



MAVA
Learning

BE AN OCTOPUS

Reflections from
an Engaged Donor

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ENGAGEMENT TO MAXIMISE IMPACT

Philanthropic giving is increasing, but so are the challenges that it intends to address. There is an urgency to question the effectiveness of such giving and reflect on how to further maximise the positive impact generated with the philanthropic funds available.

The term philanthropy has come to mean and be associated with only a project-funding engagement. This focus has limited donors* from reflecting on what other capabilities they have at their disposal. This is not a new observation and philanthropic organisations have been thinking about this matter for quite some time. However, the discussions have yet to spur the necessary shift in practice.

MAVA strongly believes 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.* Neglecting to make use of these opportunities would decrease our potential impact on our mission. Applying all these capabilities is what we call being an engaged donor.

Many donors are already practising engagement in some way or another. Broadly speaking, the spectrum ranges from writing cheques to an implementing organisation, to being the implementer yourself. Experienced donors, as well as newcomers to the philanthropic world, are asking themselves the same question: where on this spectrum is the best place to increase my odds of achieving the desired outcomes for the funds invested?

Not surprisingly, there is no single or simple answer. The best place depends on the context and the partner organisations, and both are likely to evolve over time. As a result of 27 years of MAVA Foundation's experience partnering with hundreds of non-profit organisations, this booklet shares our reflections regarding the pros and cons of our relatively high level of engagement.

Our objective is to inspire other donors to look at their way of operating, how it relates to the wider system and its needs, and to eventually consider new fields of action where they can add more value. This is not a straightforward process and the opportunity can also have pitfalls. In this booklet, we have tried to objectively present what we have experienced.

This is not a 'how-to guide', neither is it an exhaustive list of types of engagement or a conclusive report. We hope to provide insights to philanthropists who would like to improve their practices towards increased impact. As such, we hope to add to the ongoing debate on how the sector can be more effective.

**In this booklet we refer to donor organisations as donors and partner organisations as partners.*

BECOMING AN ENGAGED DONOR

MAVA defines an engaged donor as *a donor organisation that is committed to a cause and is doing more than funding.*

Becoming an engaged donor starts with acknowledging that the donor's ability goes beyond just giving money. This leads to thinking about what else is needed and what could be done beyond traditional project grants to maximise impact towards the overall vision.

For defining what this non-traditional support to a partner could look like, it's best to answer three key questions: What is the donor's unique position within the system in which it works? What are the needs and aspirations of the partners? What are the unique capabilities that the donor can bring to this system?

THE DONOR'S PLACE IN THE SYSTEM

A donor cannot maximise impact in isolation, it is only effective as part of a system. Understanding how the system works and the impact of direct interactions within it allows the donor to identify where it and its partners stand, its sphere of influence and what else might be needed. This 'engagement for information' can be simple or in-depth but should allow the donor to understand its responsibility in achieving impact and delivery of its specific part.

THE NEEDS AND ASPIRATIONS OF THE PARTNERS

Even the best organisation encounters challenges that can hinder its actions and limit its impact. Donors who genuinely understand their partners' aspirations and the challenges they face can take action to enable them to attain their objectives.

