

Short  
version!

# Strategic Partnerships



MAVA's approach to scaling  
up conservation impact



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## MAVA's approach to scaling up conservation impact

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*This booklet is a summarised version of a more comprehensive book on the same subject. Access the long version [here](#).*

### Colophon

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## Introduction

In 2015, we began preparing for the foundation's closure in 2022. As a major conservation donor, above all, we wanted to do all that we could to secure our partners' achievements, ensure their vital work continued, and scale impact.

Guiding our approach were our core values – unifying, empowering, flexible, and persevering – and our desire to nurture a diverse, capable, and thriving conservation community.

To achieve this, we set about bringing partners together in strategic partnerships to deliver more ambitious and effective programmes. And from supporting around 250 individual projects in 2016, we created 23 partnerships whose participants we believe will be able to deliver conservation impact for many years to come.

This summary report gives a flavour of our experience, and outlines our approach to creating strategic partnerships. It is an approach that is disruptive – requiring perseverance, honesty, and empathy – but also transformative. We hope it will help the global conservation community address today's most pressing conservation challenges.

*“With a view to our closing, we identified our criteria for success. 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**

## Chapter 1: Strategic Partnerships

In strategic partnerships, actors with different but complementary strengths and capabilities come together as equals, adapt to changing circumstances, and assume joint responsibility for realising a shared vision and delivering conservation at scale.

At MAVA, we envision a future in which biodiversity thrives and economies support lasting prosperity and a healthy planet.

The scale and complexity of the challenges we face today – not least from climate breakdown and nature loss – mean that achieving this vision demands collective effort through strategic partnerships.

Successful partnerships all contain four essential ingredients – functionality, impact, adaptability, and empowerment.

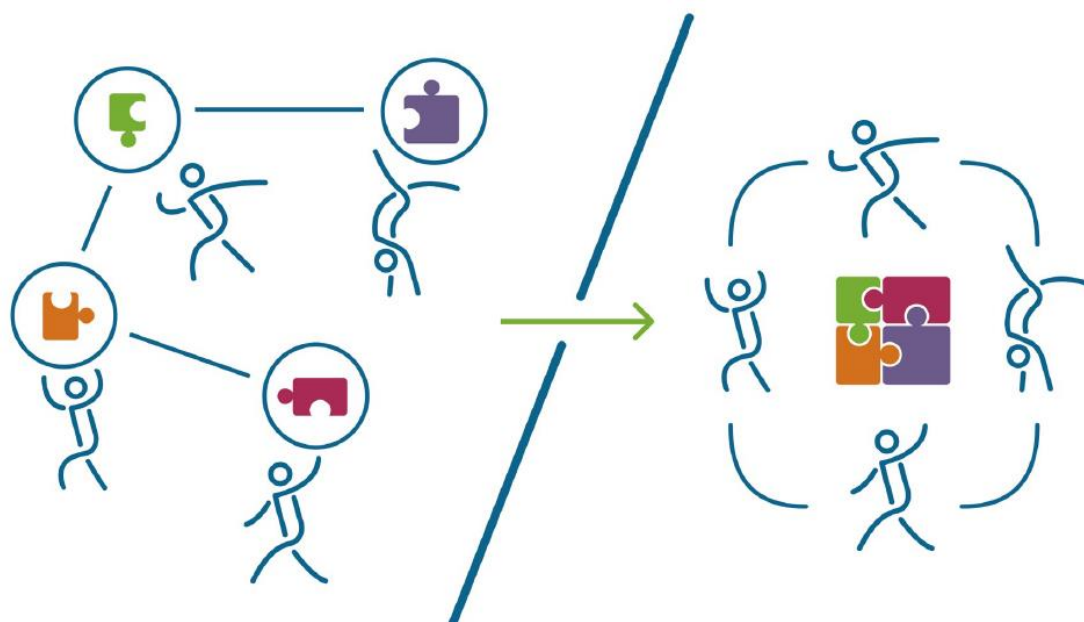


Figure 1: Strategic Partnerships require the combination of four key pieces: functioning partnership, impact at a scale that matters, learning through adaptive management, and an enabling donor

### Functionality

Collaboration between different kinds of partners – from technical to political, local to regional, financial to social – requires trust. Though built over time, trust in turn depends on good governance that distributes power, reduces conflict, and ensures all partners have an equitable voice in collective decision-making. With a focus on outcomes and impact, all partners must respect each other's perspectives and contributions. This takes time, effective coordination, and most importantly, investment.

