



OUR JOURNEY IN PHILANTHROPY

Lessons from three decades of grant-making at MAVA

NOVEMBER 2022

INTRODUCTION

As MAVA wraps up its 28 years of philanthropy, we have taken a step back to reflect on what we have learned. Through a series of [learning products](#) we attempted to capture and share what might be useful for others in either the conservation or philanthropy sectors. This often related to specific aspects of our work, or approaches that we favored.


Here we take it one step higher, thinking about our key lessons in philanthropy. A lot has been written about best practice in our field, and we sought out areas where we might have something different to add to the debate. These were developed with input from the whole of MAVA staff and board.

This isn't a how-to document, but an attempt to share our insights and a-ha moments, especially the big surprises we encountered along the way. Our lessons here pertain to philanthropy in general, not only sunset foundations.

In philanthropy, there are no definitive answers and we don't mean to suggest in this document that there are. Our hope is to add to the body of experience for others to build on and integrate as appropriate. As we close our doors, we would like to offer our fellow funders and our partners a few lessons for consideration that we feel will help increase mission impact and the chances of securing lasting change for a living planet.

We start with a short visual history of MAVA for those who are less familiar with our journey.

Happy reading!



OVERVIEW OF MAVA

MAVA was a family philanthropic foundation based in Switzerland. We were founded in 1994 by Dr. Luc Hoffmann, a dedicated naturalist. His son André Hoffmann succeeded him as President in 2010. We focused on biodiversity conservation and sustainable economy. We worked mainly in Coastal West Africa, the Mediterranean Basin and Switzerland, with the Sustainable Economy work having a more global reach.

Our approach was one of partnership and collaboration with those we funded as well as with other funders. Our final strategy focused on orchestrating major collaborations amongst partners working together on a common strategy, defined by the group of partners. In addition, we had a strong focus on strengthening the field of conservation actors.



MAVA JOURNEY



Opening of the "Tour du Valat Biological Station"

1954

1948

Luc Hoffmann, 25 years old, buys the Tour du Valat in Camargue. This is the start of his lifelong dedication to wetlands conservation



1969

Creation of Doñana National Park as a result of efforts by José Antonio Valverde, Luc Hoffmann, WWF and the Spanish government commitment



Theodore Monod convinces the authorities to create the Banc d'Arguin National Park in Mauritania

1976



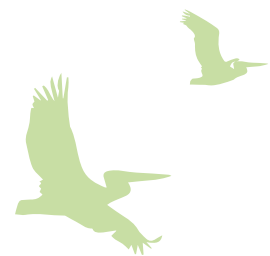
1986

Creation of the International Foundation of the Banc d'Arguin (FIBA)



Creation of the Society for the Protection of Prespa (SPP)

1991



Creation of MAVA, Fondation pour la Nature

1994



Creation of BACoMaB, the first conservation trust fund in West Africa

2009

2010

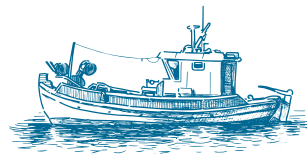
André Hoffmann becomes President of MAVA

Formalisation of the MAVA programmes - Mediterranean Basin, Coastal West Africa, Alpine Arc & Switzerland



2005

Recruitment of first MAVA employee



2000

Creation of the Prespa Transboundary Park



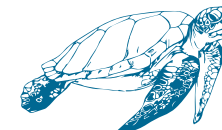
1996

Bijagos Archipelago, in Bissau Guinea, becomes a Unesco Biosphere Reserve



Launch of MAVA new strategy for its final phase

2016



2018

First cohort of MAVA Leaders for Nature Academy

End of MAVA Foundation grant-making activity

2022

2015

Merger between FIBA and MAVA

Creation of the Prespa Ohrid Nature Trust Fund (PONT)



MAVA AT A GLANCE

OUR MISSION

To conserve biodiversity for the benefit of people and nature by funding, mobilising and strengthening its partners and the conservation community.

