



Strategic Time Horizon Case Study:

MAVA Foundation's Time-Limited Journey

This publication is part of Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors' multi-year research initiative exploring the various dimensions and considerations of strategic time horizons in philanthropy.

Location: Gland, Switzerland

Year founded: 1994

Foundation type: Independent or private endowed foundation

Grantmaking budget: \$1.14 billion (approx. \$1.26 billion as of June 2023 exchange rate)

Closure date: 2023

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Background

Founded in 1994 by Luc Hofmann, a renowned Swiss businessman and environmentalist, the MAVA Foundation has its roots in its founder's keen interest in waterbirds in the Mediterranean. From there it expanded its focus to work on ecosystems, particularly in freshwater and marine environments in the Mediterranean, West Africa and Switzerland. Later it added in a stream

of work looking at the root causes of biodiversity loss with the aim to create an economic system that values people, planet and profit. The foundation was driven by Mr. Hofmann's mission to protect biodiversity, promote the sustainable use of natural resources, and build resilient societies. Mr. Hofmann presided the foundation until 2010 until he handed over the reins to his son André Hofmann.

The founder did not wish to create a permanent institution that his heirs would need to carry on in his image. Thus he planned for the eventual closure long in

advance, with a belief that it is important to provide freedom and space for future generations to set their own visions and adapt to changing needs. Although it was known that the foundation would eventually close, foundation leadership began its detailed planning for the closure in 2015.

Since it did not have an endowment, instead relying on corporate dividends for its income stream, MAVVA was not technically a spend-down foundation. Its limited-life approach provides an illuminating example for giving vehicles that fall outside of the endowed foundation formula but are looking to leverage the strategic clarity of time-limited philanthropy. With the organization's closure set for June 2023, the foundation understood that significant changes internally and externally would be required, and acted on them intentionally and strategically.

MAVA's Internal Journey: Developing a New Drawing Board

The MAVVA Foundation began its time-limited journey by engaging in rigorous planning to guide the transition. At the same time, it intentionally retained agility and flexibility, understanding that those capabilities would be imperative to the success of the transition. As one of the earliest spend-down foundations, MAVVA's 2021 shutdown provided

and undermine trust in the organization. To achieve this, the foundation created talking points and key messages for board members and staff to ensure that everyone's public-facing statements were reliable and harmonious. Staff members also participated in role play exercises to ensure that they were comfortable with the key messages and talking points.

Walking the Walk Responsibly and Responsively: Centering Grantees and the Ecosystem

Inclusive, Open Communications with Grantees

MAVA's approach to communications with its grantees was critical to ending its lifespan and achieving its objectives responsibly and equitably. The foundation appreciated the importance of open communications and responsive interventions, and intentionally avoided imposing its priorities on grantees. Instead, it always started with the question "what do you need, and how can we support you?" This approach seeded trust, allowing for open and honest conversations about what the foundation's limited lifespan meant for the field. It was also the top question the foundation posed to its grantees as it announced its new, truncated timeline.

To ensure a lasting impact beyond its lifetime, the MAVA Foundation leaned deeper into its existing strategy of investing in its grantees to build their capacity and sustainability. To achieve this, the foundation continued to provide long-term and flexible funding to organizations, invested in organizational development, and supported fundraising efforts. CEO Lynda Mansson believes this strategy was a resounding success and should be adopted by funders across all strategic time horizons. "I think one of the biggest learnings out of this is investing in capacity and sustainability of your partners pays off. Even if you're not ending, everybody should do it."

Securing Grantees' Longevity

As a well-respected member of the philanthropic community, the foundation was frequently approached to recommend organizations for funder support. It was happy to further leverage such opportunities after its decision to switch to a time-limited lifespan to give grantees a better chance of longevity. By having close relationships and a deep understanding of its grantees, the foundation was well positioned to assess the alignment between these organizations and potential new funders, and make effective, lasting recommendations.

Investing in the Field

Even prior to its decision to become a time-limited foundation, MAVA was known for its generous, long-term funding of difficult-to-fund initiatives. Following the

would “slope it much more.” This means acting with a more paced, incremental cadence, and ending one program at a time, rather than abruptly or en masse. Mansson believes this approach would allow for natural attrition in staff, making the transition much more manageable.

Lesson 3: The Critical Role of Robust Administration – a Key Capability

Additionally, the foundation called out the critical role a strong administrative team plays in ensuring a streamlined, successful time horizon transition. This is because of comprehensive changes related to the foundation’s operations, including logistical considerations such as closing down of office space, forwarding phone numbers, and countless other details. A smooth closure is simply impossible without an efficient administrative capability.

Looking Back Over Its Shoulder

The MAVA Foundation’s fresh time-limited journey serves as an estimable reminder that while time horizon change can be difficult, a clear vision, intent and painstaking planning are key components of success. The foundation’s decision to transition to a limited-life organization was a bold move that required significant changes in its approach to philanthropy. Its thoughtful, transparent, and human-centered approach means that its work will continue to live on through the organizations it supported and helped grow, the connections it made in the ecosystem, and the lessons learned and shared publicly. By making strong investments in internal staff so they were able to feel supported and work to prioritize the sustainability of its grantees the foundation was able to achieve lasting impact beyond its lifetime.

Each step MAVA Foundation took throughout the process of closing the foundation was rooted in care for its mission, its partners, and the ecosystem. That is part of what made it so successful. Mansson said that she was often told by various stakeholders that d to