BHP | Foundation



First 30x30 Canada team and friends, January 2026

MODULE 3

Partnering for Lasting Impact

Lasting impact depends not only on what is funded, but on how partnerships are built, supported, adapted and brought to a close.

The BHP Foundation and four partners reflect on what great partnerships look like: what helped, what was hard, and what they would do differently.

Introduction

Lasting impact depends on how you partner, not just what you fund

We believe grants achieve greater impact when delivered through a genuine partnership approach that considers how partnerships are built, supported, adapted and respectfully closed.

This publication brings together reflections from four BHP Foundation partners and Foundation staff on what helped their partnerships succeed, what was challenging, and what they would do differently. Organized around four stages of a partnership journey, it offers practical insights into how relationships can contribute to lasting impact.

The Foundation uses the term "partner" rather than "grantee" to reflect a commitment to shared learning, mutual respect and collaboration in pursuing social, environmental and community outcomes. This also requires recognizing the power created by funding relationships and working deliberately to support openness, shared ownership and constructive challenge. While grounded in the Foundation's experience, the lessons are intended for anyone involved in designing, managing or participating in social impact partnerships.

How we think about partnership

- **Initiate & Build** – understanding shared purpose and building confidence.
- **Support & Strengthen** – investing in the conditions that enable impact.
- **Learn & Adapt** – responding honestly to challenges and opportunities.
- **Transition Responsibly** – planning for what comes next.

This isn't meant to be read once and filed away. It invites you to consider whether how you currently work with partners reflects the kind of partner you want to be.

About this series

This publication is part of BHP Foundation's Learning in Practice series, which includes two 45-minute modules and three bite-sized modules on partnership and impact practice. Visit https://www.bhp-foundation.org/ to access the full series.



01



01 Initiate & Build

The strongest partnerships start with honesty

Strong partnerships often begin with honest conversations long before a contract is signed. In the partnerships featured here, openness about ambitions, risks, capabilities and constraints helped both sides build confidence and address challenges early.

How we build trust:

- **Early, exploratory conversations** before any commitment is made, covering mission, capability and constraints.
- **Independent technical review**, brought in early to strengthen the proposal design together.
- A deliberate **"fatal flaws" assessment**, naming anything that could make the partnership unworkable before either side is invested. This is a two-way process: the Foundation assesses alignment and readiness, while partners consider whether our purpose, approach and expectations make us the right partner for them.

None of these steps work on their own.

> **The challenge:** honesty doesn't happen by accident. If you don't consciously go in with that mindset, it can be easy to gloss over issues, so it has to be built deliberately into how both sides work together.

A common challenge is that both sides feel pressure to look like things are under control. What's actually needed is the courage to be vulnerable when it's not. We've learned the value of building that honesty into the first conversation, rather than letting problems get papered over.

> “I definitely had a bit of imposter syndrome. This program was a totally new topic for me, but I knew that for this to work I needed to be transparent from the outset.”
>
> — Country Director, BHP Foundation

The story behind the partnership

Three organizations, one shared ambition: First 30x30 Canada is a Nature For Justice program, co-created with the IISAAK OLAM Foundation (IOF) and Nature Focus Development. The three organizations each brought a different piece of nature finance for Indigenous-led conservation across Canada. It was that complementary mix of capabilities, not any single organization’s strength, that made the partnership special.

Admitting what you don’t know: carbon markets and nature finance were a genuinely new subject for the Foundation, well outside the areas we usually work in. Rather than bluff it, we were upfront with First 30x30 that we would need time and support to learn alongside them.

Bringing in independent expertise: we knew we weren’t qualified to judge the plan’s technical credibility alone, so we brought in an independent specialist to help. First 30x30 had real apprehension about this plan: would this outside group take their ideas elsewhere, or arrive with an agenda of their own? Non-disclosure agreements (NDAs), a clear explanation of how the relationship would work, and professional peers who could vouch for both sides put those concerns to rest.