OUR VISION

We envisage a future where biodiversity flourishes, especially in the Mediterranean, coastal West Africa and Switzerland; the global economy supports human prosperity and a healthy planet; and the conservation community is thriving.



Luc Hoffmann was MAVA President from 1994-2010 and then his son **André Hoffmann** from 2010-2022



MAVA allocated

CHF 1.14 billion

since 1994 for about

1500 projects

implemented by more than

500 partners

Headquarters in
Gland, Switzerland

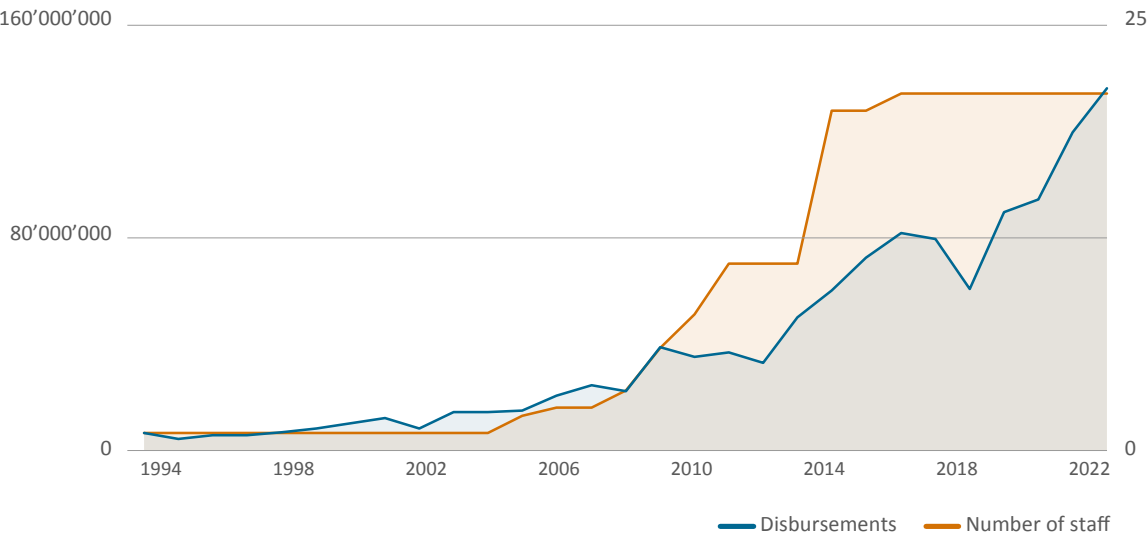
Regional office in
Dakar, Senegal



UNIFYING - EMPOWERING - FLEXIBLE - PERSEVERING - UNIFYING - EMPOWERING - FLEXIBLE - PERSEVERING - UNIFYING - EMPOWERING - FLEXIBLE - PERSEVERING

MAVA AT A GLANCE

Project payments and number of staff over the years



Some of our long-term partners



Funding of MAVA programmes

4%
IMPACT &
SUSTAINABILITY

9%
SWITZERLAND

10%
SUSTAINABLE
ECONOMY

13%
WEST
AFRICA

29%
GLOBAL
PROJECTS

35%
MEDITERRANEAN
BASIN

FROM 1994 TO 2009

A FOUNDATION BASED ON LUC HOFFMANN'S VISION AND ACTION



Office at Luc's home in Montricher (Switzerland)

FOCUSES ON BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION, IN ICONIC SITES SUCH AS:



A STRATEGY FOCUSED ON SPECIFIC TOPICS AND PARTNERS

MAVA'S 4 PROGRAMMES

ALPINE ARC & SWITZERLAND

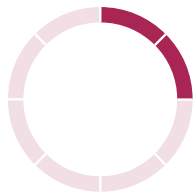
MEDITERRANEAN BASIN

WEST AFRICA

GLOBAL

GRANT MAKING

About
CHF 15 million
per year



STAFF

MAVA staff evolves from
1 to 6 people



COMMUNICATION

A discreet foundation with
very little communication



FROM 2010 TO 2015

MAVA EXPANDS ITS PORTFOLIO AND STRUCTURE



MAVA Foundation is based at the World Conservation Center in Gland (Switzerland)