THE UNIQUE CAPABILITIES

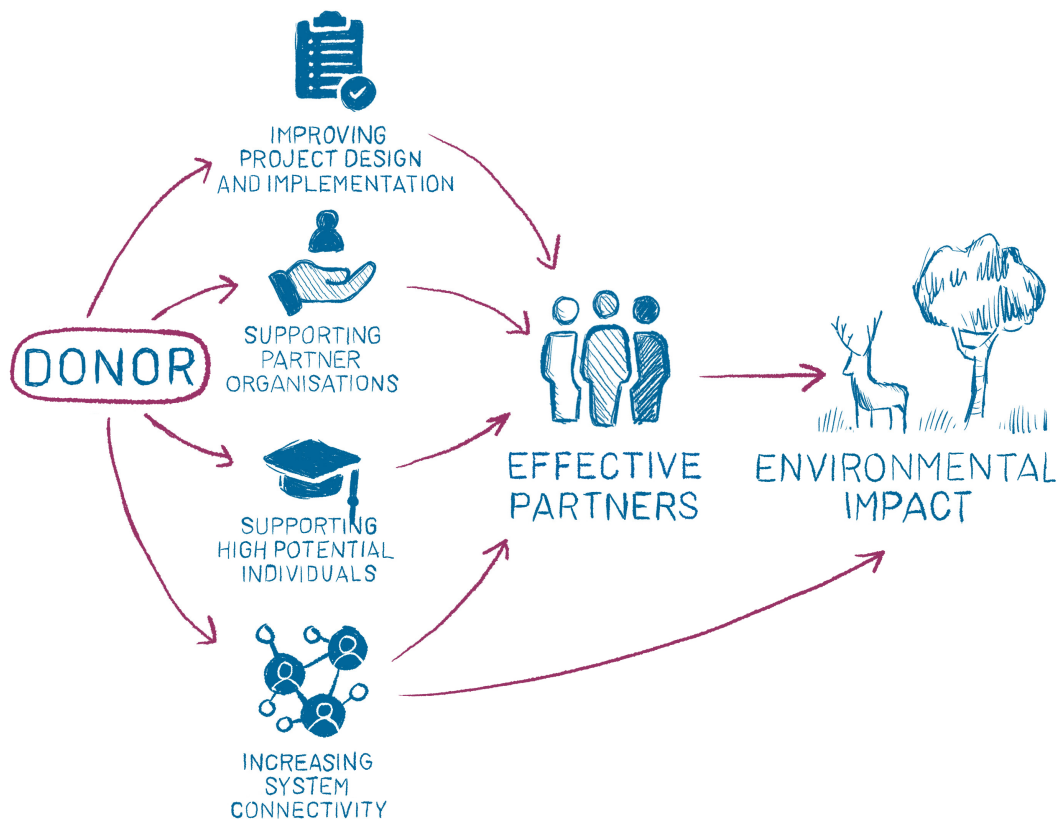
Donors have unique capabilities when compared to other stakeholders in the system. This can include providing a unique perspective on the context, networking, credibility with specific audiences, or convening power. These are 'superpowers' that can play a key role in achieving impact. It may be a missed opportunity if these resources remain unused. Identifying these unique capabilities and how they can be mobilised, is a good way to identify 'the other things to do' and how to engage, as a donor, in the system.

MAVA FOUNDATION, OUR HISTORY OF ENGAGEMENT

At MAVA, we have always been committed to doing what it takes to achieve the desired outcome. We embrace our role with humility and develop a deep relationship with our partners, nurturing trust. Our engagement has evolved progressively. During the early years, MAVA was involved in a few, very deep types of engagement, such as creating organisations where there was a gap, or our founder leveraging his unique convening power. Over time, we have broadened our types of engagement, putting more emphasis on improving project design. However, the approaching sunset of the MAVA Foundation has forced us to become more focused on the sustainability of our impact. In 2015, seven years before closing, we made the conscious choice to go one step further in the scope and depth of our engagement. Most of the actions described in Chapter 3, Engagement in practice, refer to this period.

ENGAGEMENT IN PRACTICE

Over the past 27 years, at MAVA, we have leveraged our unique capabilities as a donor to reinforce our partners through a range of very different methods. These engagements can be grouped into four types based on the target — improving project design and implementation, supporting partner organisations, supporting high potential individuals, and increasing system connectivity. These actions can be carried out either in isolation or as a complementary set, but ultimately are intended to deliver higher impact.



IMPROVING PROJECT DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

Partners, as implementing organisations, have deep expertise and knowledge of the field. Donors, because they have seen and accompanied many different projects that have deployed diverse strategies in varied cultural contexts, have a unique knowledge and viewpoint.

Engagement consists of combining the complementary perspectives of the donor and the implementing organisation to strengthen a project. At the design stage, the donor and the partner can engage in a discussion for the improvement of the project (e.g., timing, budget, involvement of other stakeholders, etc.) and create the conditions for dynamic adaptation. Mutual trust is an important element that enables these discussions. Donors should be careful not to impose their own views, and partners should be open to considering different options.

CHALLENGING PROJECT DESIGN

Early in the project conceptualisation process, it is always better to create a dialogue with quick feedback loops leading to the final project design and approval by the donor rather than the partner developing a complete proposal that will not fit with the donor's criteria nor leave space for improvement.

A process built on dialogue is not necessarily longer but allows for mutual learnings and integration of the elements that the donor can offer such as context knowledge, specific experience, coherence with other initiatives, or network connections. Even providing constructive feedback for rejected proposals is not only appreciated by the partners but helps them improve their future fundraising actions.