Funding the proposal, not just the project: a strong proposal can take many weeks of dedicated work, so we fund the proposal stage. A development grant let First 30x30 hire a dedicated consultant to lead the work, rather than pulling staff off delivery.

> “Getting funding to develop the proposal was the difference between a good proposal and a brilliant one. And that thinking filtered through to other work we were doing too.”
>
> — Senior Leader, First 30x30



"This experience raised the bar for me on what a good partnership looks like. Anything less than radical transparency makes me wary in a way it never used to."

— Senior Leader, BHP Foundation

Raising the bar together

Proactively raising risks, challenges and changes builds confidence: when threats of new government restrictions for cross-border funding emerged, First 30x30 raised the risk before being asked, explaining clearly what could happen and what First 30x30 was already doing to protect against it. Raising a risk before you're asked is what real partnership looks like, and it's what let both sides plan together rather than react. Staying quiet and hoping an issue wouldn't surface would have damaged that trust instead.

> "When this new risk materialized, we could have hoped it wouldn't matter, but if something was going to threaten the wider program we wanted the Foundation to hear it from us first."
>
> — Senior Leader, First 30x30

Nothing replaces a face-to-face relationship: it's not always possible to meet in person every time, but looking back, we wish we had been more intentional about meeting in person earlier, rather than only doing so just a few weeks before the proposal submission.

Raising the bar of what good looks like: the trust both sides built didn't just secure funding. It changed what everyone involved now expects from a partnership. Committing five years of funding is rare in this space, but it let First 30x30 work at the pace First Nations communities and projects actually needed. It also answered a familiar fear in those communities: that funders show up, then disappear. First 30x30 called this approach "a game changer."

That trust has carried on past the funding itself. Both organizations, and the individuals involved, still draw on the relationships and networks it built. It has changed everyone's expectations too: every partnership since is now held to the standard First 30x30 set.

Lessons learned

1. **Admitting what you don't know invites honesty back.** The Foundation was open about our own gap in expertise immediately. First 30x30 responded with the same openness, which is what built trust from day one.
2. **Proposals can take many weeks of dedicated work, and sometimes it's worth paying for that.** A development grant let First 30x30 properly resource the proposal itself, rather than squeezing it in around day-to-day delivery. That investment paid off in a stronger, more considered program.
3. **When you can't judge something yourself, put the right support around you.** We couldn't judge the plan's technical merit alone, so we brought in independent experts, not as a check on the partner, but to support the whole project through the design phase and give a proper technical assessment of the concept and the partners' ability to deliver it.
4. **Raising a risk before you're asked is what real partnership looks like.** First 30x30 flagged a big potential risk unprompted, giving both sides time to plan for it together.



02 Support & Strengthen

Investing in potential

The Foundation had identified a strong potential partner for a large, multi-year investment, who had done great work, but had never operated at scale before.

Sometimes a strong potential partner may need additional capacity or systems to manage an investment at a larger scale, and the funder should consider what support could help build that readiness.That's an important decision, and it requires both partners to go into the partnership with eyes open.

How we understand and support capability:

- **Due diligence** that looks for what to strengthen, not just what to raise as a potential concern.
- **Pre-award funding** to support design, governance or readiness work before a full investment is approved.
- **Reporting and oversight** right-sized to the scale and complexity of the investment.

Our experience: Kodea didn't just meet the compliance bar we set, they briefly overshot it, then found their own version of it, and that's when we knew the standard was theirs, not just ours.

Supporting a partner's own growth plans: growing into a bigger role isn't something you impose on a partner, it's something you support them to reach on their own terms. For Fundación Kodea, that meant providing core funding aimed at strengthening the organization itself, not just the program it was delivering. Getting growth right means investing in the capabilities and organizational development a partner needs to take on greater responsibility and deliver impact at scale.

“Now the issue of compliance is in our DNA.”

— Senior Leader, Fundación Kodea

The story behind the lessons

Sometimes the best team for the job needs investment: Kodea was a ten-person organization in Chile focused on digital inclusion, with a strong track record on small, sharp innovation projects. The organization had not yet had the opportunity to run anything at a national scale.