MAVA'S VALUES:

UNIFYING
EMPOWERING

FLEXIBLE
PERSEVERING

A STRATEGY FOCUSED ON BROAD OBJECTIVES

MAVA'S 5 PROGRAMMES

ALPINE ARC &
SWITZERLAND

MEDITERRANEAN
BASIN

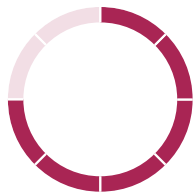
WEST AFRICA

GLOBAL

SUSTAINABLE
ECONOMY

GRANT MAKING

About
CHF 59 million
per year



STAFF

MAVA staff evolves from
8 to 20 people



COMMUNICATION

A communication strategy
is implemented

Logo shifts from



FROM 2016 TO 2022

MAVA INVESTS IN SUSTAINABLE PARTNERSHIPS



Part of the team works at
Dakar office in Senegal

WITH THE IMPACT AND SUSTAINABILITY UNIT

20 organisational Develop-
ment partnerships

176 alumni of MAVA Leaders
for Nature Academy

A strategy based on

25 coalitions of
partners

A STRATEGY FOCUSED ON SPECIFIC OUTCOMES

MAVA'S 6 PROGRAMMES

SWITZERLAND

MEDITERRANEAN
BASIN

WEST AFRICA

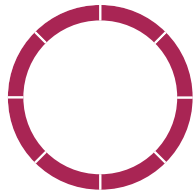
GLOBAL

SUSTAINABLE
ECONOMY

IMPACT AND
SUSTAINABILITY

GRANT MAKING

About
CHF 80 million
per year



STAFF

22 people



COMMUNICATION

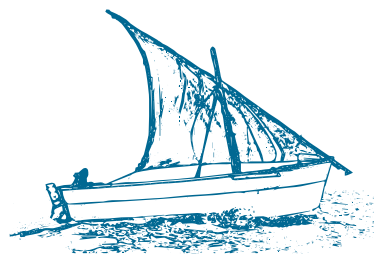
Many communication
and learning products!



About
4K each



OUR KEY LESSONS



1. INVEST IN COLLABORATION

Investing in joint planning, shared learning, and collective action can help bring different actors together, identify common interests, and build a shared vision - in order to achieve more collectively than is possible individually.

DESCRIPTION

Every organisation has its limits, and for various reasons, may not necessarily fully understand or be equipped to address all aspects of a particular challenge. Foundations and funders have the power to go beyond these limits by convening diverse actors and interests and facilitating collective action for greater impact. That is why in its last years of existence MAVA dedicated significant funding and energy to leveraging the power of the many - by creating space for our partners to collaborate and learn from one another, and most importantly, develop joint strategies for collective action and mutual accountability.

Done well, collaboration can deliver lasting impact - but it requires time, investment, and guidance.

Collaboration works best when built on a genuine desire amongst partners to work together. And while imposing collaboration is not recommended, sometimes insisting on it can deliver great results.

But it is important to bear in mind that, in a world where funding is limited, competition often underlies the relationship between organisations. We dealt with this by ensuring transparency on the budget available and providing long-term funding for the partners. When the funding competition diminishes, this opens the road for more fruitful collaboration.

Collaboration offers you as a funder a means to increase impact but only becomes instinctive for partners if it delivers demonstrable value. The best foundation for this is helping partners to jointly define strategy and take responsibility for their contribution to the bigger picture.

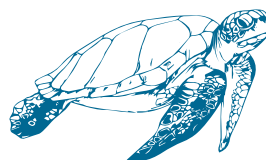
IN PRACTICE

Through our strategic partnerships approach and Outcome Action Plans, we brought partners together around specific issues. Together, they identified priorities and strategies, defined responsibilities, and set up clear governance structures for coordinated implementation.

