



# Transnational Partnership Scheme

## Experiences from the Wadden Sea Pilot

December 2022

Margrita Sobottka, Lower Saxon Wadden Sea National Park Authority



*Publisher*

Common Wadden Sea Secretariat, Wilhelmshaven, Germany

*Author*

*Margrita Sobottka* Lower Saxon Wadden Sea National Park Authority;  
Wilhelmshaven, Germany

*Editors*

*Harald Marencic & Annika Bostelmann*, Common Wadden Sea Secretariat

*Cover Photo*

Kirk og Holm

*Layout*

*Creative Concern/ Annika Bostelmann*, Common Wadden Sea Secretariat

*Published*

2022



*This publication should be cited as:*

Sobottka, M. (2022) Transnational Partnership Scheme- Experiences from the Wadden Sea Pilot. Common Wadden Sea Secretariat, Wilhelmshaven, Germany

# Content

Foreword	4
About the report	5
1. Introduction: A transnational partnership scheme	6
2. A typology of partnership models	6
3. Setting up a transnational partnership	8
3.1 Scoping and Building	10
3.2 Managing and Maintaining	16
3.3 Reviewing and Revising	20
3.4 Sustaining Outcomes	22
4. Conclusions	24
Annex: Related PROWAD Link products	25

## Foreword

Dear reader,

This report marks the end of an exciting four-year journey in which we have jointly explored new ways of stakeholder collaboration and knowledge partnerships across the North Sea region with a focus on the transboundary Wadden Sea. It has brought all contributors closer together in different ways, despite the difficult conditions of the Covid-19 pandemic.

A strategic, multi-stakeholder, transnational partnership was established, expanded, and activated as a pilot forming a network of networks spanning across the three Wadden Sea countries Denmark, Germany, and the Netherlands. The “Trilateral Partnership in support of the Wadden Sea World Heritage” and its organisational centre unit Partnership Hub could be developed thanks to financial support from the EU Interreg North Sea Region Programme in the framework of the PROWAD Link project. As a side effect, many new projects have been initiated by the strategic partners pooling knowledge, creativity, and forces and have already been put on a good track during this period.

On the surface, the PROWAD Link project activity to facilitate the trilateral partnership by setting up a Partnership Hub may appear to be just one example of innovative organisational development. However, in fact the developments initiated were not conceivable without the many people who have engaged as stakeholders in this trilateral partnership and in its project initiatives in support of the protection of the Wadden Sea World Heritage and for a more sustainable development in the Wadden Sea region.

I would like to sincerely thank them all for their commitment and perseverance over the past years and I look forward to continuing and expanding our partnership in the future!

*Bernard Baerends*

Chair of the trilateral working group on the Partnership Hub and  
Executive Secretary, Common Wadden Sea Secretariat

## About this Report

This report is delivered in the framework of the EU Interreg VB North Sea Region Programme project “PROWAD Link: Protect & Prosper: Benefits through linking sustainable growth with nature protection” (2018-2022). PROWAD Link aimed to establish long-term knowledge partnerships in line with the objectives of the North Sea Region Programme Priority 1. “Thinking Growth”, specific objective 1, in particular to unlock the potential of nature heritage brands as a driver for jobs and sustainable regional development. Among other innovative tools and strategies developed, one work package specifically addressed the creation and improvement of long-term collaborations in cross-sectoral knowledge partnerships at different spatial levels, whether regional or transnational *i. a.* as a means to activation of nature designation brands. This report intends to compile and line up information and experiences gathered during the project, in particular the exemplary pilot for a transnational partnership, the trilateral Wadden Sea World Heritage Partnership Hub, and other related deliverables in this context like the development, expansion, and improvement of regional partner and ambassador programmes.

This field report was written as a preliminary conclusion of a development process in retrospect after the pilot phase. From this perspective, all steps of the development process may seem logical and consistent, but in practice there were detours, dead ends, and course corrections during these four years.

With this report, the project partners would like to share lessons learned and issues identified during the process of setting up a transnational partnership, also with a view to sustain the overall outcomes of PROWAD Link post-project in a long term-perspective, as well as to transfer the experiences of the pilot to the whole Interreg North Sea Region Programme.

These project activities also serve the UN sustainable development goal (SDG) 17: “Multi-stakeholder partnerships beyond the governmental sector” which is transferred and applied to regional and transnational levels.

### SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

The Trilateral Partnership contributes to the UN SDGs



Figure 1: Contribution to the UN Sustainable Development Goals

# 1. Introduction: A transnational partnership scheme

Regarding nature and its ecosystems, there are no administrative boundaries. They are open systems that can extend across several states, as in the case of the large natural landscape of the Wadden Sea. In 2009 the Wadden Sea was recognized by UNESCO as a natural World Heritage Site because of its “Outstanding Universal Value”. The socio-economic system in such a large area is also interconnected through many kinds of transnational relationships. To effectively protect the Wadden Sea World Heritage Site and to support a sustainable transformation of the most important nature- and landscape-based economic sectors of the Wadden Sea region therefore needs a transnational approach. This must go beyond the purely governmental cooperation on Wadden Sea protection and reach out to those stakeholders and actors who shape this landscape in different ways through their decisions and actions today and in the future.