Before committing at this scale, the Foundation needed to see governance, leadership depth, financial systems and risk management capable of managing a program of that size. We could not yet see these in place, even though Kodea had strong foundations to build from.

Don’t treat a big opportunity as an automatic yes: Kodea’s Executive Director remembers the conundrum clearly. It was an exciting opportunity to do something huge, but it also meant reorganizing fast: from 10 people to 30, and eventually to 50, in a relatively short period of time.



“We always felt comfortable saying, ‘Look, this isn’t working, how about we try this instead?’”

— Senior Leader, BHP Foundation

Building the capability, in the open

Establish the right approach from day one: the Foundation set out a number of requirements from the beginning, including an Advisory Board, governance protocols, a risk management framework and monitoring and evaluation infrastructure, so the program could be properly managed and run. Financial sustainability targets went in too, including a commitment to cut our share of financing from 48% to 20% over time.

Compliance as an enabling condition, not a checkbox: when strengthening their compliance approach, Kodea built out more process than was strictly required, then refined it down to what the program actually needed. That wasn’t overreach, it reflected how seriously Kodea was taking the partnership. “It has been very helpful because when you become aware of the things you have to adhere to, you also become aware of the risks and how to mitigate them. It changed our whole mindset” Kodea says.

Leave room to change course: both sides felt free to suggest changes to the agreement as the world around the project shifted. When generative AI reshaped what digital literacy meant almost overnight, that flexibility meant the program could adapt rather than deliver against a plan that had quietly gone out of date. The approach wasn’t to keep tight control. It was to build a relationship honest enough to say when something needed to change.

> “If we’d stuck to the original plan, we’d have been teaching digital literacy skills that didn’t exist anymore. We needed a funder willing to adapt as fast as we did.”
>
> — Senior Leader, Fundación Kodea

The outcome: by 2025 the program, IdeoDigital, had trained more than 1,300 teachers and reached 38,000 students, helping secure digital skills and computational thinking in Chile’s national curriculum. The next phase will target roughly 728,000 students and Kodea is now a trusted technical advisor to multiple government agencies.

> “We are now regularly called upon for our input on public policy. We are clearly positioned as a key player in the field.”
>
> — Senior Leader, Fundación Kodea

Lessons learned

1. **Due diligence can build capability, not just assess it.** Kodea didn’t yet have every system the Foundation wanted to see, but rather than seeing it as a list of reasons not to partner with them, it was viewed as a list of capabilities we’d help build together.
2. **A contract isn’t a cage.** Both sides treated the agreement as something to renegotiate in the open, and that flexibility let the partnership scale.
3. **Core funding builds the organization, not just the project.** Fundación Kodea used these funds to bring in strong management capability, the kind of investment that let them approach every new project on a different footing, not just this one.

03



03 Learn & Adapt

When reality stops matching the plan

When you emphasize learning and adaptation, rather than simply looking at compliance to the original plan, you unlock the potential for greater impact. Being honest about what's working and what isn't means you can make changes to the plan that enable impact.

How we build learning and adaptation into our work:

- Regular **partner conversations** to review progress and risk.
- **Reporting** that captures learning, not just results.
- **Independent evaluations** that challenge our assumptions as much as the partner's own.
- A co-created **Collaboration Agreement** that sets out how we work together effectively, especially when things get off track.

The challenge: learning requires vulnerability about what's not working, and that only happens if there's trust behind it.

Concerns are first raised through conversation, not dashboards: a report can say things are on track even after people have quietly stopped believing it. That's not because anyone's hiding anything, but often because we haven't yet made it clear how we can have safe conversations about hard things.

Institutional partnerships can be decades old, but as the people involved move on, you need deliberate ways to build new relationships within them, so trust can be developed and there's a safe space for concerns to be raised and addressed.

As you'll see, CSIRO's STEM Together program needed an open conversation entirely outside the usual reporting structure.

"I remember the Foundation asking me straight out whether I actually believed the project we'd designed could still work. It wasn't an easy question to sit with, but it was the one we needed."