Co-design can build strong partner communities that feel ownership of an initiative but doing it well requires time from foundation staff (especially early on), dedicated funding (for setting up and running collaboration), leadership (for collective action and adaptive management), facilitation and mediation (in addition to project management), and transparency (for monitoring and reporting).

RECOMMENDATION

Use your convening power to encourage, incentivize, and when necessary, insist on collaboration - but be ready to do what it takes to make it effective by investing the necessary time, energy, skills, and funds. Providing flexibility, offering unrestricted funding, or at least multi-year secured funding, could be a way to reduce competition between partners.



2. CAPITALISE ON PARTNER KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERTISE

Tapping into the knowledge and technical expertise of partners and implementing organisations can help you make smart funding decisions.

DESCRIPTION

Leveraging knowledge and expertise from partner organisations is a smart and efficient way to gain insights into complex social and environmental challenges and their potential solutions. It also reduces the need to create large and costly in-house teams of experts.

Understanding challenges and opportunities, and assessing partners, proposals, and levels of expertise, as well as what external support may be required, does require in-house knowledge and skill. But ideally, as a funder, you should have just enough in-house know-how to enable you to judge the best combination of partners and resources that will maximise collective impact.

IN PRACTICE

While in-house staff at MAVA had a good level of knowledge about the issues we fund, it was our partners who had the deep understanding of local context or a complete picture of what was happening on the ground. **Ultimately, we found that sourcing knowledge and insights from partners and local actors was a better way to sharpen our thinking and decision-making, rather than building up extensive in-house expertise.**

As an example, when we started to build our own circular economy programme, we realised it would be hard and potentially unnecessary to develop in-house circular economy expertise when we could instead turn to an expert, science-led

organisation that we had supported since its foundation. And to meet our needs, we secured 20% of one of their staff member's time that then enabled us to draw on the knowledge and insights of the entire organisation.

In the end, it is important that you strike a balance between in-house and external expertise, and recognise when to use which. Having in-house expertise should not get in the way of listening to the voices on the front lines. In our experience, our own knowledge and understanding was critical in the early phase of partnerships, helping us strategise, and appreciate and validate partner perspectives; as partnerships evolved, our own technical expertise became less important in shaping key decisions and outcomes.

Trusting partners, listening to their needs, and having just enough in-house expertise will ensure solid planning, smart strategies, and adaptive management.

RECOMMENDATION

Ensure you have enough internal expertise and know-how to broker and maintain effective partnerships and maintain a trusting relationship with your board, and meet more specialist needs by securing access to independent expertise from partners that is distinct from project work.



3. TAKE EVEN MORE RISK

Going outside comfort zones and taking even more risks can pay dividends in bringing about positive change.

DESCRIPTION

Grant-making foundations normally think of risk in terms of not achieving objectives or intended impact, or losing the opportunity to use funds elsewhere for potentially greater impact. At MAVA this translated into investing in 'long-shot' grants, acting as a sole funder, staying in politically-sensitive or unstable countries when others left, and giving a chance to young organisations to prove themselves.

There is a lot of discussion in the philanthropic sector about the need to take risks and in particular the special role that family philanthropy has in doing so. **In our experience, even though we felt like we were embracing risk, as we looked back at the end of our grant-making, we felt we could have done even more.** We suspect this is the same for others and can only encourage our fellow funders to be bold in their philanthropic giving.

Of course, when you take more risks, you increase the chance of failure. How you learn from failure will either reinforce the need to take risks and nourish the field or become a barrier to future risk-taking. Taking risks requires building a culture that is prepared to view failure as a chance to learn. Family members on the MAVA board encouraged us to take more risks. Taking more risk can require a culture shift for board, management, staff, and partners that avoids finger-point-

ing or blame, and accepts failure as a necessary part of delivering impact. This also means avoiding a natural tendency to put in place systems and processes to avoid future failure when confronted with something that didn't work. Such an approach may help avoid not reaching stated objectives in future work, but will also limit the incredible gains that can come from risks paying off in a positive way.

