP budget was allocated to different partners, what each partner was expected to deliver for that, and how it all added up to a powerful whole.

## 3. Reflecting on progress and impact to adapt

There were two distinct reflection processes for partners to jointly reflect on progress and impact: the annual reflections and the Mid-Term Evaluation (MTE). In both cases they used the TOC and the Scorecards to guide discussions.

During annual reflections, partners came together in a Steering Committee Meeting to jointly take stock of progress and fine-tune work plans for next year. Approval for changes in the spending of project budgets by MAVA logically needed to follow the main conclusions of these meetings.

A much deeper reflection, in the form of a MTE, took place at the end of the three years contracting period. The MTE is explained in more detail below.

## 4. Strategic learning and sharing

All the OAPs supported by MAVA (23 in total) have been developed in a standardised manner, enabling the foundation to reflect on the effectiveness of the approach and communicate its findings on the implementation of the strategic pathways.

# STEERING COMMITTEE MEETINGS

Many partnerships have invested in *steering committee meetings* as the place and time for regular check-ins, discussion about impact and progress, and shared decision-making. These meetings allow partners to step away from their projects and focus on the big picture. Partners typically learn from each other what has worked and what has not worked. In most cases, the role of this committee is to ensure joint decision-making regarding priorities for the coming year. Moreover, such committees are crucial for changing the dynamics between the donor and the partners, shifting from multiple donor-led, top-down relationships to a bottom-up, partnership-driven relationship.

## The Mid-Term Evaluation

The MTE served two different aims: (1) To help partners adapt OAP v1 to OAP v2 and design meaningful projects for the last phase of MAVA funding; and (2) To help MAVA make final funding allocation decisions — representing the foundation's final investment to leverage and sustain conservation impact before closure in 2022.

The approach to the MTE was that of an evaluation carried out by the partners themselves in the form of a guided and systematic self-reflection. This was powerful, because conclusions that were drawn together tended to

stick much better – and could not easily be ignored. The MTE was focused on assessing the progress of conservation work and the impact of this work in terms of the achievement of objectives and ultimately of the intended outcome (being the anchor point of each OAP). Partners were requested to substantiate conclusions with evidence, i.e., data gathered on an agreed set of indicators. Taking an evidence-based approach was important for the many reasons explained throughout this document: to increase objectivity, to balance power, to improve impact, to justify changes.



Figure 13: The Mid-Term Evaluation was carried out in the form of a self-assessment

The MTE was a intense process for all partners involved, including MAVA and FOS. The gathering and analysis of data, the logistics of physical meetings – the challenges arising from Covid-19, the finalisation of documentation and budgets: these added up to a substantial amount of work.

Some have argued that the process and method took focus away from the real discussions. Others have argued that the rigour of the process and the use of tools helped to unveil and to deal with the tough questions.

*MAVA set itself to develop a comprehensive and objective process aiming at maximum impact, but this very same process became, at times, the dominant issue, so the programme appeared dominated*

*by the intricacies of the process rather than by the ultimate goals, the core actions, and the final objectives.*

***Jose Tavares, Vulture Conservation Foundation***

*The MTE was very useful to analyse the effectiveness of strategies and the relevance of the objectives. It allowed us all together to discuss our interests and to ensure that we are on the same page regarding our priorities. It was also a good opportunity to improve our knowledge of the other projects, to identify new avenues of collaboration and to assess gaps, especially regarding information flow and partnerships.*

***Yousra Madani, WWF North Africa***

Differences aside, all seem to agree that although the MTE was time-consuming, it led to many valuable adaptations to the Strategic Partnerships and OAPs.

The MTE was a turning point for many partnerships. It became *the* moment when partners fully realised that the TOC was more than “just a series of coloured boxes” and represented the framework to jointly achieve a shared vision in which each partner has a unique role to play.

