

Van Tienhoven Foundation

Multi-year strategy

2025-2030

Small Grants, Big Changes: Local Solutions for Global Conservation





Introduction

We are in the midst of a biodiversity crisis; species become extinct, and ecosystems decrease in richness and size. In general, the highest biodiversity is found in countries with limited financial resources for protecting and restoring nature. The human population in these countries is also more directly dependent on healthy, rich nature and is more vulnerable to the consequences of the decline in biodiversity than those in Western countries. Despite the obvious need for nature restoration and protection, funding for this purpose is declining worldwide.

The Van Tienhoven Foundation (in Dutch the Van Tienhoven Stichting, VTS) has been committed to the conservation of biodiversity in developing countries since the 1960s. To this end, it supports local organisations, with relatively small amounts, with very low overhead costs both on the side of the fund and of the recipient. The Van Tienhoven Foundation, consisting almost entirely of volunteers, has developed in recent years into an efficient and effective small grants fund that is very well received by grassroots and professional local organisations that have an impact on the nature on which they directly and indirectly depend.

The niche of an organisation like the Van Tienhoven Foundation has proven itself time and time again.

This document contains the new strategy of Van Tienhoven and covers the period 2025-2030. After a brief evaluation of the points learned from the previous strategy period, the determined five-year goals and the overall plan of action follow.

Evaluation of former strategy phase

During an internal evaluation session, various strengths of the strategy and approach of the VTS were identified. The VTS is well-found by relevant grassroot organisations from many different regions in the world, on a wide variety of topics. We have further developed a thorough and professional selection process with input from knowledgeable people from inside and outside the board. Many meaningful impactful projects (90) were financed and successfully implemented (despite the two-year worldwide corona crisis).

The capital of the VTS is invested professionally and sustainably and the financial results are according to general trends of the sustainable investment markets. Income (naturally) varies per year. Because of our approach, we have very low costs, resulting in a very low overhead.

Also, several points for attention and improvement were defined. The number of proposals approved compared to the number of proposals submitted is on average 1:20. This means a relatively large investment of time for the submitting organisations to develop the proposals as well as for the board and its network to appraise the proposals, compared to the number of projects approved.

Relatively little attention is paid to the results of the projects, e.g. no comparison is made between the expected and the effective outcomes. We therefore miss opportunities to test our and the organisation's presumptions and to become a learning organisation.



The quality of the proposals varies between different regions, sometimes dependent on English language skills. Appraising all the proposals together results in a risk of a skewed amount of projects taking place in one continent (i.e. Latin America).

Although the variety of topics in the submitted proposals is high, there are still a lot of recurring strategies/approaches included in the proposals, like ecotourism and tree planting. The sustainability of these strategies is difficult to estimate and there is little innovation in approaches.

Also, we have given very little attention to the follow-up financing of our partners and little idea of the sustainability of the financed activities/projects. Most organisations are only funded once by VTS and no support is given to find follow-up financing.

Our maximum amount of 10,000 euro per grantee is low, also compared to other small grants, and considering that we have not adapted this amount for many years, even though costs are increasing, also in developing countries.

None of the members of the board as well as hardly any of the experts that we use during the appraisal phase are originally from the regions in which the projects take place.

Trends and context in which we work

Several relevant worldwide trends that influence our future strategy are discussed below.

Small grant funds are still considered crucial for local nature organisations, especially for smaller, local groups working on biodiversity. Many smaller organisations still find it difficult to access large grants due to complex application processes or requirements. Small grants provide them with the opportunity to secure funding without heavy administrative burdens, enabling them to respond quickly and flexibly to local environmental issues. The local organisations can develop projects that address the specific needs of their environment, such as protecting indigenous species or restoring vulnerable habitats. Due to the relatively small amounts involved, these funds offer space for experimental approaches and innovative solutions. Local small organisations can try out new techniques or strategies without significant financial risk, leading to potential new insights and methods for conservation. Although the amounts are relatively small, they can have a significant impact in regions where project costs are lower. Moreover, successfully implemented small-scale projects can attract larger investors who are willing to provide follow-up funding.

Despite the large need for funding for nature conservation and restoration, development aid for biodiversity is stable or even decreasing worldwide. Specifically, the Netherlands is strongly decreasing its developing aid as of 2025. Worldwide, there is also a growing recognition that including staff and experts from the eligible regions (localise decision-making) can enhance the effectiveness of aid programmes. However, structural challenges remain. True structural shifts



in power and inclusion are still evolving, and much work remains to be done for more equitable representation and leadership within international organisations.