On the other side of the equation, we rarely turned down a project because we felt it was too risky, which suggests partners are reluctant to offer proposals for high-risk projects. We encourage organisations to be bolder in requesting funding for ambitious initiatives whose outcomes may not be guaranteed but may be transformational. This requires funders to help create a level of trust and openness for this to happen.

Ultimately, reminding yourself that your survival as a foundation is not at stake should make it much easier to take more risks. And remember, if every project succeeds and achieves its objectives, you are playing things too safe.

IN PRACTICE

As an example of risk-taking, MAVA funded work in Guinea Bissau throughout politically tumultuous times. Many other donors pulled out or paused their support until things got more stable. This made our on-going support all the more important to maintain the momentum of essential work on the ground. Had we also pulled our funding out, we would have risked losing years of progress to build the programme back up again.

Another example was our willingness to take a chance on smaller organisations with good ideas. In countless cases, this allowed them to build their capacity, strength and credibility – to become respected actors in their fields.

RECOMMENDATION

Earmark a significant part of your funds for high-risk, high impact, long-shot grant-making for projects that have the potential to deliver a step change while accepting that some of these investments will fail.



4. STAY TRUE TO YOUR ROOTS AND GROW YOUR BRANCHES

Consistency investing in specific themes, topics and regions can help build partner networks, trusting relationships, and deep understanding of issues that all contribute to more effective conservation.

DESCRIPTION

Over our lifetime, we evolved and adapted as we grew, including developing new areas of work, such as our Sustainable Economy programme. But over the years we also remained true to our roots, focusing on specific geographies and priority themes, and pursuing a unique approach to conservation developed by our founder.

This consistency of focus formed the basis for building trust with and between partners, enabling them to take the lead in strategic partnerships. **It also allowed us to 'grow our branches' by building strong networks, developing deep knowledge of specific contexts and issues. This helped to make us ready to address challenges and take advantage of opportunities as they arose.**

We sought to adapt to the evolving needs of the field while integrating new issues in a holistic manner. For example, when we started the new Sustainable Economy programme, we not only focused on global level changes but also used our existing geographic priorities to land the work on the ground and conduct pilots. Being rooted in these regions, having the knowledge and networks already in place, along with a willingness to adapt allowed this to happen effectively.

IN PRACTICE

The benefits of our consistency can be seen through the evolution of our strategies in the Mediterranean and West Africa. While the actions supported at the creation of the foundation had a focus on protected areas and community engagement, our strategies expanded to include issues linked to infrastructure, national development plans or entrepreneurship development. This common journey with our trusted partners, allowed us to stay relevant and accelerate the tackling of emerging needs in these regions.

Staying long term in a region, and therefore having a good network, has other added values. For example, when we conducted due diligence on a new partner in one of our focal regions, we knew who to ask, received timely and insightful responses, and could at times even delegate key responsibilities to other trusted partners. In contrast, on occasions when we invested outside our focal regions - for example in a green energy project in the Mekong - we lacked the profile, networks and knowledge either to conduct proper due diligence on partners, or to interpret reports on implementation and results.

The risk of consistency is losing objectivity. The long-term relationship might get in the way of making tough decisions when necessary. One of the ways we handled this was by having a robust challenge mechanism within the team and conducting robust external reviews periodically.

RECOMMENDATION

Invest in core themes, topics, and regions, and build long-term relationships that enable efficient and informed decision-making and accelerate the tackling of emerging issues and facilitate the on-boarding of new partners. Nurture trust, but also establish robust management and governance mechanisms so that you can retain your objectivity even with the closest and most trusted partners.



5. BE FLEXIBLE FOR THE BENEFIT OF PARTNERS

Be flexible to make things as easy as possible for the partners, and be clear on where the limits are.

DESCRIPTION

We were known for being flexible with our partners, on both administrative and programmatic issues. We knew how tough it was for people working in partner organisations, and we tried to minimize the burden on them. However, too much flexibility can put an undue burden on foundation staff who may scramble to meet internal deadlines or who need a lot of extra time to deal with changes.