— Senior Leader, CSIRO

The story behind it

The pressure of over forty years of legacy: CSIRO, Australia's national science agency, is dedicated to building a strong and diverse STEM capable workforce that Australia needs. CSIRO has worked with the Foundation for a decade, and with BHP Social Investment for over 40 years.

Refocusing on underrepresented students: CSIRO's education team wanted to refocus on young people who had historically been underrepresented or excluded by the STEM education system – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, rural, regional, remote and socio-economically disadvantaged young people.

A good plan on paper that wasn't holding up: the original design, led by an external consultancy, looked good on paper. In practice, the assumptions the design was built on had become less relevant over time.We kept asking how things were going; CSIRO kept saying, "fine, we just need more time". But the gap between what was planned and what was happening kept getting bigger.



> “I knew that an independent partnership broker could unlock new insights and trust. It gave us all the ability to have really open, courageous conversations.”
>
> — Senior Leader, BHP Foundation

The reset

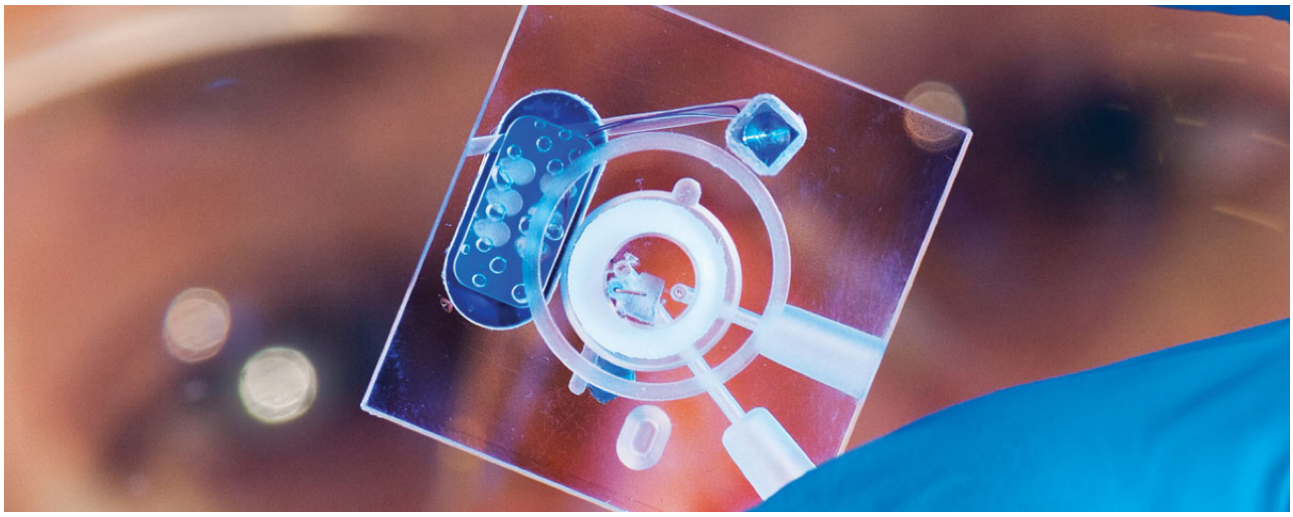
The turning point: the Project Leads met for lunch, in a deliberately informal setting, so both sides could step back from day-to-day delivery questions. The Foundation asked a different kind of question: not what CSIRO was delivering, but how the program could serve CSIRO’s larger mission. CSIRO later called that conversation the catalyst for change, because it exposed a tension between the two sides’ expectations of the partnership.

Bring in a broker for an outside voice: a big change was needed, and getting there wouldn’t be easy, so the Foundation appointed an external broker – an independent third party to facilitate the reset conversations. The broker ran separate conversations with each team, then brought everyone together, and was able to refocus them on their shared purpose, and build a shared understanding of how they could work together to achieve it. The broker facilitated a space where both sides could build equity despite the funding and contracts that would otherwise create a power imbalance.