## 2. A typology of partnership models

This chapter is meant to give a short theoretical background for the envisaged transnational, in this case a trilateral, partnership model for the Wadden Sea and to describe the rationale behind as far as needed.

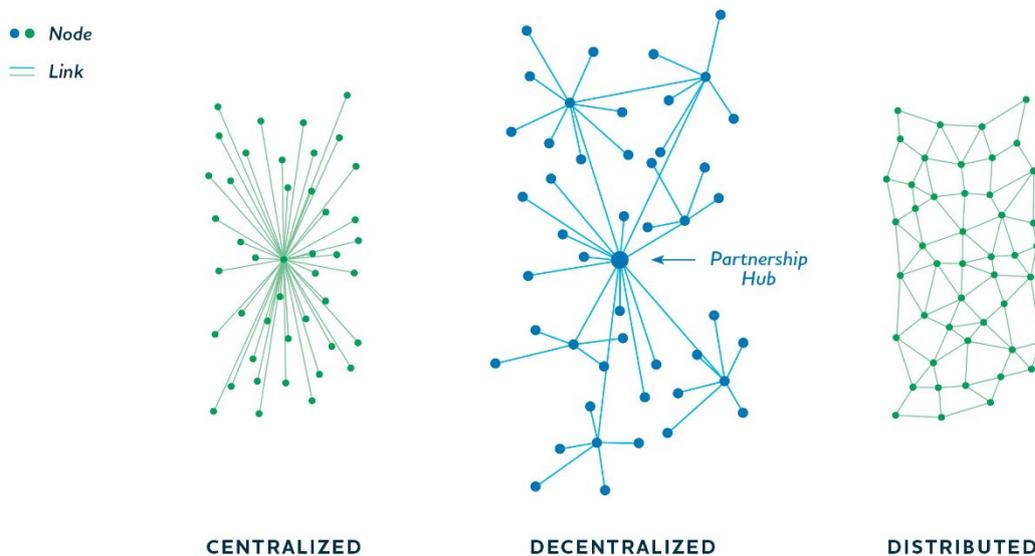
The academic reading from economics and social sciences on partnerships between public and private sectors is incredibly extensive and, depending on the origin of the discipline, more confusing than helpful. What has been used here to guide the development of the partnership approach for the Wadden Sea are UN handouts on building SDG 17 strategic multi-stakeholder partnerships. They open the view for the essential characteristics that distinguish successful partnerships, are based on the current state of science and can be well transferred to our pilot application case.

The first central question to be answered was that of the purpose and motivation to engage in the trilateral partnership - what drives the partner organisations, what keeps them in the partnership? What would make the partnership successful in the long run?

Without added value on the part of the partners, there would be no lasting partnership. In particular, the potential added value for the partners from engaging in a strategic multi-stakeholder trilateral partnership could be enhanced acceptance and visibility, political attention and influence, enlarged trilateral outreach, complementation of regional activities at transnational level, easier access to knowledge partners, attraction of funds and other benefits for common project activities, usage of a credible and well introduced nature brand.

The second essential question is that of a structural model basis. A good structural model helps to map and plan the structure of partnership relationships in a quite simple way. On the one hand, the discussion of structural models serves to analyse what is already present in collaborative relationships. On the other hand, it also helps to find out in which direction one wants to develop this cooperation. In our case, the direction of development was towards strengthening cross-border relations and also between different sectors. This network approach runs like a thread through the entire process of building the trilateral partnership.

The basic structure of a network is determined by the type and location of the relationships (links) between the network partners (nodes) (Fig. 2). The links stand for communication and activities, sometimes also for the flow of resources. The nodes stand for organisations or their representatives or actors. It is therefore worthwhile to take a brief look at the basic model types against the background of the goals and purposes of the trilateral partnership in order to find the appropriate approach.



*Figure 2: Typology of partnerships*

In a centralised network type, a kind of hierarchy is formed because the central node has a key position in the network. Without it, nothing works. On the other hand, this model can be very helpful if the partners can clearly benefit from the activities of the central network node and there is not so much interest among themselves in direct cooperation. This manageable model describes in some cases existing and quite well functioning partner networks on the national level. The opposite model is the distributed structural type, where there are many connections between individual partners, but no coalescing nodes.

The most suitable network structure for transnational partnerships is the intermediary, decentralised structure, since here one can and must start from existing networks at the respective national level and also within the different sectors. Thus, a "network of networks" – a decentralised meta-network - model was envisaged. This builds on the existence of networks at national and sectoral level, recognises them and connects them in a new way without replacing them. This kind of decentralized network of networks nevertheless needs a well-functioning partnership hub, which will not only establish the transnational connections but will also indirectly help the sub-networks to strengthen their links with each other, to consolidate within and to attract further partners, thus supporting organic growth both internally and externally. This model is also open to new sectoral networks.

### 3. Setting up a transnational partnership

For the organisational set-up of a transnational partnership, as for all successful initiatives, there are four essential basic components:

- Initiative and strategy: Policy mandate and backup on the part of the initiators, objectives, conceptual framework, course corrections before and during the set-up process.
- Coalition of the willing: Partner organisations and networks that want to be actively involved in development of the partnership and shape it from the very beginning in the form of a transnational working group.
- Resources: A small team of organisers (2-3) for the day-to-day administration work, as secretariat for the trilateral working group, equipped with a small budget as seed and an organisation that is willing to act (initially) as legal sponsor for this.
- Time for a stepwise approach with a start-up and testing period lasting several years.