# SCOPE OF THE MTE

---

The MTE was comprised four elements:

1. *A Progress Assessment*, homed in on the question “Were you able to do what you planned?” In this assessment, partners took stock of planned versus actual progress over time and thought of ways to increase efficiency, maximise momentum, and overcome operational hurdles.
2. *An Effectiveness Assessment*, focused on the question “What is the impact of your work?” With this assessment, partners established a joint understanding of the achievement of planned objectives over time, on different scales and across different geographies, and the correlation of these achievements with progress findings. It helped all involved to understand if the strategies were having the desired effect and if the TOC made sense, resulting in the adaptations needed to increase the effectiveness of the work.
3. *An Assessment of the Partnership Leverage*, focused on the question “Is the collaboration paying off?” With this assessment, partners tried to understand if they were achieving more when working together than on their own, in other words to what extent were the partnerships leveraging collective wisdom, authority, political clout, and resources to increase and sustain impact. Partners looked at the effectiveness of communication and collaboration within the partnerships as well as the extent to which the partnership could mobilise other partners, stakeholders, and additional financial resources. This assessment was important for gauging the sustainability of the partnership beyond MAVA (beyond 2022).
4. *Assessment of Contextual Changes*: focusing on the question “Has the world around us changed?” Through this lens, partners scanned for developments that may have been important and needed to be considered in the development of the OAP v2. Examples were increased momentum for policy change, changes in funding, civil unrest, and technological developments.

# Adaptations in practice — stories from the field

## Adaptations to partnership scopes

During the scoping phase, MAVA and its partners made decisions that occasionally did not work in practice. Adaptations to the partnership scope had to be made:

### Merging partnerships

In the Mediterranean region, one partnership focused on reducing overexploitation of fish resources, another on reducing the negative impact of fisheries on marine habitats and species. It soon became evident they shared key results and conservation actions. Merging them made delivery of a larger impact much more efficient and increased the likelihood of success.

### When the context forces you to adapt your structure

Something similar happened to a partnership focusing on circular economy in general, and another one on plastics. The partnerships later merged in order to seize momentum around EU policy.

## Adaptations to results, focus and structure

The ongoing reflection on progress and impact by partners leads to adjustments in the TOC. Sometimes the ambition level or focus of results must change. In different situations, partnerships replace and remove desired results entirely from their pathway. The following examples illustrate the breadth of adaptations:

### Reducing the geographical scope

A partnership working towards decreasing the risks associated with offshore oil and gas exploitation in West Africa changed its strategic orientation from regional to national level. Progress at the regional level was slower than expected. In addition, this regional focus limited the ability

of individual countries to move forward with their own plans. Partners, therefore, decided to redirect efforts directly to establishing national level contingency plans. The number of constituent projects was reduced from four to one, and work was repositioned under the direct responsibility of national partners. This decision improved the efficiency of the project implementation and created conditions for achieving more tangible impacts at the country level.

### **Expanding the thematic scope**

A Mediterranean partnership focusing on dams and water abstraction changed its strategic focus from mainly hydropower dams to include irrigation dams. The focus on hydropower was large because of the historic focus of work by part of the partnership. By convening partners with other views and getting new monitoring data, the partnership soon realised that more focus was needed on irrigation dams because these dams imply the same impacts for species movements, ecological flow, and retention of sediments. This has resulted in significantly raising the number of dams for which conservation action and advocacy work must be carried out.

### **Adaptations to specific conservation strategies**

As time goes by, conservation strategies are being implemented, some results are achieved, others are not. New opportunities and hurdles arise. All this requires continuous discussion about the need to continue or even give an extra push to, stop, or start specific conservation strategies. Decisions about this are not always easy, as they often have implications for the use of funds and the workload of individual partners. All MAVA OAPs have made adaptations to their conservation strategies. Here are two examples:

#### **Adapting strategies when results are achieved**

The partnership focusing on protecting coastal wetlands and waterbirds in West Africa invested, during the first phase, considerable resources in improving knowledge through scientific research. Once objectives were

achieved, the focus shifted to ensuring that results were actually used to improve site management.

### Changing focus if a problem is less urgent

A Mediterranean partnership on the protection of birds, addressed the poisoning of birds using diclofenac. Surprisingly, monitoring data did not reveal any cases of intoxication of birds with diclofenac in any of the focal countries. The data enabled us to scale down all work on diclofenac, except for continued monitoring of the situation. As a result, resources were re-allocated to more vital conservation work.