Accept that a worthwhile reset can get uncomfortable: the Foundation could have taken the easier route, tightening oversight and controls. Instead we chose a harder conversation about what a genuine reset would look like. The Foundation’s lead reflected that “I’d been acting like a typical funder at first, driven more by my own obligations to my stakeholders than by an equal partnership with CSIRO. Realizing that and making the change helped get the program focused on transformation, rather than just delivering a project.”

For the CSIRO lead, the toughest part was telling their own team that the work they’d delivered wasn’t meeting the real need. “I felt like I’d let them down.”

The outcome: both organizations ended up with a program they were proud of, and CSIRO now sees itself not just as a program deliverer, but as a convener of the whole STEM system, a shift CSIRO doubts would have happened without the reset. The redesign was helped by drafting a new Collaboration Agreement: a co-designed record of shared purpose, principles, how both sides manage challenges and risks, and what each expects of the other. It helped ensure everyone was clear on what it meant to be in partnership. Both organizations used it to bring new people into the partnership, and to do regular checks on the health of the collaboration.



> “Once we let go of proving we could deliver the original plan, we could see what we were really good at: bringing the whole STEM system together, not just running one program.”

— Senior Leader, CSIRO

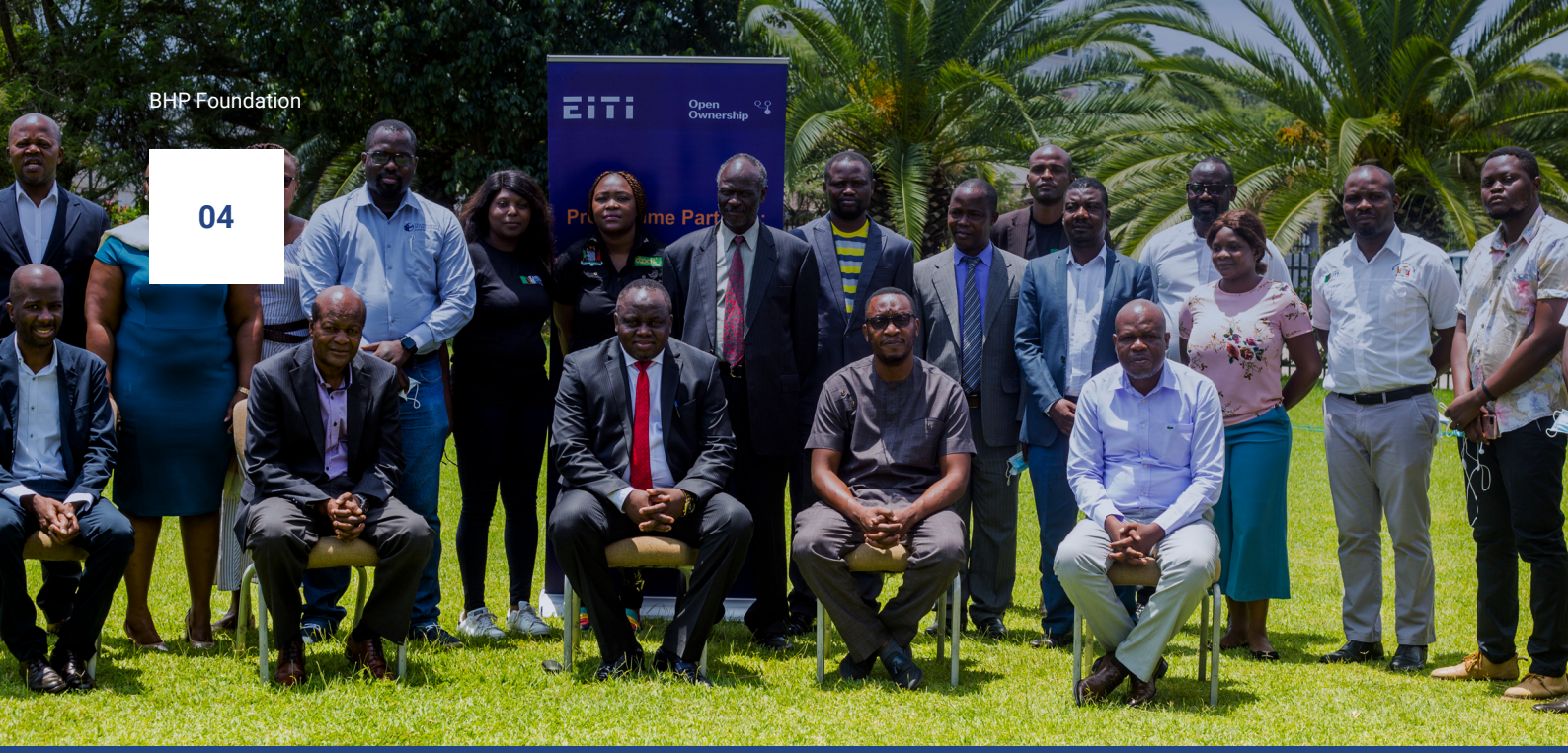


Lessons learned

1. **More control won’t unlock transformation.** When things go off track, it’s tempting to set firmer targets, add check-in points, increase oversight. But that reduces opportunities for learning and adaptation and ultimately would have limited impact.

2. **Trust and vulnerability unlock harder, better questions.** People rarely raise the underlying problems in a scheduled check-in. It takes courage and an environment safe enough to ask an uncomfortable question without it being read as failure.

3. **A neutral voice can bring out the best in both sides.** An outside broker did what neither organization could do alone: helped both sides see what was getting in the way of their shared vision, and define how they could work toward it effectively.



04 Transition Responsibly

Navigating an unexpected exit

The challenge of an unexpected exit: this story follows Opening Extractives, a joint program run by the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) and Open Ownership across eleven countries, and its partnership with the Foundation, which had to end on an accelerated timeline after the Foundation changed its organizational strategy.