The initiative to establish the trilateral partnership came from the governments. This can be both a strength and a weakness in building an equal partnership. The organisational strategy, a conceptual framework, was designed together with the potential partner organisations and networks in an iterative model, and continuously concretised and refined.

During the process, it should not be forgotten that the organisational structure of a transnational partnership is not an end in itself. A shared awareness of the vision and mission of the partnership is not enough for its internal cohesion and sustainable existence. It must also be added value oriented, bringing added value to all committed partners in order to be sustainable. Therefore, in addition to organisational development, it is at least as important to bring the partnership to life through joint cross-sectoral and transnational project initiatives and to achieve tangible results. Theory and practice must go hand in hand and already produce partial successes in the short term.

In terms of resources for building the transnational partnership, one should also start as early as possible with the establishment of a funding mechanism that can support the joint issue-oriented activities of the partnership in a financially sustainable and long-term way, as this can take considerable time.

Therefore, three parallel strands of activity, all equally important, were systematically pursued when setting up the trilateral partnership:

- Organisational set-up of the Partnership Hub,
- Content-related cooperation of the partners in project initiatives and exchanges,
- Creation of long-term funding bases.

In the case of the Wadden Sea trilateral partnership, there is also a material component: a new building project for an office and conference building, the Trilateral Wadden Sea World Heritage Partnership Centre, to be situated in the geographical centre of the Wadden Sea region. In the future, it will serve as a homebase, identification point and meeting place for the Partnership Hub together with Common Wadden Sea Secretariat (CWSS) and Wadden Sea Forum (an independent stakeholder network).

However, the prospect of a central meeting and working place for the Partnership Hub did not only generate positive reactions. As the cooperation area geographically forms a stretch of coastline many hundreds of kilometres long, voices were also raised against a possible centralising tendency, fed by the concern of peripherally located partner organisations that they could increasingly be left behind. This was countered by considering the provision of a conference venue and co-working space for the Partnership Hub in the geographical centre mainly as a starting point, but with the Partnership Hub's activities taking place throughout the whole region, underlining the decentralized character of the partnership.

In the following, however, this report is focusses primarily on the organisational procedure of setting up the trilateral partnership in support of the Wadden Sea World Heritage. The organisational approach chosen early on is an adaptation of a management cycle, a growing and experimental organisation development model, a process oriented scheme, rather than a fixed structure. It favours strategic work in a feedback cycle. Because it is so universal and already familiar to many in terms of its methodological approach, it allows stakeholders to quickly come to an understanding of how to proceed together. Using basic management tools such as this adaptation of a management cycle as a step-wise, strategic approach proved to be very helpful.

Main phases that a typical cross-sectoral, transnational collaboration cycle moves through:

- Scoping and Building.
- Managing and Maintaining
- Reviewing and revising
- Sustaining outcomes

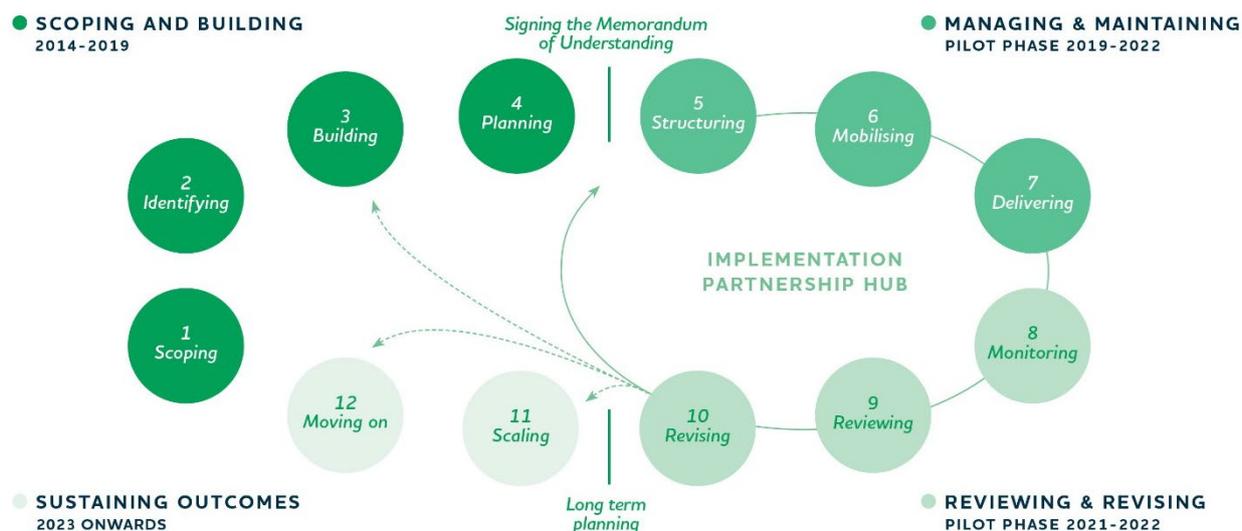


Figure. 3: Management cycle for the “Trilateral Partnership in support of the Wadden Sea World Heritage” (Modified from: Stibbe, D.T.; Reid, S.; Gilbert, J. (2018): Maximising the Impact of Partnerships for the SDGs; The Partnering Initiative and UN DESA)

### 3.1 Scoping and Building

The activities described here to promote the trilateral partnership in this phase lasted about five years from 2014 to 2019 (PROWAD Link design and application phase and implementation of the first half).