### Adaptations to partnership functioning

Many of the adaptations described above have implications for the composition of partners, the allocation of work and budgets between projects, partners, and activities. In tandem with this, partners consciously assess and discuss how they function: whether the communication and coordination suffice; if the leadership and decision-making are working; if the roles and responsibilities of each partner are clear; and what can be improved. These reflections, in turn, lead to adaptations in their collaboration mechanisms and sometimes also extend the partnership. Here are some examples:

#### Adapting the composition of the partnership along the way

Initially, one of the partnerships focused on the identification of seagrass beds in West Africa. This work was coordinated by an international partner with important expertise regarding this kind of research. Gradually, the emphasis shifted to the actual protection of these seagrass beds. As a consequence, the partnership expanded to include partners engaged in protected area management and the coordination of the partnership was taken over by a conservation organisation.

## **Adding new expertise to existing partnerships**

As MAVA's partnerships have matured, the need to sustain their impact and functioning and secure long-term financing has become more evident. For this purpose, MAVA provided specific support to strengthen governance, elaborate long-term plans, and raise funds for continuing work beyond 2022.

## **Donor adaptation: targeted investments to boost the impact**

The adaptive management process, and the MTE showed that many Strategic Partnerships did not achieve their potential impact, simply because knowledge was not being turned into actionable information and, therefore, was not used.

This is why MAVA decided to create learning grants. These grants have allowed partners to raise their profile, attract new donors, contribute to several advocacy initiatives, and share their knowledge with their peers and the public.

# 5



## Chapter 5: Through the lens of the MAVA Foundation

Some of us think holding on makes us strong, but sometimes it is letting go

---

By 2016, MAVA already possessed many of the conditions and processes necessary for fostering Strategic Partnerships as it had always regarded its relationship with grantees as a partnership. As a result, its philanthropy was inclusive, participatory, and collaborative.

But even then, the investment of the foundation to adapt to this new approach during its final phase of existence was not negligible. One of the biggest changes was to largely delegate the responsibility of planning and monitoring to the Strategic Partnerships. With it came a change in the relationship with the grantees, in the role of the foundation as a donor, and its internal operations.

*Establishing Strategic Partnerships has been one of MAVA's most impactful ways to truly put its values into practice: How to unify the partners, giving them plenty of power and aim at long-term impact while remaining flexible? It was only by setting up these partnerships, which at the same time required practising adaptive management.*

*Charlotte Karibuhoye, Director of West Africa Programme, MAVA Foundation*

## **Transferring power to the Strategic Partnership**

The foundation decided to shift to a process that empowers others — those who are best placed because of their knowledge, experience, or relationships — to recommend the best options for allocating resources.

### **Strengthening the role of MAVA's secretariat**

The role of the Board has always been to steer the strategic direction of the foundation. Since 2011, it has delegated project approval to the President and the Director General based on recommendation from the Secretariat. There is a high level of trust from the Board and the President in the judgement of the secretariat.

For the Secretariat, this means that staff can confidently engage the partners in the development of the Strategic Partnerships.

### **Changing the donor-grantees relationship**

Building strong impact-driven partnerships requires that the donor be willing to share decision-making power on funding priorities with the grantees. This means that grantees have the opportunity not only to identify and express their needs but also to lead the planning and implementation process. This represents a huge change in the approach from funding donor priorities to challenging partners to define priorities and funding those.

Shifting to this new model implies that partners come along with the same spirit (this is mainly explored in Chapter 2, *Effective partnership functioning*). Key partners identified by MAVA led to the development of OAPs, particularly on identifying priorities and strategies, with the involvement of other relevant actors.

The MAVA Secretariat was part of the transparent discussions, including those on available funding, and provided technical support as needed. This sharing of decision-making was key to ensure ownership of the process early on and was also an important element for building trust between the donor and the grantees.

The high level of reciprocal trust between MAVA and its partners, as well as its good understanding of the context and the issues, facilitated the quick adoption of the approach. However, we have seen that some partners could not adapt to the collaborative spirit and the joint decision-making required and had to leave the process.