A funding crisis elsewhere in the sector soon followed, making an already difficult transition harder still. What matters most in that moment is how the transition supports the partner's ongoing resilience, sustainability and ability to continue delivering impact. Transition planning should begin during investment design and be revisited throughout the partnership, while recognizing that unplanned exits may require this work to be accelerated. In either case, funders and partners should agree how to conclude activities responsibly while protecting the outcomes and capabilities that matter most.

How we typically support responsible exits:

- Giving a partner an **early indication that something might change**, even before a decision is final, can help both sides plan and avoid a complete shock.
- **Sustainability funding** can help a partner manage the transition, beyond the final grant that simply closes the program.
- **Checking each decision** against whose interest it actually serves, not just what's easiest for the funder.

The challenge: even with early planning and open communication, exits can be difficult, particularly when circumstances change unexpectedly or the partner has limited time to adapt.

“It actually felt really sudden and kind of quite confusing, because the program was going so well.”

— Senior Leader, Opening Extractives

The story behind it

A program delivering great impact: by 2024, Opening Extractives was delivering well. Demand for the program’s support was very high, almost outpacing what the partners could deliver, and the growth opportunities were exciting.

Don’t assume a partner is reading between the lines: as the Foundation’s strategy review progressed, we shared potential changes early and continued those conversations over time. Opening Extractives later reflected that they did not interpret these discussions as warning signs, reinforcing the importance of checking understanding rather than assuming a partner is drawing the same conclusions as you.

Factor in the wider pressure a partner is under: the decision to exit was announced, but working out the actual details, e.g. timelines, funding, what support would look like, took months. That planning period overlapped with a funding crisis of its own: wider government funding cuts were freezing money already committed to Opening Extractives’ partner countries. Planning an exit isn’t a single moment. Staying aware of what else is changing for a partner while that planning happens matters just as much as getting the initial announcement right.

> “Looking back, when the Foundation started talking about possible changes, we didn’t read it as a warning sign. I wish we’d asked more directly what those conversations meant, instead of assuming we’d have been told outright if something serious was potentially coming.”
>
> — Senior Leader, Opening Extractives



“That flexibility has saved so much of the impact that would have just disappeared and not happened.”