#### Scoping

The scoping step answers the following questions: What exactly is the transboundary partnership supposed to be about? What purposes and goals are to be pursued, as concrete as possible?

Scoping is first and foremost a policy task that lies in the hands of the initiators. Within the framework of the Trilateral Governmental Cooperation on the Protection of the Wadden Sea (TWSC), since its recognition as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2009, approaches have been developed to use the protection status as a World Heritage Site as an opportunity for a stronger anchoring of the protection idea in society as a whole as well as for the promotion of a more sustainable regional development on a transboundary basis and to bundle existing forces and competences of all sectors involved more strongly.

Two feasibility studies for a so-called “Wadden Sea Competence Centre/Network” were prepared on behalf of the TWSC (Andy Brown, 2015), the Wadden Sea Board (WSB) adopted a “Wadden Sea World Heritage Strategy” in 2014, subtitled ‘Working with Partners’, and the ‘Why and What

Paper' (Wadden Sea Board, 2016). In 2018, the Ministers of Environment of the Wadden Sea States formulated in the Leeuwarden Declaration the mandate for the TWSC to develop the Partnership Hub together with the envisaged partner organisations and in partner networks throughout the Wadden Sea Region and to conduct a pilot phase, see §2 LD. In parallel, preparations for the PROWAD Link application began in 2015, which finally led to approval in 2018.

At the same time, the 'Why and What paper' outlined the potential partner sectors with which the partnership should initially be sought, to starting with and building on already quite well-established relations. These were the Wadden Sea (stakeholder) Forum, the Wadden Sea Team of environmental NGOs, the trilateral Network Group Sustainable Tourism and the trilateral science community. It was very important to work concretely with them from the beginning in building the partnership.

Therefore, a trilateral working group was founded, whose task was to initiate and build up a formal partnership and the Partnership Hub, and in which liaison people to all the aforementioned potential partner sectors were to be based. They were not to deal with structural questions of the organisational structure, but rather, according to the motto "Form follows Function", firstly dedicate themselves to the content-related orientation and partner acquisition.

This trilateral working group came into being as coalition of the willing, as a nucleus to explore, grow and expand into a kind of steering body during the development process of the Partnership Hub. It met about 4-6 times a year during PROWAD Link.

First, the working group worked on a common understanding of its task, a vision and a mission for the trilateral partnership and the Partnership Hub.

One of the first steps of the trilateral working group was to gain a common transboundary understanding of the landscape of existing initiatives and collaborations and the stakeholders organisations relevant to the issues at hand.

## **Identifying**

According to the WSB guidelines, the trilateral working group first looked at those potential partner sectors and networks whose objectives were most closely align with the conservation objectives of the Wadden Sea World Heritage Site and with whom long-standing cooperation already exists. These were the Wadden Sea (stakeholder) Forum, the Wadden Sea Team of environmental NGOs, the trilateral Network Group Sustainable Tourism and the trilateral science community, as well as, in principle the regional Wadden Sea partner programmes, which at that time lacked trilateral coverage in all regions.

This was followed by a detailed inventory of potential partner sectors and networks and the organisations and representatives appearing in them by the trilateral working group, separated by individual sectors and broken down into trilateral, regional, local and grassroots levels. This mapping and analysing of the respective transboundary and national sectoral networks also lead to the identification of gaps. Stocktaking was also crucial to be able to build on what

was already there, but most importantly, to recognize and appreciate in more detail the array of existing relationships, capabilities and resources to be able to build upon.

The PROWAD Link partnership inventory “Taking Stock: An Inventory of existing partnership programmes at North Sea region World Heritage Sites and Protected Areas” (Dawo, H. L. A. & M. Pruyt 2020) was developed specifically for existing programmes at the national level, taking into account the different, more or lesser centralized institutional landscapes. The authors summarized, that the national programmes focus on collaborative networking using local partners in a voluntary, action-oriented manner with clear, albeit varied goals with limited emphasis on the World Heritage Brand, so far. They advise that a transnational partnership may draw from the local strength.

In addition, the trilateral working group also conducted informal surveys within networks to determine the interest of potential partner organisations at the different network levels in becoming involved in the Partnership Hub. It turned out that while organisations or individual members of the networks at the local level had a general interest in information and looking beyond their own horizons by sharing experiences, they could not envision concrete trilateral engagement in a Partnership Hub themselves, because it was too abstract for them. However, interest in this grew at the higher and highest spatial levels in the networks and was strongest where there was already a well-functioning trilateral network or even institutionalisation.

## **Building**

As already mentioned, building requires initial political back up to actually start the process. The basic construct of the partnership was described in the WSB key points paper 2019 at the suggestion of the trilateral working group. A trilateral, multi-stakeholder, strategic partnership on an equal footing between all potential partner sectors and networks should be aimed for.