## Impact

Delivering conservation impact at a scale that makes a difference is a critical challenge facing all strategic partnerships. This means elevating ambitions beyond those of any single partner, tailoring each partner's contribution, and often also foregoing the short-term reward of immediate results in favour of the longer-term pursuit of less visible but fundamental policy, societal, and systems change.

## Adaptability

Effective partnerships begin with a vision of what success looks like, as well as a clear theory of change. Inevitably, context and circumstance evolve, and unforeseen events occur. In response, all partners must be willing to regularly and objectively assess together what is and isn't working, and with this information, be ready to adapt strategies and activities accordingly. This relies on having the right systems, processes, and tools in place.

## Empowerment

Combining financial support, convening power, and impartiality, a committed donor can be the beating heart of a partnership. Ready to make a strategic investment in the future, and do what it takes to forge an effective partnership, a donor has superpowers that can enable all partners to fulfil their potential and ensure success. These include being open to sharing power, as well as funding dull but essential activities such as coordination.

# Chapter 2: Functional Partnerships

*One finger cannot lift a pebble*

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## No single recipe

While there is no single recipe for creating effective strategic collaboration, in our experience, five ingredients, and their quality, can make or break a partnership:

1. relevant and diverse partners
2. shared vision and outcomes
3. governance and leadership built on trust
4. balanced power dynamics
5. funding and resources

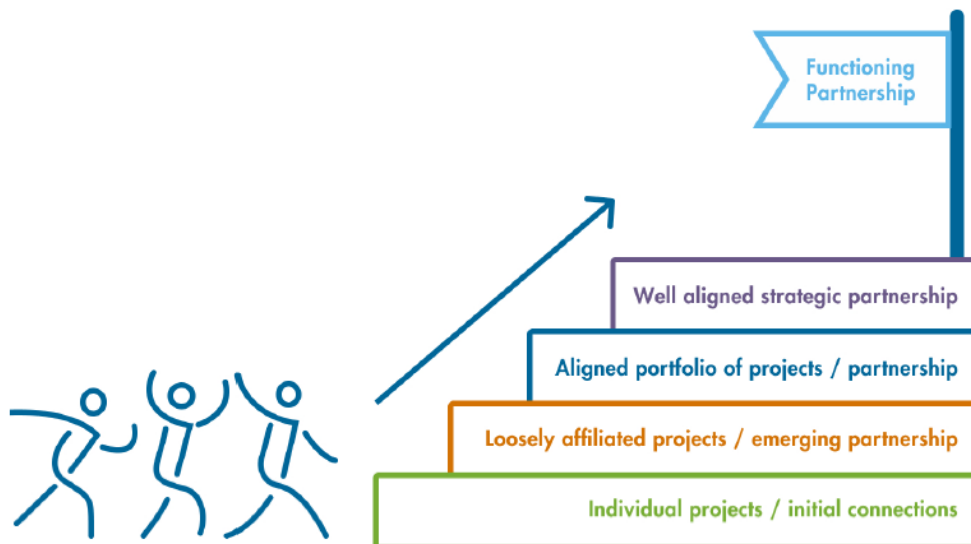


Figure 2: Different stages of building functioning partnerships

## Relevant and diverse partners

**Strategic partnerships often bring together diverse actors, many of whom may not previously have worked with one another. Each must be open to new perspectives, change, and innovation.**

Partners can range from international, national, and local NGOs, and government departments, to academia, professional associations, and local communities. Each must actively participate, be ready to learn, and respect differing cultures.

Irrespective of the number of partners, collaboration means sharing decision-making powers and responsibilities, and relinquishing full control for the sake of collective impact.

Adapting to new ‘rules of the game’ can often be challenging. Larger organisations may need to cede a dominant role, and smaller organisations may need to step up, increasing their ambition to work at scale.