— Senior Leader, Opening Extractives

Building the capability, in the open

Give partners something concrete to plan around: leaving a partner in a stable position was a deliberate part of the Foundation’s strategy. As part of that commitment, we set up a sustainability fund. This funding was designed to help partners build toward what came next, not just close the relationship. That funding was flagged as early as possible, so partners had something concrete to start planning around.

Stay flexible throughout the exit: what changes between the exit announcement and executing it matters just as much as the decision itself. A stop-work order from a government funding program froze funding for work already underway in one of Opening Extractives’ partner countries. Rather than letting that work fall away, the Foundation adjusted how the sustainability grant funding was used, redirecting some of it to bring that country back into scope so its work in country could continue.

The outcome: although the formal relationship ended, meaning no more reporting cycles, Opening Extractives kept delivering brilliant work even with no one left to report to, because the team felt genuinely invested in what they’d built and confident they’d been set up to succeed.

> “We still feel that accountability regardless of not having any reports to submit... We’re invested in this together and we want it to be the best it can be.”
>
> — Senior Leader, Opening Extractives



Lessons learned

1. **Believing you’ve prepared a partner for hard news doesn’t mean it was received that way.** You can’t always share everything straight away, but it’s worth checking that what you can share is being interpreted as potentially significant.
2. **A partner’s circumstances can shift while an exit is being worked out.** Working out the practicalities takes time, and staying aware of what else is changing for the partner during this process matters as much as getting the initial decision right.
3. **Sustainability funding for the exit itself can protect impact that would otherwise be lost.** Flag funding as early as possible, and use it flexibly, working with the partner on how it can best strengthen their resilience and sustainability, not just close out the program.

Our key reflections

No two partnerships are the same, and not every lesson here will apply in every situation. But across four very different partnerships, at four different stages, the same handful of themes kept coming back. These aren't rules. They're questions for both funders and partners to ask whenever you're working toward lasting impact.

01

Courage and safety to raise a problem matter more than any process for catching it. When First 30x30 raised a risk before being asked, and when the Foundation admitted its own gap in expertise upfront, both moments built confidence rather than eroding it. CSIRO's story shows the same thing from the other side: more oversight and firmer targets wouldn't have fixed the actual problem, what helped was a harder conversation that unearthed the bigger issue underneath that both sides could then tackle together.

Reflection: How easy is it for either partner to raise a concern, uncertainty or risk before it becomes a bigger problem?

Consideration: Set aside time in your next partner conversation to discuss what helps or hinders people from raising challenges early.

02

Capture how you'll work together, not just what you'll deliver. A Collaboration Agreement sets out shared purpose, principles, and what each side expected of the other, not just program milestones. That gives both sides something to return to when things get hard, and a way to bring new people into the partnership without starting from scratch.

Reflection: Do both organizations share a common understanding of what good partnership looks like in practice?

Consideration: Document the shared purpose, expectations and ways of working that underpin the partnership, and revisit them as the partnership evolves.

03

Support and invest in the process for success, not just the outcome. A strong proposal can take many weeks of dedicated work, and a development grant let First 30x30 properly resource theirs instead of squeezing it in around day-to-day delivery. For Kodea, due diligence became a shared list of capabilities to build together, not a filter to screen them out. And funding for EITI's exit protected impact that would otherwise have been lost.

Reflection: Are you investing enough in the relationships, capabilities and conditions that enable impact?

Consideration: Identify one capability, relationship or enabling activity that is critical to success and discuss whether it is receiving sufficient support.

04

Don't be afraid to ask for help. Bring in an outside view when you need one. CSIRO's story shows what this looks like in practice: an outside broker helped both sides see what was getting in the way of their shared vision, and define how they could work toward it effectively, something neither organization could have surfaced alone.

Reflection: Are there assumptions, tensions or challenges in the partnership that may be difficult for either side to see clearly?

Consideration: Seek an independent perspective, such as a partnership broker, when important decisions, persistent challenges or differing expectations are limiting progress.