There is a risk for the donor to drive the process and the content development, even unintentionally (you will read how we tried to mitigate that risk in our 'Lessons learnt'). However, in MAVA's experience, this engagement does deliver higher-quality projects because they are designed through broad experience, lessons learnt, and collective critical thinking and debate. Being part of the design process is also reassuring because the donor will have seen the critical issues and how they have been solved. At MAVA, discussing and improving the project proposal with the partner is a big part of the work of the programme staff.

ALLOWING FOR DYNAMIC ADAPTATION

To allow a partner to quickly adapt its intervention to a change of context, and to capitalise on its learnings, a donor should ensure that projects can truly be managed adaptively. This implies giving enough flexibility to the partner and maintaining regular contact in order to better understand and promptly authorise any major changes in project implementation and spending. Trust between donor and partner is essential for this to work. Thus, at MAVA we have witnessed how the time spent on building a trustful relationship is fruitful.



SUPPORTING PARTNER ORGANISATIONS

Well-functioning organisations not only efficiently and effectively implement a project funded by a donor but also achieve impact beyond the specific project. But partners often face organisational issues that could hinder their efficiency. A donor, because it interacts with many organisations and sees different ways of operating, has a unique standpoint to understand the needs of the organisations it supports and where the opportunities are. Seeing an organisation at a distance, and often being unemotionally involved, the donor can also identify weaknesses and offer solutions from what it sees working well elsewhere.

A donor might also see operational challenges across the wider sector. It can pool partners that share the same challenges and offer tailor-made solutions, reinforcing its community and generating economies of scale.

Hence, there is a wide range of activities to engage in supporting a partner organisation. At MAVA we have put our focus on the four following activities.

FUNDING ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Organisational development strengthens a partner's ability to achieve impact by improving its operation in terms of efficiency, effectiveness, and financial sustainability. It is usually a holistic process, which can be quite demanding. Preconditions include partners' readiness, transparency, vision, and time to dedicate to the process.

Engaging in organisational development bears the risk for the donor of meddling with the partner's internal affairs. The process needs to be partner-driven, meaning that the partner must retain the overall ownership, control, and responsibility of implementing the activities.

At MAVA, we have been engaged in a diversity of tailor-made organisational development support. We have not shied away from funding what the organisation needs, even if it means funding non-traditional budget lines, such as salaries for support staff, financial reserves, or core funding.

Moreover, to keep the right distance and mobilise the right expertise, we have often worked through tripartite partnerships between the partner, an external consultant, and MAVA. Our approach has been described in this [*funding organisational development report*](#).

BUILDING PARTNER'S CAPACITIES

Sometimes, building a specific capacity can help the partner resolve a specific challenge. At MAVA, we have funded many technical training sessions (e.g., scenario planning, marine patrolling, developing business plans for protected areas, hosting international volunteers), often creating groups of practitioners who collaborate beyond the training. These actions are usually easy to identify (signalled by the partner) and implement (outsourced).

SITTING ON A PARTNER'S BOARD

Having a representative of the donor sitting on the partner's board is very intrusive. Best practice rightly states that it should be avoided. The power relationship is very difficult to manage, with the risk of the donor driving the agenda. The reputational risk is also higher, both for the donor and the partner. Also, because being sitting on a board has legal implication for the representative, it blurs the lines of organisational and individual responsibility.

There are only very few cases where this might be considered. At MAVA, it occurred in 2 scenarios: during the creation of an organisation we helped set up, or when the statute of the partner requires a donor representative on its board. We did bring our credibility, network, organizational development expertise or connection with the other donors to the organisation's board.

In any case, sitting on a partner's board should be considered very carefully and only seen as temporary. In many situations, the donor presence can be replaced by appointing a third party.

HELPING PARTNERS TO RAISE FUNDS

Wider communication about a partner's work and its success is an easy way for a donor to add credibility and visibility to the partner's work with eventual benefits for fundraising.

A donor can also make introductions to other potential funding sources and share with partners its donor perspective on the elements that make a funding proposal successful.

Donors need to be aware that every time they communicate, using their name and credibility on behalf of others, they assume a reputational risk that cannot be controlled.



SUPPORTING HIGH POTENTIAL INDIVIDUALS

Individuals are the energy centres, the creative minds and the ultimate movers and shakers within the system. Supporting individuals so they can express their potential and shine as leaders will not only improve the delivery of actions and build the strength of their organisation but also impact the whole system.

A donor, because of its interactions with many stakeholders, is uniquely positioned to hear and identify common challenges for leadership development. Donors can help emerging leaders build credibility by supporting their development, either through a programme or tailored support to individuals.