At MAVA, we have sought to enable partners to meet these challenges, build on each other’s skills, experience, insights, and relationships, and pioneer broader, richer, more effective approaches to delivering impact.

## Shared vision and outcomes

**A shared vision and clear outcomes, in which all partners believe, are the foundation stones upon which all effective partnerships are built.**

Each partner must understand their role in pursuing a strategic pathway, as well as how they contribute to overall goals and the bigger picture. This includes being flexible and open to change if outcomes, approaches, and activities need adjusting over time.

## Governance and leadership built on trust

**Effective partnerships also require good governance and clear leadership, both of which rely on trust.**

Initiating partnership takes a leap of faith, and a conscious choice to invest in a joint initiative and a collective approach built on collaboration rather than competition. And the pursuit of impact must take precedence over that of profile or funding for any single partner.

Around 90% of our partners describe their experience of collaboration as being characterised by trust, mutual respect, and regular interaction. All of these need to be nurtured, and only emerge over time.

Ensuring this happens requires strong leadership – either from a donor or one or more partners – and robust governance structures and processes that guarantee:

- equal representation for all partners and collaborators
- shared decision-making powers
- shared responsibility and accountability

*“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**

## Balanced power dynamics

**In trusting and effective partnerships, all partners have the opportunity to contribute as equals, according to their ability and degree of involvement.**

This means striking a careful balance between different partners whose power and influence may vary significantly for institutional, personal, or historic reasons.

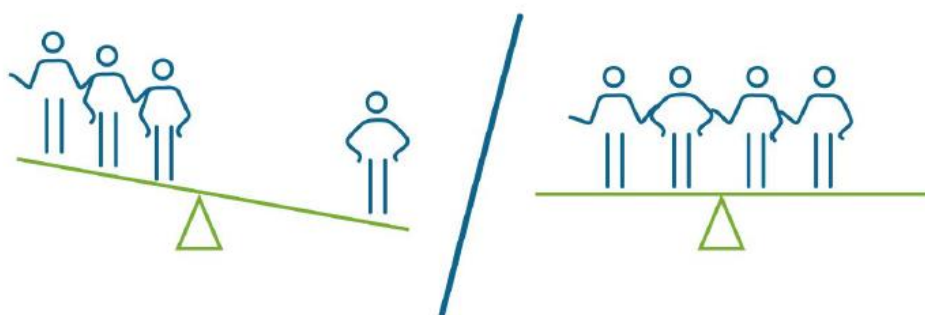


Figure 3: Balancing power and providing opportunities for all partners to play an effective role in the partnership

Smaller organisations may lack experience of participating in large multi-country programmes, whereas international NGOs may be used to playing a dominant role. Governments may act unilaterally without involving civil society, and researchers may be unaccustomed to implementing conservation.

Balancing contrasting experiences and expectations requires consistent, active, and careful management. It does not happen automatically but relies on mutual trust and collective responsibility so that all partners feel empowered to share, learn, contribute, and deal constructively with tensions.

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

Oliver Greenfield, Green Economy Coalition

## Funding and resources

**All effective partnerships need proper funding – and fundraising collaboratively brings partners together in ways that deliver greater conservation impact.**

At MAVA, we connect partners and donors, reducing competition and prioritising impact.

*“MAVA’s legacy will 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 Ferger, EuroNatur

## Almost infinite variety

In total, we have supported 23 different partnerships, each with a distinct conservation focus. They take many different forms, and range in complexity, type, size, maturity, and structure.

Some partnerships are relatively simple, addressing a topic such as seagrass in a specific site, and others cover multiple issues across cultures and landscapes. Complexity can influence the types of partners in a partnership and its overall size.

No one type of organisation makes a better partner than another but trust and openness are critical. Our partnership on oil and gas in West Africa, for example, benefits from strong government participation, while others rely only on civil society organisations.



Partnerships can differ in size enormously, often in response to the challenge at hand. Our partnership on marine conservation in the Mediterranean, for example, is the largest with 45 partners, while many others have far fewer.

And partnerships vary in their maturity with consequences for governance and partner mix. Some build on longstanding relationships such as our partnership on Mediterranean wetlands, while others are brand new and built from the ground up.