In doing so, it is advised to take a cautious approach to change management. When building something new and initiating changes, it should always be made clear that this is in no way to be understood as a criticism of the existing, but only as an appreciation of existing relationships and past achievements, meaning good things should be made even better for the benefit of all. Of course, mutual trust should be fostered by careful handling of expectations and promises.

Even though the working language of the trilateral Wadden Sea cooperation has been English for several decades, the importance of the language barrier as an obstacle to transnational cooperation should not be underestimated, especially for those parts of the potential partner networks whose activities are primarily focused on the regional level. It was also helpful here that the TWSC had begun to set up its internet presence in four languages and to have many publications appear in several languages.



Figure 4: The Partnership Journey. (Modified from: Stibbe, D.T.; Reid, S.; Gilbert, J. (2018): Maximising the Impact of Partnerships for the SDGs; The Partnering Initiative and UN DESA)

What followed in 2018/19 was a round trip of the chair of the trilateral working group with the individual members to potential partners with on-site visits to explore common interests, potential benefits, added values, capacities, but also potential obstacles: They embarked on the individual partnership journeys (Fig. 4). Evaluation of the results of these exchanges and intensive discussions in the trilateral working group lead to drafting, negotiating and finally to the conclusion of a formal cooperation agreement, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), containing vision, mission, objectives and geographical scope of the partnership.

This phase of the partnership journey with each envisaged partner led to its provisional endpoint, the signing of the MoU in June 2019. It was advantageous to exploit the momentum in the run-up to the 10th World Heritage Anniversary and to stage and document it with a public signing ceremony as a community experience in keeping with its significance.



*Figure 5: Signatories of the MoU in Wilhelmshaven in June 2019.*

## **Planning**

There were initially quite different ideas among the strategic partners about what a partnership hub for the transnational partnership could be, what it could do and how it should work. An intensive discussion process, first in deepening the vision and mission, via an outline and finally first drafts of the text, a concept was developed.

In 2020, the strategic partners agreed on a first concept for the trilateral Partnership Hub at the outset of the start-up phase (2020-2022), describing the purpose, vision, mission, and objectives. These, as well as potential services and offers, which the Partnership Hub might provide, were outlined. Potential offers of the Partnership Hub in operation were described and general principles for common projects and activities were set. A lean organisational structure was sketched. Since then, the concept was slightly amended twice regarding the organizational setting. One central question regarding the design of the Partnership Hub remained unanswered during the initial phase, namely the question of an appropriate degree of dependency/ independence from the governmental organisations. During this pilot phase, the Partnership Hub management unit was associated to the CWSS as legal carrier organisation.

During this phase, the trilateral working group held 15 meetings and reported nine times to the Wadden Sea Board to search feedback, political backup and resources. In addition, the other liaison persons in the working group also permanently linked back to their sectoral networks.

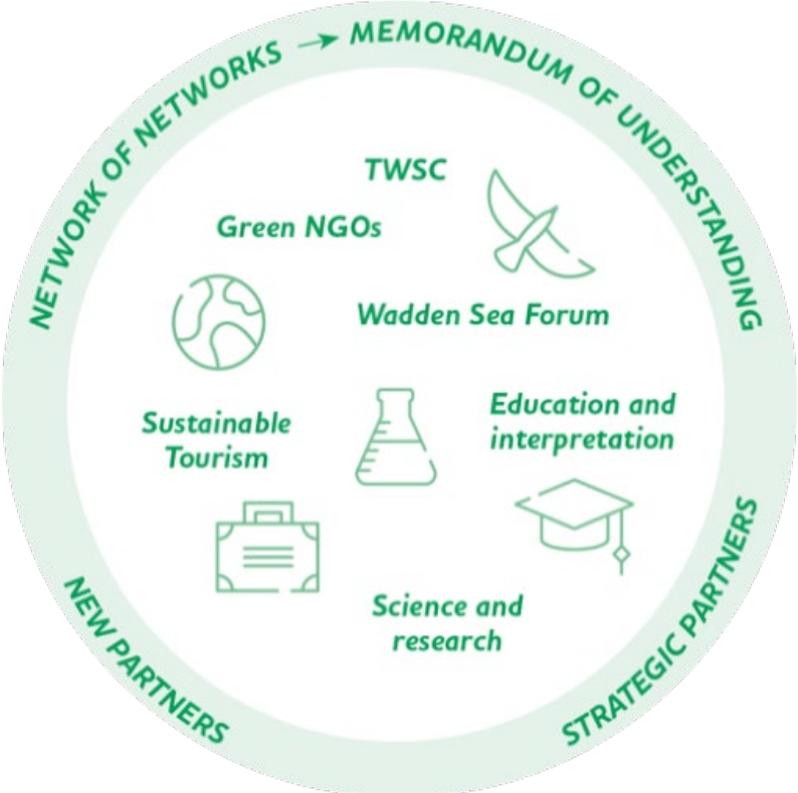


Figure 6: The trilateral multi-stakeholder, strategic partnership in support of the UNESCO Wadden Sea World Heritage

## 3.2 Managing and Maintaining

Managing and maintaining activities conducted during the pilot phase of the Partnership Hub ran from 2019 to 2022 (PROWAD Link implementation second half).