For us, adaptive management of work we funded was a given. For any project or programme, having a clear overall goal is critical, as well as a clear path for reaching it. In reality, projects tend to require some flexibility in implementation, for example, in terms of duration or means. This should not be a problem as long as it does not endanger the ambition of the project.,

Exercising this kind of flexibility well requires preparing and equipping your staff so that they are ready and able to react to evolving partner needs while keeping projects and programmes on track. Staff must be mandated to handle this kind of change without additional bureaucratic layers of approval. A mindset of being partners in successful delivery lays the foundation for appropriate flexibility.

Administrative flexibility is a bit trickier. As a donor, we preferred to adapt ourselves as necessary to avoid complicating things for our partners. But this can

sometimes be demanding and there are limits to what a donor can do. **We found that we needed to balance being flexible with partners with managing our own teams' and managers' capacity and workload.** For example, we stood ready to accept another donor's reporting format to avoid requiring the partners to reformat information just for us. This is harder for donors who have grants management systems that require information to arrive in a specific format to be uploaded or processed. We often had to adapt to the processes of those foundations in order to spare the partners. For a single grant, it is not a big deal. When you manage a large portfolio, this can entail significant additional time investment.

Many donors do not allow much flexibility, and partners are not always used to it - but in our view, showing flexibility is a risk worth taking and can help overcome unforeseen challenges. In many cases, the flexibility we provided (in budget reallocation, timelines, or administrative constraints) helped the partners solve concrete issues as well as answering new opportunities and having more impact on the field. Both donor and partner must agree on the degree of flexibility that is acceptable, and in exercising it, the guiding principle must be that while anything can be changed, it should be agreed in advance and deliver greater impact.

IN PRACTICE

While we always conducted due diligence on new partners, in the longer-term, we sought to invest in relationships, often visiting them in the field during project implementation to build trust as a prerequisite for flexibility.

By focusing on strategic rather than technical discussions, we kept our aim on the results while leaving flexibility of methods to our partners.

In addition, we empowered the programme managers, so they could approve changes in a project, like budget reallocation or no-cost extension, without heavy administrative processes. Also, we tried to be flexible with our internal rules. Rather than seeing our rules as immovable, we were ready to be flexible when it made more sense to do so.

RECOMMENDATION

Exercise flexibility with trusted partners but ensure any changes to plans, strategies and activities are designed to deliver impact and achieve project goals, and ensure your staff are mandated to manage flexibility with partners properly. Focus the relationship on strategic discussions and without overly focusing on tactics the partner may choose to reach the objectives.



6. BE AN OCTOPUS!

Providing holistic project support that goes beyond grant-making can increase partner impact and contribute to their sustainability.

DESCRIPTION

We strongly believe that, as a donor, supporting a cause means more than funding projects. Just as an octopus can adapt to the environment, solve problems, and use different arms simultaneously, so do we have additional and unique capabilities beyond signing cheques. At MAVA this included, for example, investing significantly in our partners' leadership and organisational development, which meant we were able to ensure their resilience and sustainability. You can find out more about our approach as an engaged donor in our 'Be an Octopus' learning product.

'Being an octopus' implies using all levers at our disposal to support our partners. **Funding from donors is of course the bread and butter of our partners' existence, but all the other kinds of support are greatly appreciated, hard to come by, and are often cited as the key to their success.**

IN PRACTICE

We would like to emphasise that investing directly in individuals and organisations - including in areas such as youth leadership, fundraising capacity, organisational development, and even creating new organisations - has not only been an essential part of our role as a donor, and one that has been much appreciated

by our partners, but also something that we see as being critical for all donors in developing solutions and securing lasting change.

As a salient example of how important this support is, we noticed that when other donors picked up on work in the field that we had funded, especially our work in West Africa and some parts of the Mediterranean, so often those partners were able to submit strong and credible proposals at least in part due to the fundraising and organisational development support they had received along the way. Being willing to fund development – whether for individuals or organisations – enables partners to grow and scale at a pace required by the challenges we face.