Complexity, size, type, and maturity all affect partnership structure and function. A single organisation may lead the group, different organisations may rotate leadership, or different partners may hold distinct leadership roles in the partnership.

## Chapter 3: Impact at Scale

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

### Facing up to reality

**Truly strategic partnerships force partners to confront their limitations, and consider how they might collectively scale effort and ambition, and tackle wider systemic factors for greater impact.**

Conservation projects and initiatives that are successful at site level may not always deliver impact at a scale that really matters. Protecting migratory bird species in a handful of sites in West Africa, for example, offers no guarantee of their survival elsewhere across their flyway.

*“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.”*

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

## Choosing your approach

Depending on the challenges and opportunities at hand, scaling can be done in different ways – *outward*, by doing more conservation over a wider area; *upward*, by changing policies and incentives; or *systemically*, through structural transformation or by shaping new societal norms.

Our partnership promoting a circular economy in cities, for example, began by developing and testing specific interventions in pilot cities, the most effective of which were then offered to more cities for replication. And further scaling is set to occur through existing inter-city networks.

Similarly, our sea turtle conservation partnerships in West Africa and the Mediterranean have spread best practice and expanded the number of sites under protection, notably including Mauritania’s Banc d’Arguin when research revealed it to be a globally important feeding ground for green turtles.

Our partnership on fisheries in the Mediterranean tackles threats such as the accidental bycatch of cetaceans and seabirds. It also scales upward, seeking to accelerate the adoption of better fishing techniques through advocating their formal endorsement by the Regional Fisheries Commission, as do our partnerships on wetlands and rivers which include national and European level advocacy.

In contrast, our work to integrate the value of nature into economic decision-making seeks systemic change. Initially developing methods for natural capital accounting, our partners then began promoting these across civil society, business, and government to help stimulate a new ‘nature economy’ narrative.

## Chapter 4: Adapt, adapt, adapt

Craftspeople are only as good as their tools

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### Begin with a theory of change but be ready to adapt

Ambitious, strategic partnerships often face complex challenges and changing economic and socio-political contexts. This makes the ability to question plans openly, reflect, and adapt accordingly, a fundamental part of long-term success.

Inspired by the widely accepted [Conservation Standards](#), for our final six-year funding round to 2022, we made adaptive management a core part of all our partnerships, and provided [clear guidance](#) for partners.