There is a growing trend to exchange data among small grant funds, among others to contribute to follow-up financing of the supported organisations as well as to prevent supporting corrupt organisations.

There is an increasing push from both aid organisations and parties from developing countries for more direct and flexible (unearmarked) funding. However, no visible trend in this direction can be observed.

Leading principles for the new strategy

As a basis for our new strategy, we define several leading principles.

Small grant funds such as the Van Tienhoven Foundation have an impact and added value compared to other (larger) funds, mostly in developing countries, among which unstable countries in which few others invest. The effective and efficient provision of small grants to grassroots organisations in developing countries is the highest added value of the VTS. The balance between the number of projects supported and the number of projects submitted should become more equal.

Investments in an added goal like direct policy influencing in the Netherlands is not realistic because VTS is not a publicly known organisation and the foundation consists of volunteers. Furthermore, many other Dutch organisations are already focused on that.

We consist of a group of mostly volunteers and the time available is limited. More attention to follow-up financing by VTS or by other funds (on the recommendation of VTS) is considered important but is also limited by available time and by finance and should be approached thoughtfully.

It is important to have more input from a more diverse network of experts (and in due time board members) who are living in or are originating from the countries in which the VTS supports projects.

Goals of the multiannual strategy

Main goal:

Supporting effectively and efficiently impactful small projects aimed at nature conservation and restoration in the least developed countries, aka “DAC countries”, for the amount of minimally the yearly profits of the investments of VTS.

Subgoals:

- Development of a more inclusive appraisal procedure.
- At least two follow-up financings by VTS and/or other organizations.



- A shift in the ratio of approved to submitted proposals from 1:20 to 1:10.
- More projects with innovative approaches are financed.
- Continuation of asset management of VTS based on the highest level of sustainability requirements, while at the same time striving for the highest returns.

Action plan

Recruitment of projects:

- Via the website www.vantienhovenfoundation.com and proactively via Conservation Connect a call for proposals is made.
- To decrease the number of submitted proposals, we will limit the number of eligible regions to one or two continents each year.
- A group of regional experts originating from the continent will be set up. There will be a brainstorm online meeting to define examples of priorities at stake and potential for innovation. In 2025 the exact methodology will be further developed.
- The effectiveness of focusing geographically will be evaluated yearly.
- The maximum amount per project will be increased to 20,000 euros.

Selection process:

- The aforementioned regional experts will also be actively involved in the selection process, in addition to the existing group of experts.

Follow-up process:

- Each year, one organisation is chosen for a second time for funding by VTS. They are invited to submit a new proposal.
- Other successful projects are promoted via Conservation Connect.
- Examples of successful projects are also promoted via the website of VTS and social media.

Investments:

- We will continue to manage our assets sustainably.

Composition of the Board

- We will continue to work as a group of dedicated volunteers, supported by one paid professional.
- Future recruitment of board members will also focus on non-western board members (as long as they are based in the Netherlands or often present in the Netherlands).



Annex 1. Evaluation of former strategy phase

We are an effective, efficient, flexible, and lean organisation, embedded in a small network of like-minded organisations and professionals, who are willing to provide support and advice upon request	Achieved. Very low overhead. Cooperation with other small grant funds will improve by means of the membership of Conservation Connect.
We have spent at least € 500.000 on a minimum of 50 projects in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, spending at least € 100.000 per annum	Achieved. €864,507.00 spent on 90 projects in total.
We have built a relationship with our grantees and have – if desired and possible – helped them further in building a viable effort	Not achieved. Relationships are built at the moment grants are provided, and practical questions are professionally answered but sustainable future-oriented relationships are not achieved.
We are transparent and accountable in our communication about our policy and our grantees	Achieved but minimally.
We have a sustainable relationship with other foundations	Not extensively but will improve through Conservation Connect.
We have more focus and we have ensured the success rate of project applications is around 10% or higher	Not achieved. During this period the success rate was lower.
We have built a sustainable working relationship with the Triodos Bank to reduce overhead costs and – if possible – to co-finance or co-invest in activities that are linked to VTS mission	Not achieved. Costs were relatively high, we spread the funding among two banks and there was no co-funding or investments.
We have engaged the community of grantees in policy making of the foundation	Not achieved. The board consists of volunteers who have dedicated their sparse time to the careful selection process and the investments of the capital.
We have assessed the viability of co-financing with other initiatives and financial contributions from third parties.	Not achieved. See above.