RECOMMENDATION

Look beyond simply signing checks and invest in people and organisations, accompanying and empowering partners so they can deliver greater impact.



7. BE BOLD AND ACT SYSTEMICALLY

Taking a systems approach entails supporting a range of initiatives that use different methods and partners to achieve results.

DESCRIPTION

At MAVA, we sought to understand and engage with environmental challenges and potential solutions in a comprehensive and systemic way, embracing complexity and interdependence.

This meant working or partnering with a large variety of actors that brought different approaches and expertise - across public and private sectors, academia, and civil society, including both local and international NGOs - wherever they had an interest and expertise in a particular issue. And it also required tailoring interventions to specific circumstances, for example, acting regionally when addressing a challenge such as the conservation of migratory species, or more locally on specific issues.

IN PRACTICE

In developing our strategies, we sought to work collaboratively with all interested stakeholders in our endeavour to understand conservation challenges. Our firm conviction was that complex problems cannot be solved by individual organisations alone but only by partners working together. This is why we chose to create strategic partnerships. And also why we invested significantly in networking and targeted facilitation to promote exchange, learning, and collaboration between

different actors, regions and technical fields. These coalitions of diverse actors were able to build strategies to address an issue holistically, not with just one approach. This allowed them to build coherent and complementary projects, with a simultaneous implementation. **In many cases, it made the projects more impactful and proved the value of working systemically.**

RECOMMENDATION

Embrace systems complexity and design a holistic approach to addressing issues. Multiply impact by using different levels of intervention.



8. AIM TO PUT YOURSELF OUT OF BUSINESS

Investing for sustainability and securing sustainable financing can reduce dependence on philanthropic funding.

DESCRIPTION

Philanthropic foundations are only one player in a bigger system, which includes policymakers, businesses, investors, communities, and individuals, amongst others. And protecting nature cannot be done in isolation but only by accounting for many different values, interests, and needs.

In this context, philanthropic foundations should aim to make themselves redundant. By working together with other stakeholders, foundations can leverage multiple sources of funding which, if sequenced wisely, can create new, sustainable finance streams for conservation that eliminate dependence on philanthropy and secure lasting impact.

IN PRACTICE

Historically, MAVAs have funded some initiatives for many years. While this has helped launch and sustain projects for which it might otherwise have been hard to attract funding, it is not sustainable in the long term.

Our closure in 2022 forced us and our partners to explore alternative financing for their work. But irrespective of whether or not ongoing philanthropic funding is available, seeking sustainable sources of finance for conservation to cover all or at least part of costs should be something that all donors and partners do.

This may require a conscious shift in culture and skills for a foundation's board and its staff, as well as for NGOs receiving funds. Ultimately the aim is to reduce the need for philanthropic support.

Accessing increased public funding is one solution but not a panacea. In our sector, alternative sources of finance include trust funds, impact investing, user fees, or changes such as new laws that once secured do not require further funding. Nevertheless, some issues and initiatives do require long-term philanthropic support. These include work in difficult geographies such as failed states or disputed territories or work that is unattractive to many funders such as gathering baseline scientific data.

Donors can encourage partners to develop their own means of generating income (e.g., through ecotourism, sale of goods or expertise). **As we have seen, making this shift can sometimes be challenging for conservationists and often requires novel investment and recruitment, and a significant change in mindset and skills.** As donors, we need to support partners over the long-term with these actions to be able to eventually work ourselves out of a job.

RECOMMENDATION

Create a cultural shift and drive investment in sustainability, innovation and impact - you are here to put yourself out of business!



CONCLUSION

We hope these lessons give our fellow funders some food for thought. Philanthropy is an art rather than a science and we know that there are no magical formulas appropriate for everyone. Our hope is that you take these ideas, make them your own, adapt as needed and in turn pay it forward by nourishing the field of philanthropy with your own learnings.

MAVA will no longer be here to contribute to the debate, but the people who made MAVA what it was will continue to be present in the sector. Additionally, we have left an archive of our learnings, impact and history [on our legacy website](#) which will remain live (though static) for many years to come.