FUNDING LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Picking off-the-shelf programmes is an easy option, should they exist. Otherwise, a donor can develop such programmes and invite its partners to apply for participation. It is a considerable investment, but running the training in the spirit of cohorts, where individuals remain connected as a community, also helps with the long-term leadership growth (peer support) and eventual impact of the cause.

Donors should acknowledge that some people might have difficulties prioritising leadership development amid all the urgencies they have to deal with. Some may leave their current organisations, but we have seen that the vast majority of them are attached to the cause and stay within the same sector.

MAVA AND LEADERSHIP

In 2016, when we decided to support our partners to develop their leadership capabilities, we hadn't realised how transformative this journey would be! Leadership development was a new focus for us and we partnered with experts (Common Purpose and Mowgli Mentoring) to develop and run a specific programme: the MAVA Leaders for Nature Academy. We stayed involved, to ensure that the programme fits well with the needs of our partners, and to enable coherence and synergies with our other actions. It was inspiring to see how our partners revealed themselves and built self-confidence through this programme. With personal involvement and honesty, innumerable smiles and laughs (and a few tears!), this leadership academy connected our partners as a community.

PROFILING EMERGING LEADERS

A donor has a variety of opportunities to profile the leaders it works with. It can be through personal introductions or showcasing their work. Opportunities could be the annual foundation report or events to which foundation staff are invited but which could be passed along to selected individuals.

It is beneficial to facilitate the spotlighting of individuals, not only to make them more recognisable and enhance their credibility and reach, but to increase the fundraising success of their organisations as well.



INCREASING SYSTEM CONNECTIVITY

Individuals, organisations, and donors are all actors in the same system of purpose.

From its place, a donor can connect to specific actors that are out of reach to its partners. Also, a donor sees a different, often wider, landscape of actions than many other actors. It can identify possible similarities, synergies, and connecting points.

A donor has the capability to engage with its peers, either through informal or organised technical discussions or by participating in donor collaborations. Using its convening power, a donor is also able to facilitate collaborations among organisations. Building up on its credibility, a donor can also lobby actively for the cause it supports.

DONOR ROUNDTABLES

Gathering several donors working in the same region, or on the same challenge, to improve communication and coordination, opens opportunities to align understanding of priorities, build coherence, create synergies, or even initiate co-funding. Roundtables can also serve as a place for pooling and making sense of gathered information. All of this helps to increase the efficiency of the global amount invested by the donors.

FACILITATING COLLABORATION

With this unique view of the wider landscape of organisations, a donor is able to explore overlapping interests, possible synergies, and complementary strengths. A donor can play the role of a connector and facilitate the contact between stakeholders. This has the risk of becoming quite time-consuming but certainly eases the establishment of new collaborations in the sector.

Another approach is to use donors' convening power and possibly their facilitation skill to initiate and develop new forms of partnerships for specific objectives. This impact-based collaboration process has been described in more depth in our publication *Strategic Partnerships: MAVA's approach to scaling up conservation impact*, laying out processes, risks, and the potential for higher impact.

COLLECTIVE DONOR FUNDING

A donor can seek other like-minded donors to mount a joint effort on a shared subject of interest, be it a new subject or one that needs increased effort. Actively pooling resources can create a substantial funding base for impactful actions. Donor collaborations also have the potential to pool intelligence, increase financial sustainability, credibility, and visibility.

Finding the most appropriate governance and operational model for such collaborations is not always as easy as it looks. One of the risks is losing focus if each donor comes with its own agenda.

ACTIVE LOBBYING

A donor has unique connections and can access audiences (eg., business sector, media, philanthropic community) or individuals (eg., thought leaders, high-level officials) that would otherwise be inaccessible to its partners. These can be linked to its position as a donor, the profile of its board members or staff, or built through its presence in the area (e.g., through a regional office). A donor could use this to advance the cause within the existing system or to bring the cause to new spheres.

SHARE THE RISK!

After André Hoffmann took over as President in 2010, MAVA started to explore with other foundations high impact/high-risk areas with the potential to shift the economic system towards more positive social and environmental impact. Together, we created a donor collaborative that provided a base from which we could engage beyond our comfort zone and pioneer in an uncharted topic. Developing a common vision and understanding of this complex field required a lot of effort and reshaping but was so exciting! Even if this collaborative was not a formal organisation, we created a board and took part in it. A few years after its creation, this new collaborative had established its credibility as a pioneering and innovative actor in the field and other donors have joined it.