*It was a demanding process in the beginning but later it proved to be a rich co-creation exercise which deepened the donor relationship and gave a new momentum to collaborative relationships between diverse partner organisations.*

***Ibrahima Thiam, Wetlands International Africa/West Coast and the Gulf of Guinea***



Figure 14: The relationships between MAVA Board and Secretariat, FOS, and partner organisations

## Changing our ways

### Changing hats and Adaptive Management

MAVA's shift to working with partnerships did not require hiring many new staff. A rather small team of staff ensures the management of all partnerships. Depending on their complexity, a MAVA manager can oversee one to seven Strategic Partnerships (typically three or four). The trick is to contract outside experts where needed (e.g., FOS for the development of tools and providing technical guidance). This allows MAVA staff to focus on the convening of partners and on moving forward the overall process of developing the partnerships and practising adaptive management.

Determining the role of MAVA staff in each partnership is not always easy and poses dilemmas regarding the level of engagement in convening, coordinating, managing, and guiding each partnership. At the heart of this choice lies the question of whether MAVA is an integral part of the partnership, or rather a donor that influences from the outside.

MAVA staff typically act as facilitator, mediator, connector, and challenger – and sometimes *ad interim* that of partnership coordinator. Often, MAVA staff plays different roles simultaneously. Combining these different roles can be at times uncomfortable. For example, being the *ad interim* coordinator of a Strategic Partnership, while at the same time being the facilitator who is trying to make a complex participatory process work can be really challenging. Not to mention, the extra complication of wearing a donor hat.

The exact role that MAVA fulfils has evolved over time and may take different forms, tailored to the context of the partnership, the capacity of the partners, and cultural/historical aspects of the personality of the people involved. Being aware of these different hats, and consciously choosing which one(s) you are willing and able to wear, helps manage expectations and mobilise help.

It is important for MAVA staff to have a good understanding of adaptive management and to know how to use the tools to continue to monitor the performance of projects and engage with partners in a structured discussion. Partnering with FOS allows the foundation to pull in additional adaptive management expertise when required most, e.g., during the initial TOC design, for setting up the monitoring systems, and for facilitating the MTEs. Overall, it has been challenging to *know enough*, yet stay out of a deeper level of technical detail.

## Administration

It is fair to say that we did not foresee the administrative consequences of choosing this approach. It created a real burden, especially related to the contracting process (with various, complex multi-partner projects starting at the same time) and the regular re-allocation of budget following adaptive management decisions. Also, ever since transferring responsibilities to partners, the complexity of reporting back up the chain, i.e., from project managers, to programme directors, to the committee making allocation decisions, to the Board, became much more complex in comparison to more traditional decision-making methods.

*If the team decides to engage into such a process, the administration has to follow and adapt. We went through it, but it was complex. We needed to set up new rules, and sometimes this overcomplicated the administrative procedures. The dynamics of the partnerships also implied that contracting was all happening at the same time, which put pressure on our administration team. It will surely pay off to invest in the design of lean and adaptive administrative procedures and jointly commit to minimising the total number of contracts to ease the pain.*

*Rachel Sturm, Administration and Finance Director, MAVA Foundation*

## Engaging beyond individual projects

### Funding what it takes: Overarching costs and long-term visibility

If Strategic Partnerships have an added value for impact, it does not come for free. The costs for key items related to an effective partnership, including staffing, communications, meetings, outreach, or overarching activities need to be covered. In some cases — especially if the partnerships are complex and cover extended geographies — these costs can be extensive. Thanks to the process, the contribution of these elements to the success of the partnerships will be made explicit and ease the funding decisions. Funders should not be dogmatic but allow for flexibility and open discussions with the partners.

As the Strategic Partnerships develop a vision over the mid- to long-term to be relevant, donors also need to be ready to declare likely budget reservations and explain under which conditions these budgets will be actually allocated. In order for OAP level decision-making to work, the budget should be announced on the OAP level rather than on the level of each beneficiary. At MAVA, we defined rough envelopes for each OAP for a six-year timeframe, funding most projects through two cycles of three years each.

## Investing in organisations and leaders

The planning process of an OAP might reveal that not all capabilities are already present or that they are insufficiently developed. Even more, it can pinpoint organisational issues of a particular partner that requires attention. In this case, an outcome-determined foundation needs to take a step back and invest in the organisational development first, or in parallel to, the directly outcome-oriented activities.