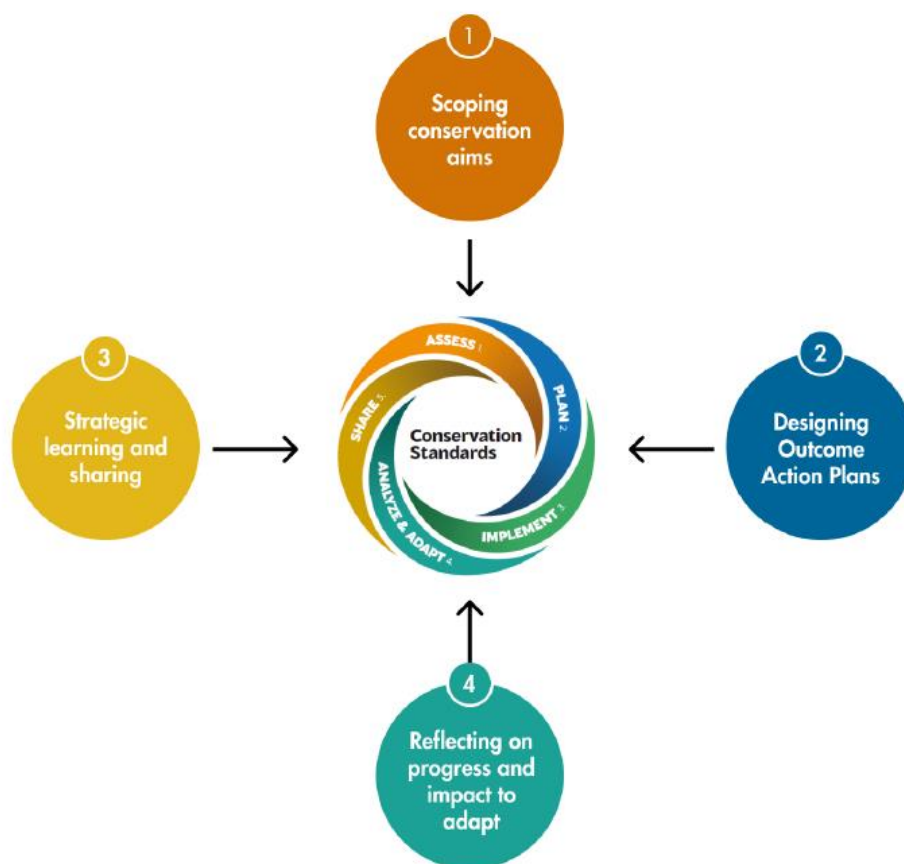


Figure 4: MAVA's four steps tie into the steps of the Conservation Standards

A strategic plan – or what we term an ‘Outcome Action Plan’ or ‘OAP’ – together with a theory of change, anchor each of our partnerships, binding partners together in a joint mission. Both are powerful tools that enable partners to agree objectives, allocate responsibilities, assess progress, and adjust approaches and activities where necessary. Together, they offer a framework for creating a shared vision in which each partner plays a unique role.

*“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, RAMPAO  
(Regional Network of Marine Protected Areas in West Africa)**

## Four steps to success

**We developed our strategic partnerships in four steps – scoping aims, designing plans, reflecting on progress, and learning and sharing insights – in which all implementing partners participated.**

First, through thorough situational analysis, we scoped aims and decided on partnership outcomes. Then we designed a strategic plan, a theory of change, and a set of projects and activities.

Once underway, we assessed progress annually to fine-tune plans, and then after three years, we conducted a full mid-term evaluation. Rigorous, evidence-based, and often challenging – to ensure objectivity, balance power, and improve impact – these evaluations informed the second three-year phase of partnerships and final funding decisions. And strong partnership dynamics and skills meant evaluations were delivered ‘in-house’ without the need for extensive external support.

Throughout all partnerships, we reflected on effectiveness, sharing insights to improve partnership design and impact. Many set up and used Steering Committees to conduct annual assessments and hold regular check-ins that enabled them to step away from the day-to-day, reflect on the bigger picture, and make joint decisions about upcoming priorities rooted in on-the-ground realities rather than donor preferences.

*“The mid-term evaluation 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.”*

**Yousra Madani, WWF North Africa**

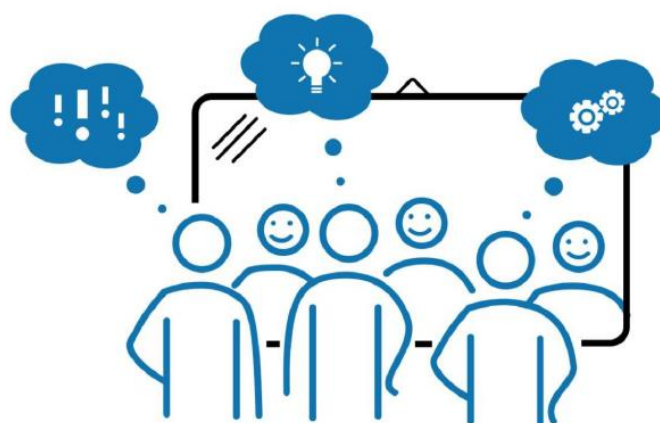


Figure 5: The Mid-Term Evaluation was carried out in the form of a self-assessment

## Stories of change – adaptation in action

### *Merging*

In the Mediterranean, two separate partnerships, one focused on fish stock management, and the other on destructive fishing and habitat loss, found they had much in common, and a decision to merge increased their chances of success. Similarly, a partnership on circular economy and another on plastics joined forces when presented with an opportunity to shape key EU policies.

### *Evolving*

When it became apparent that regional progress was slow, our partnership on the risks of offshore oil and gas exploration in West Africa altered course to pursue change at the national level, creating the opportunity for more tangible impact. And in the Mediterranean, a partnership on hydropower dams expanded its remit to include work on irrigation dams on discovering their impacts on ecological health were just as severe.