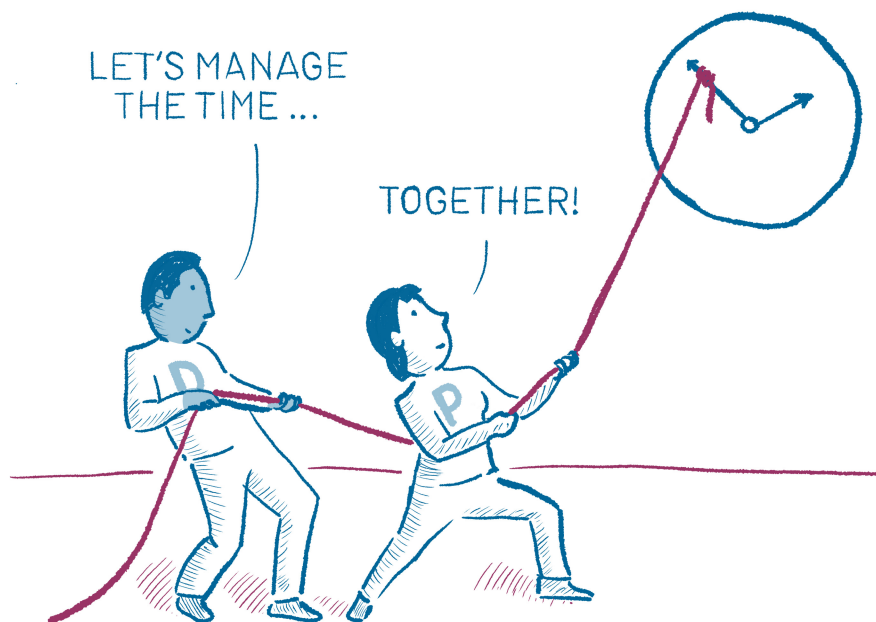
LESSONS LEARNT

Engagement incorporates many facets and every single one is unique. Across the many relationships MAVA has had the privilege to experience, we consider that several higher-level factors apply to most of them in different ways:

Optimal timing	When to start, duration, and the right exit
Depth of engagement	Knowing what is important but avoiding micromanagement
Human relationships	The human side of relationships
Appropriate staffing	Skills and number of staff
Decision-making model	Reducing and managing conflict of interest
Credibility	The up and downside of (co)branding

We offer reflections based on our experience of these 6 factors and some associated recommendations.

OPTIMAL TIMING



From an impact point of view, any type of engagement should last as long as necessary. However, what is necessary is not always easy to determine because the real impact is often only visible a few months, or even years, after the actions are taken (e.g., fundraising actions).

Experience shows that there is always something unexpected that constrains and eventually delays actions. Allowing time for the full completion of the actions should be preferred to

forceful completion for the sole purpose of staying on time. A donor should also recognise that the partner should set its own priorities and rhythm for the action to be compatible with other parts of its work.

A donor might also encounter other constraints in its operations that should be acknowledged and dealt with early in any process. These could be related to internal processes such as strategic cycles or allocation cycles that entail a risk of non-renewal. A donor should also plan to avoid possible conflicts of time misalignment.

Different types of engagements can happen at the same time. This bears the risk of higher financial dependencies negatively impacting the overall operation and sustainability if not managed adequately. Keeping a watchful eye on dependency rates, setting absolute limits, and staging engagements can reduce this risk.

Regardless of how a donor sees its engagement, be it in the short or the long term, when and how to exit a partnership is a key question. Exits need to be planned in advance, with mutual understanding and respect to the people affected. The idea is to plan the exit to seize the opportunities it opens.

OUR TIPS FOR OPTIMAL TIMING

Take the time it needs. Always allow for more time than planned. Be clear, internally, on how long you are ready to engage and let the partner set the rhythm and priorities.

Consider staging your support. Even if there is a need for different initiatives to be funded (projects, OD supports, etc.), there is only so much that can be absorbed. Staged support with lower progress might translate into overall higher impact.

Plan your exit. Plan your exit from the beginning in a respectful manner and in agreement with your partner.

Exit even if it hurts. Try to have a realistic view of the chance for success and dare to take difficult and painful decisions to exit.