Management requires effective communication both within the partner network and externally. Unfortunately, this phase was heavily impacted by the effects of the global Covid-19 pandemic, which began in March 2020 and made travel, meetings, and exchanges very difficult for more than two years. Fortunately, many collaborative relationships had already been established over many years and could therefore be built upon, even if communication was only possible virtually. However, the development of trusting, new connections is to a large extent dependent on personal encounters. Expanding the network to completely new sectors was therefore only possible under difficult conditions. Where this was nevertheless possible in the actual project work, it was thanks to the extraordinarily active commitment of individual partners in the hub and a steep learning curve in the use of virtual communication media.

Another experience made in this phase was the importance of open and trusting communication within the partnership about possible reservations and fears among the strategic partners of appropriation, competition, restrictions on the visibility of their own organisations or networks, and losses in the attribution of successes.

This can only be countered by building trust and a common basic understanding that

- the Partnership Hub should primarily fulfil an initiating and supporting function with regard to joint activities of the partners within the partnership,
- the strategic partner networks do not (should not) change in their nature and self-image by entering into this partnership, and
- a meta-network is not synonymous with the introduction of new hierarchies,
- the strategic partners in the partnership meet as equals.

From the beginning, it was important to avoid the misunderstanding that the transboundary partnership was intended to establish a new parallel organisation - rather, it was about the cross-sectoral, cross-border linking of existing networks with regard to a jointly supported goal: The conservation of the Wadden Sea World Heritage Site and the associated sustainable development in the Wadden Sea region.

Another issue that had to be dealt with was the expectation among some strategic partners vis-à-vis the state partners that the Partnership Hub was an instrument for project funding by the state partners. These expectations were certainly also triggered by the concept for the Partnership Hub, which described quite ambitious potential services, but which in the reality of the start-up phase were matched by a very small administration unit and only a small budget from the TWSC governmental supplementary budget as so-called seed money.

## **Structuring**

Even though the previous paragraphs may have given a different impression, in consistent application of the motto "form follows function", no further detailed work was done by the trilateral working group on refining the organisational structure beyond the concept for the Partnership Hub. This prioritizes mobilizing energies and resources over lengthy structural discussions on institutional settings and decision-making processes.

The advice on structuring during this phase can be summarised as follows:

- Start lean with a small, engaged working group to facilitate and steer the partnership initiative,
- Use a stepwise approach containing a pilot phase, that enables organic growth.
- Develop rules of play only where and when needed, as you proceed.

## **Mobilising**

Mobilising has action, network, and resource components.

Given that the Partnership Hub was in the pilot phase, an attempt was made to also test all its different working methods: network management, communication for and of the Partnership, communication and activation of the Wadden Sea World Heritage brand, facilitate knowledge exchange and mutual learning, organise meetings and workshops, initiate and facilitate planning of projects and common activities, help with fundraising and financial management, in at least one application each in order to gain concrete experience.

In terms of joint action, mobilisation of strategic partners works primarily through content work, mutual exchange of knowledge and experience, and the advancement of joint thematic initiatives and joint projects. What should characterise such joint initiatives has been defined in general principles for common projects and activities among the partners as part of the Partnership Hub Concept: Objective as per MoU, transboundary, trans-sectoral approach and activation of the Wadden Sea World Heritage brand.

One of the challenges identified was that the Wadden Sea World Heritage brand was not being activated and used as well as it deserved. Therefore, in the framework of mobilizing and engaging with stakeholders, the Wadden Sea World Heritage brand needed a stronger focus on operationalizing, communicating, and measuring the brand with the aim to take significant steps further and to develop instruments for stakeholders to connect with the brand. To activate and involve the stakeholder networks and app. 1000 Small and Medium Entrepreneurs (SME) in three countries, a concept for Brand Activation was set up.

In the concept, different levels of engagement were developed and presented: A 'supporter' shares the story of Wadden Sea World Heritage, a 'partner' is ready for a more permanent commitment, and an 'ambassador' works together with the brand owners strategically on the shared mission. Examples of each level are given, as well as examples of how to incorporate the brand narrative and engage in co-creation. Underlining that a clear, meaningful and communicative brand proposition, combined with storylines, direct and

indirect engagement of stakeholders, SMEs and public by reaching out, connecting, provisioning, co-creative and stimulating brand activation is key.

Following this concept, an online branding toolbox was developed, designed as a contemporary guideline, online accessible therefore easier for users because it provides direct downloads, and gets the most out of a single, user-friendly source, the online schema has two main functions: First, to guide users on how to tell/use the story of the brand Wadden Sea World Heritage (tactical guidance) and second, to facilitate communication and marketing for SMEs and local partners. It is available on [www.waddensea.brandspace.online](http://www.waddensea.brandspace.online).

Training was provided for multipliers in all countries. All strategic partners in the Partnership Hub were also given the opportunity to use the brand in the form of a co-branding approach for activities within the partnership. Projects (facilitated by the Partnership Hub) are permitted, per signed cooperation agreement, to use the Wadden Sea World Heritage Cooperation logo to make their relation to the Wadden Sea World Heritage more visible.