MAVA designed a dedicated programme to support the organisational development of its partners.<sup>8</sup> It supported comprehensive development plans or targeted needs (fundraising boost, turning the organisation digital, specific governance issues, etc). Several of the partners supported through the organisational development programme went on to take a stronger role in the partnership.

The planning process of an OAP might also make explicit the need for conservation leaders to have an influence across sectors beyond the conservation community. In a sector where individuals have typically very few opportunities to develop their leadership capacities, this was a critical element. MAVA set up a leadership academy to accompany its partners through their leadership journey. The individuals who participated in this programme naturally took bigger roles in the partnerships, and the bonds it created between the alumni eased the partnership dynamics.

## Engaging collaborations with other donors

The ambition of a Strategic Partnership to create system change and to scale up could mean that the OAP exceeds the financial capacity of a single donor. To ensure the scale of its impact and its sustainability, the partnership must engage with other donors. This can be done on an ad hoc basis by co-funding projects but is more powerful when other donors join the approach.

---

8. See specific publication on this <https://mava-foundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Funding-Organisational-Development-final.pdf>.

Engaging with other donors should be a task of each of the members of the partnerships. In this respect, donors have a unique role to play. We have seen that an OAP's ambition and ability to provide a common framework for impact can be very appealing to some donors, but alternatively its scale might deter smaller donors. Some donors like to feel a shared ownership of the plan and need to be brought in at strategic moments in the process.

Building successful collaborations among donors requires alignment around joint objectives and finding a balance between the needs of the partnership and the priorities of the donors. The timeline issue is also key, as each donor has its own process and speed to approve funding, let alone to adapt its strategy!

Guiding principles include mutual trust, transparency, flexibility, and willingness to learn from/with each other and to let go of any sense of possession. Programmes should not be impacted by branding issues that sometimes emerge among and within foundations as these can hamper effective collaboration and might negatively affect prospects for sustainability.

*Strong environmental and social development organisations are key to implement projects on the ground that achieve meaningful and lasting impact. MAVA successfully spearheaded capacity building of individual organisations as well as multi-stakeholder co-ordination and cooperation in Western Africa, creating the conditions for other philanthropic and public funders to further invest in the conservation of this important region.*

**Markus Knigge, Executive Director, Blue Action Fund**

## Final thoughts

The quintessential question is *was it all worth it?* Did MAVA's approach to Strategic Partnerships lead to improved collaboration and conservation impact? We asked this question directly to MAVA's partners, staff, and Board. Their views and our own experience gave much food for thought.

Looking back at the journey we travelled together, we certainly can say it was a time that allowed us to explore new grounds in conservation and philanthropy. Together we experienced enthusiasm, companionship, and a feeling of opportunity. The road was not always smooth, and the bumps sometimes made us question ourselves and the approach. We discovered the power and the challenges of collaboration.

With its closing in sight, MAVA aimed to give a final push to deliver on critical conservation outcomes and leave behind thriving Strategic Partnerships.

Strategic Partnerships practising adaptive management seemed like the only option to make such an ambitious final strategy work. In hindsight, it is difficult to imagine an alternative that could unfold with the same impact.

*The Strategic Partnership Approach responded to three of the Board's priorities as we embarked on designing MAVA's final ambitious strategy: effective targeting of precious conservation resources; synergy between our grantees in a way that builds on their individual strengths and avoids competition and overlap; and most importantly – a legacy of strong conservation partnerships to carry forward the MAVA Foundation's vision after our closure. Although highly innovative (and requiring time and resources to implement), the Strategic Partnership Approach seems to have paid off – on all three counts. Nature will tell us if we got it right!*

**Mike Moser, Board member, MAVA Foundation**

*As a foundation with an end date, we wanted to do everything possible to lock in big conservation wins before our exit. Simultaneously, we wanted to help build a strong community of actors to carry on working together beyond our end date. We chose this highly orchestrated, deeply collaborative approach. It was an original yet demanding method – asking a lot from MAVA partners and staff. Early evidence points to some important wins and strong bonds built between people and organisations that didn't exist before. Only time will tell if the results are better than they otherwise would have been, but I am extremely optimistic based on what we are seeing so far.*

**Lynda Mansson, Director General, MAVA Foundation**