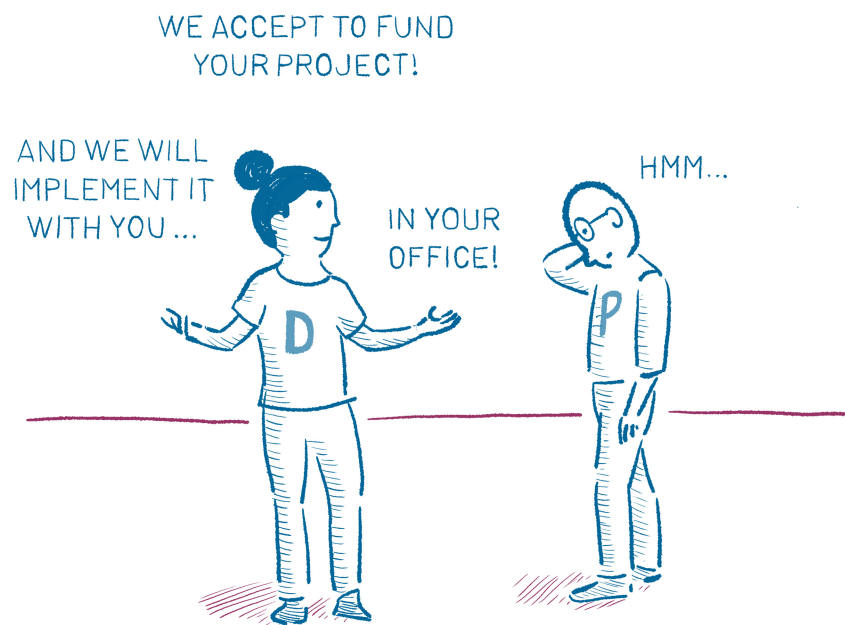
DEPTH OF ENGAGEMENT

Engagement is driven by the desire to do more for the cause and originates from an emotional attachment or detailed technical knowledge. Donor staff need to resist the temptation to use their responsibility as an 'excuse' to jump into the partner's shoes and get involved in execution work. Maintaining a clear line between donor's and partner's roles is crucial — less is usually better, more can always be provided upon request.

When there is a lack of trust, a donor might also seek inappropriate levels of monitoring and get too deep into the business of the partner. However, there is a time to ask for what is needed, and a time to allow the partner to do the work, which in turn can bring evidence for more trust. Let's simply say that when a partner thinks its donor is too involved in its own business, the level of engagement should be questioned and probably adjusted.

Under certain circumstances, such as during a crisis, engagement in more detail can help to solve a specific problem. It can even be seen as a sign of a solid partnership. It should, however, be planned as a short-term intervention and should only happen if real expertise can be provided.

Overstepping the boundaries can feel like an intrusion that limits a partner's freedom of decision-making, resulting in negative consequences for all the partnership. For the donor, there is a real risk of losing too much time and energy when dealing with business outside of its role and prerogatives.



OUR TIPS FOR FINDING THE RIGHT DEPTH OF ENGAGEMENT

Stay in your own shoes. Remember the respective roles of a donor and an implementation partner. As a donor, you don't own the project, and should humbly provide your expertise. Be open about this with your team and make it part of your organisational culture.

Wear the donor hat smartly. There needs to be a place for honest discussions where a partner can say 'no'. Encourage your partner to question your opinions.

Work as a cohesive team. Create a culture of transparency within your organisation to compare approaches and flag potential over-engagement of staff. This can be mitigated by limiting the time for dedication to each project or partner. Invite an external point of view for making neutral decisions.

Build trust. Create the conditions of confidence through your attitude (humility, transparency, open-mindedness), by investing in a partnership step-by-step, and/or through a solid due diligence process.

HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS

Every organisational relationship eventually translates to an interaction between people, bringing a complex emotional and psychological dimension to the partnership. It is vital to keep this in mind as you think about the personal relationships in the context of engagements.

Good and reliable relationships are the roots that fuel and stabilise the collective journey towards impact and they need to be nurtured.

Shared interests, common objectives, and emerging trust create a bond between people from donor and partner organisations, and friendships may develop. The boundaries between a good professional relationship and a friendship will start to blur.

ON THE SAME BOAT: BUILDING TRUST WITH FIELD VISITS

In 2006, MAVA started a long-standing partnership with a young, local but promising organisation in West Africa. While providing a first small grant, we frequently visited this partner organisation, spending time with the staff during field trips. Being on the same boat in storms, sharing field camp conditions, and spending nights on a census of birds and reptiles, built a solid trusted relationship. Field trips were the opportunity to learn more about this organisation, its challenges and strengths. This provided an excellent opportunity to reflect on new initiatives and bigger projects which MAVA eventually funded.