The selection of topics for joint project initiatives and other activities within the partnership came from within the partnership itself and was agreed in the trilateral working group. To this end, annual work programmes for the Partnership Hub were drawn up by the trilateral working group as planning tool.

The content initiatives were all in line with the policy objectives of the TWSC, i.e. the Leeuwarden Declaration 2018, and came from the partner sectors themselves. They also had to be in line with the jointly established general principles, annexed to the Partnership Hub Concept. Another source of substantive initiatives was the trilateral upscaling of initiatives that had previously been limited to the national or bilateral level, but for which there was broad interest in transferring and expanding in the other countries.

In terms of network building, a side effect of the partnership building activities already in this phase that should not be underestimated was what they in turn triggered within and between the individual partner sectors and networks. In general, there was a growing awareness of spatial gaps in the individual networks, which were subsequently increasingly closed. Examples of this are the trilateral representation of Danish nature conservation organisations in the Wadden Sea Team and WSB, or the first-time establishment of the Dutch Wadden Sea World Heritage Ambassador Programme. Another side effect was a noticeable vitalisation within the potential partner networks and their cooperation with each other. An example here is the cooperation of the green NGO with the Wadden Sea (stakeholder) Forum. The degree of self-organisation or institutionalisation as a framework condition for effective cooperation with other partners also came into focus for some partner networks that had previously been hardly or only loosely organised. An indirect example is the research community, which was addressed by the establishment of a trilateral Programming Committee for Wadden Sea Research.

Within the framework of PROWAD Link, the regional partner and ambassador programmes in Denmark, Schleswig-Holstein, Lower Saxony and the Netherlands were also systematically advanced in a parallel process, partly in addition to other funding projects: Wadden Sea national park partner

programmes have been in place in Germany for over 15 years and were established in Denmark by the National Park in 2013. The overall aim is to engage with local entrepreneurs and stakeholders who support the national park aim and sustainable regional development. In the Netherlands, a new programme was launched in 2022, and the existing programmes were reviewed, improved and expanded.

As far as the resource component is concerned, it can be stated that apart from the considerable in-kind contributions of the strategic partners, which they invested in the cooperation to set up the Partnership Hub, participation in the trilateral working group and content-related initiatives, it took the establishment of a small administration unit, with basic funds and staff (1.5 FTE), office and meeting premises to enable, facilitate and support this commitment.

During this time, it also became clear that there is an urgent need to find financial resources for the medium to long-term implementation. Budgets of partners are usually subject to financial planning over several years and applying for funding also requires a corresponding preparation time. It was therefore also necessary to think about how new sources of funding could be tapped in the long term.

On the one hand, this should facilitate the partners' easier access to suitable funding programmes. To help navigate, the “Wadden Sea Funding Guide” was produced to provide a comprehensive overview of third-party funding opportunities with particular emphasis on EU funds, specifically for projects related to the Wadden Sea World Heritage Site. The mapping of the funding guide draws multiple pathways for relevant activities, actions, and funding in different topics and scenarios which are relevant for many sectors, including for SMEs. The guide also provides advice on managing the complex process of project development.

Following a second strand on funding opportunities in a long-term perspective, the Wadden Sea states have further advanced the establishment of a Trilateral Wadden Sea Foundation during the PROWAD Link project period. First drafts of the statutes and funding guidelines have been formulated in such a way that future project activities within the trilateral partnership fit well into a future funding setting.

## **Delivering**

The trilateral working group agreed on annual work programmes for the Partnership Hub. An annual program was put into practice following various approaches of cooperation between different sectors and actors. Within this framework, closer working relationships were developed between organisations and single actors involved in joint projects. New partnerships for the development of projects and applications for funding have been enabled within the partnership. The gathering of stakeholders to exchange and develop knowledge has been another successful example of the Partnership's activities. Furthermore, the Partnership Hub supported the connection of different local initiatives and improves their sustainability by connecting them to the trilateral policy level.

An online exchange platform for joint partnership activities has been launched. There, new ideas can be exchanged, developed, and brought to life. Initiatives and projects have a means of representation and a gateway to connect with interested others. The platform also gives access to essential information for stakeholders to get involved with the Wadden Sea. The platform is open for stakeholders of the Wadden Sea area, who want to contribute to the protection of the Wadden Sea World Heritage Site. This includes public authorities, environmental NGOs, partner networks, visitor centres, the research sector, the sustainable tourism sector, and businesses.

Last but not least, to enhance the visibility of the trilateral partnership by communication activities within the PROWAD Link project, a permanent partnership webpage under [www.waddensea-worldheritage.org](http://www.waddensea-worldheritage.org) was set up. Brand activation was further intensified.

### **3.3 Reviewing and Revising**

Reviewing and revising activities were carried out mid-term and towards the end of the pilot phase of the Partnership Hub in 2021 and 2022 (PROWAD Link implementation second half); With these activities, the third phase in closing the partnership cycle for evaluation and quality assurance of the Partnership Hub were concluded and lessons drawn.

#### **Monitoring**

To stay in close contact and exchange with and among the sectoral networks also beneath the regular meetings of the trilateral working group was important to get a sense of the directions, their opinions, interests and satisfaction with the overall development were taking. To systematically maintain and cultivate internal network communication is key, also on-site visits were really fruitful.