### *Pivoting*

Having prioritised research in its first phase, a partnership on coastal wetlands and waterbirds in West Africa pivoted to site management and applying the scientific knowledge it had gained. And another in the Mediterranean, finding no evidence of diclofenac-related bird mortality in target countries, switched resources to more vital conservation work.

### *Repurposing*

A partnership focused on seagrass bed identification in West Africa shifted its purpose to protection, and as a consequence, leadership passed from an international research agency to a conservation organisation specialising in protected area management.

### *Learning & Sharing*

At times, some partnerships were not able to realise their full potential. In response, we set up additional ‘learning grants’ which allowed partners to increase impact through raising their profile, sharing their learnings, attracting new donors, and engaging in advocacy.

## Chapter 5: Our perspective

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

### Empowering partners

**We cannot emphasise enough the importance of partner empowerment for building trust and ownership.**

With their knowledge, experience, and relationships, partners are often best placed to make strategic decisions and allocate resources. But they can do so only if a donor is willing to share decision-making power with its grantees. And in turn, challenge them to define their own priorities and take responsibility for delivering them.

That is why we have always sought to be an ‘enabling donor’ and make our philanthropy inclusive, participatory, and collaborative – not least in the final phase of our funding.

Doing this can be a challenging experience for some partners, and sometimes for us, but it has proved to be the foundation for deep mutual trust and effective partnership.

*“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?”*

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



Figure 6: The relationships between MAVA Board and Secretariat, FOS, and partner organisations

## Changing our ways

**In our pursuit of strategic partnerships, we have been open to change and development within MAVA, adapting our own roles and responsibilities to suit each partnership.**

Keeping a lean core staff, and bringing in outside expert help when needed, we have collectively sought to be flexible, acting variously as facilitators, mediators, connectors, challengers, and even interim partnership coordinators.

Carrying out this balancing act has not always been easy, either for individual staff members, or for the foundation as a whole. Coordinating a partnership, being a donor, and trying to facilitate a complex participatory process simultaneously, for example, can be extremely challenging!

Being alive to evolving contexts and cultural differences, as well as being honest about our own individual abilities, competencies, and preferences, and then consciously choosing which hat to wear, and when to ask for help, has proved invaluable in meeting challenges.

Having a ‘good enough’ understanding of adaptive management and sufficient know-how to guide partnership and project performance, and engage with partners in a structured and purposeful way has proved fundamental to success.

We must also offer a word of caution – the administrative, reporting, and contracting burdens involved in pursuing partnerships can be complex and demanding.

*“We needed to set up new rules, and sometimes this overcomplicated administrative procedures ... 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**

## Doing what it takes

**Impact and system change does not come cheap – and donors must be ready to *fund and do what it takes*, including investing in organisational and leadership development, and securing co-funding.**

Sometimes, ensuring long-term success requires taking a step back and investing in an organisation’s governance and core competencies, or in an individual to develop their skills, experience, and abilities.

Unless a partner is fit-for-purpose, the sharpest strategies and the best laid plans may come to nothing.

That is why we created both a programme dedicated to organisational development, and a leadership academy to support talented individuals working in a sector typically short on opportunities for professional and personal growth. These have enabled both organisations and individuals to play bigger, more dynamic roles in our partnerships.

As partnerships develop and become more ambitious and complex, donors must also clarify and be transparent about what budgets are available and under what conditions. And where necessary, be ready to secure co-funding by involving other donors in partnership development and strategy. To ensure shared ownership, and mesh co-donor priorities, profiles, and approaches, the earlier this is done, the better.

Guiding principles as always include building mutual trust, practicing transparency and flexibility, and being willing and open to learn from and with one another.

*“MAVA successfully spearheaded capacity building of individual organisations as well as multi-stakeholder coordination 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 words

### A worthwhile journey

We are convinced that our approach to strategic partnerships is transformative and has enhanced both collaboration between partners, and overall conservation impact.

Our journey was often demanding, and not always smooth, but together, we were able to adapt to changing circumstances, adopt new ways of working, and explore new territory in conservation and philanthropy.

*“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. 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, new bonds between people and organisations. 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**

In hindsight, it is difficult to imagine that an alternative approach would have had the same impact.

We hope that our experience inspires you to collaborate more fully, more deeply, and more consciously with all your partners.