WE ARE MORE
THAN PARTNERS...

FOR BETTER
AND FOR WORSE!



Friendly relationships can reinforce professional relationships. But when things go wrong and the professional objectives come into conflict with the personal relationship, this can distort judgment and hinder difficult decisions to be taken.

OUR TIPS FOR DEALING WITH HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS

Build the relationship. Create the opportunity and allow time for casual conversation (even activities) between the staff of the donor and partner organisations.

Don't minimise the emotional side of the work. Acknowledge with your team that emotions are part of an engaged donor's work. Discuss the risk and challenges and create avenues to make the deepest emotional relationships transparent and manageable.

Share the institutional relationship. If possible, involve several people from your organisation in a relationship. Different types of support can be led by different people. Also, have someone with emotional distance to cross-check the work (e.g., Director General, external evaluators, colleague from another programme).

ADEQUATE STAFFING

Doing more beyond project funding takes more time. Being an engaged donor requires having dedicated staff, but should not be understood as a necessity for building a huge staff count. Many engagements such as organisational or leadership development can effectively be outsourced, allowing for flexibility, changing expertise, and external eyes.

Donor staff should focus on creating the best precondition for engagement and potential outsourcing. In an outsourced scenario, the donor should remain the orchestrator, ensuring coherence and the creation of synergies.

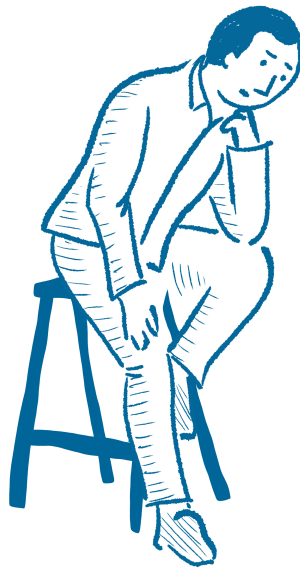
Ideally, staff should have basic technical, cultural, and socio-political understanding, topped up with complementary skills such as strategic planning, adaptive management, and facilitation.

EXPANDING MAVA ROOTS IN WEST AFRICA

During its early years, MAVA operated with a very small team from our office in Switzerland. Our West Africa programme had to rely on strong relationships with trusted partners, mostly other international organisations.

In 2014, we merged with FIBA, one of our most long-standing partners active in West Africa. This merger complemented our convening power and financial resources with FIBA's well-honed capacity development, organisational strengthening skills, and presence on the ground.

Despite the additional administrative load and costs to maintain a team and an office in another country, this merger was worth it. This gave us the means to engage in a broader range of financial and technical support available to more local partners.



AM I A SPECIALIST
OF NOTHING
OR
A GENERALIST
IN EVERYTHING?

The deep technical knowledge should remain with the partner organisation. The donor should play the role of the constructive challenger, the enabler, and the connector.

OUR TIPS FOR ADEQUATE STAFFING

Be as big as needed, but as small as possible. Do not shy away from increasing your staff count, as this will allow for deeper engagement. Define where in-house capacity adds value and consider outsourcing wisely.

Get transversal skills. Recruit people with transversal skills such as management, strategic thinking, adaptive management, facilitation, etc.

Be connected with the context. Strive for staff from the geographical, social, and cultural context you are working on. Speaking the local language creates closer relationships with partners in the field. Consider having staff based in specific geographic locations.

DECISION-MAKING MODEL

Shaping project proposals and other types of engagements together with a partner is a win-win model. On the one hand, the partner benefits from having a donor sitting at its table and providing useful insights. On the other hand, the donor gains deeper insight and trust on what they are asked to fund.

However, an engaged donor must be aware of the inherent conflict of interest a close relationship with a partner can create and the impact this can have on decision-making.

The conflict can be reduced but not fully eliminated. There is also an advantage in having those with the deepest insight in the organisation or project having a vote during funding

decisions or periods. This trade-off needs to be managed well. It can be done by always being aware of the risk and being transparent about it, or if needed, bringing in an independent perspective. At MAVA we share the decisions about the funding of projects through allocation meetings with several people from the foundation who discuss but also challenge the proposals.



OUR TIPS FOR DECISION-MAKING

Ensure sufficient independence and challenge for decisions. Decisions can be made by a specific body, disconnected from the project design work. It will also be useful when the manager has sensitive messages to communicate.

Get all the opinions. Base the decisions on the point of view all relevant staff engaged with the same partner.

Rely on a solid monitoring and evaluation system. This will also help to evaluate the achievement of intended results towards the predefined plan and provides the basis for honest discussions.

CREDIBILITY

The close affiliation of a partner and a donor can increase their respective strength and credibility but also makes each one vulnerable to the other's reduced performance and reputation or other unintended side effects.

A partner who gets funding from a donor also gains the 'labelling' of this donor, often with more credibility. Then, this labelling can help the partner to get new funding with other donors. However, there is also the risk of triggering the opposite effect and discouraging other potential donors from entering the game. Firstly, providing multiple or substantial funding support to a partner could give the impression that funding needs are fully covered.

And secondly, if the relationship seems too exclusive, other philanthropic organisations might think that there will be little or no room for them to collaborate. At MAVA we remain attentive to not missing an opportunity to discuss the needs of our partners with other donors. We communicate often about our withdrawal in 2022 and encourage other donors to consider funding 'our partners.'

WE DECIDED TO WEAR LONG
SHIRTS TO HAVE ENOUGH PLACE
TO PUT ALL OUR SPONSORS' LOGO!



OUR TIPS FOR KEEPING THE PROPER DISTANCE

Put your partners and their successes in the spotlight. Create the condition for more visibility and credibility for your partners, without flagging their successes as 'yours'. Communicate actively, and support communication. Use your network and help the partner to connect with a wider audience.

Support individual leadership development. Beyond its impact on delivery, this capacity development will help your partners stand out and free them from your branding.

Openly engage with other donors to avoid misunderstandings. Facilitate relationships between your partners and other donors.

Monitor the dependency of your partners. A high level of financial dependency on your funding puts the partners at risk, do not incentivise fundraising and discourage potential donors. Discuss risky situations openly, develop alternate scenarios and exit plans, or require co-funding.

BE AN OCTOPUS

In this booklet, we have taken you on a journey through our experience of what it means to be an engaged donor. We have proposed types of engagement as a framework based on who the beneficiaries are — individuals, partner organisations, and stakeholder ecosystems — and provided you with a taste of how we, together with our partners, are turning those into action.

The key learnings we gained from this reflection also touch on higher-level factors that apply to all engagement types to a varying degree. These relate to the timing, positioning, governance and, of course, the individual person, who is fundamental to any relationship and therefore also to the engaged donor approach.

Leaving types and factors aside, we would describe an engaged donor as having one or several of these attributes:

- is impact focused and partner centred
- considers itself as part of a web with mutual dependencies
- has a deep and broad understanding of the subject and challenges
- offers all available capabilities to its partners, such as networking and convening power
- potentially extends the scope of its action in response to partner's needs
- shares responsibility for delivery and results
- supports partners in fulfilling their roles by being pragmatic and flexible
- manages unpredictability by learning and adjusting together
- has a supportive attitude and nurtures trusting relationships

We hope to have inspired you to consider becoming an ‘octopus donor’ and consider how you can use your additional capabilities to accomplish your vision more efficiently.

Some of the above points can be realised fairly easily, others need operational changes or even modifications in decision making and governance. Finding your right place will need a bit of experimentation and learning. If done prudently, the overall associated risk can be kept small.

Our years of experience with this approach have persuaded us of its usefulness and impact. We invite you to join us in being an octopus donor.



ABOUT MAVA FOUNDATION

The MAVA Foundation, a family-based 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. By funding, mobilising, and empowering its conservation partners, the foundation aims to conserve biodiversity for the benefit of people and nature.

The foundation supports conservation projects through three regional programmes in the Mediterranean, West Africa, and Switzerland, and a thematic programme focused on Sustainable Economy. MAVA also hosts an Impact and Sustainability Unit to support the effectiveness and resiliency of its partners and to build a dynamic conservation community. The foundation operates through a small, dedicated team based in Switzerland and Senegal and is known for its high level of engagement with its partners.

MAVA was created in 1994. Luc planned for the foundation to close in 2022 to give his children the opportunity to explore their own philanthropic priorities.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors would like to acknowledge the vision of the MAVA Foundation's board and the Hoffmann family. Their understanding that foundations are an integral part of the ecosystem they support, that supporting means more than funding, and their willingness to 'fund what it takes' has provided the fertile ground on which MAVA's engaged approach has flourished.

We would also like to thank all our partners for engaging with us. We are amazed by the results we have achieved together. We are conscious that MAVA, through its engagement, is quite an unusual donor to work with. Continuous and honest feedback from our partners has helped us adapt our positioning along the way.

COLOPHON

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