#### **Reviewing**

A light mid-term review was carried out after one year of the pilot phase, in summer 2021, containing an interview series with relevant partner's liaison persons asking questions like: "Are we on the right track?" A summary of the outcomes was shared and discussed within the trilateral working group. Apart from an overall positive response on the main question, it became obvious, that there was a strong wish for more intense exchange on the core goals of the partnership and ways to implement them, which was met in form of a workshop in June 2022.

The national partner initiatives in Schleswig-Holstein and Denmark also carried out surveys and evaluations during the project period in order to further optimise them. These experiences at national level have also been incorporated into the transnational partnership development.

## **Revising**

About half a year before the end of the pilot phase, an external evaluation was carried out with the help of an experienced consultancy. The evaluation process included a desk study of relevant documents and reports, a live workshop with the trilateral working group, in-depth online interviews and online enquiries with selected stakeholders. Although the Partnership Hub is a fairly young organization and live meetings were not possible during the COVID-19 pandemic and it seemed relatively early to assess its functioning, some conclusions could be drawn. Most parties see the potential added value of a hub and the concept for the Hub is supported widely. There was agreement on the main roles of the Partnership Hub as a catalyst for developing intersectoral and trilateral projects and as being a platform for information exchange (network of networks). On the other hand, there was also constructive criticism, like the expectations arising from the concept were not a match for the actual limited capacity and funding. The company gave advice for further improvements of the Partnership Hub. The working style needs for a hands-on mentality, flexibility and specific competences with clear mandates for decision-making and a certain degree of independence. It was recommended to continue with the network approach by keeping it simple, focusing on clear thematic lines and on added value, being flexible, increasing visibility and securing basic structure and funds. Structural proposals were also made, taken into consideration by the WSB which tasked the trilateral working group to organize the transition to a future Advisory Board (including proposal for mandates and decision making), which will steer the substantive work by selecting themes and projects in future.

### 3.4 Sustaining Outcomes

Activities to sustain the outcomes of the partnership hub development were undertaken since mid-term and towards the end of the pilot phase in 2021 and 2022 (PROWAD Link implementation second half).

The predominantly positive result of the external evaluation and its discussion in the decision-making bodies led to the WSB's decision, to acknowledge the hub and give it time to develop further and prove its added value, providing basic resources. It might be too early to speak of sustaining here, but it is certain that the trilateral partnership can enter a next implementation phase after the signing of the Wilhelmshaven Declaration 2022 by the Wadden Sea states. The implementation will be characterised by upscaling and moving on and going through the next management cycle, which will include a new evaluation of the results before the next intergovernmental conference on the protection of the Wadden Sea in 2026.

#### Scaling

Scaling up can take different directions and pathways, for example also from national to transnational level. In recent years and due to limited resources and capacity, transnational exchange between the existing national partner- and ambassador programmes had taken place mainly in form of ad-hoc study visits, as carried out by Dutch and Danish stakeholders. Now, in time for the final event of the PROWAD Link project at the 14th Trilateral Conference on the Protection of the Wadden Sea in 2022, all regional Wadden Sea partner and ambassador initiatives have decided within their means for future transnational cooperation under the umbrella of the Partnership Hub and signed the Memorandum of Intent (MoU) on the trilateral partnership.

A total of 36 signatory organisations are now represented in the trilateral partnership. The reach of this network of networks can only be estimated, but for the regional partner initiatives, the number of partners is known and amounts to over 850 organisations and companies, most of them SME.



*Figure 7: Signing of the MoU by representatives of the German, Dutch and Danish Wadden Sea partner programmes and initiatives at the 14th Trilateral Governmental Conference in Wilhelmshaven in November 2022.*

The already established network of networks provides excellent contacts and relationships for the Partnership Hub to match new partners to establish project consortia and to engage in joint activities.

In view of the still very limited financial and human resources, the possibility to increase the number of cross-sectoral, cross-border projects and activities will have to be kept within limits. More important is the thematic selection for these activities, for which the principles already established as an annex to the Partnership Hub Concept and provide a good guideline.

It is also important to limit the Partnership Hub to the nursery function. This means the timely release of an initiative into the autonomy of a new consortium of project partners, which in turn has the potential to expand the network of networks by many new actors and a new network.

How best to extend the range of partners/ sector networks and further consolidate the partner network will be a future challenge and needs to be discussed further within the Partnership Hub and the future advisory board. Some stakeholders plead to be bold when it comes to approach new sectors, while others argue for a more cautious approach, out of concern for possible misuse of the Wadden Sea World Heritage Brand for so-called green-washing.

Already during the process of establishing the partnership, interest was expressed by other sectors to also work more closely with the partners on Wadden Sea protection on a trilateral level in the future. These approaches took place mainly through topic-related cooperation in concrete project initiatives, for example in the area of ports and commercial shipping or recreational shipping/sailing. There are also efforts to expand specialist societies that were previously limited to the national level to a transnational level, for example on sediment management.

## **Moving on**

The transnational Partnership Hub is one of the main results which will be continued after the end of PROWAD Link. The transnational partnership will continue to develop in all its dimensions, incorporating new partner networks into the network of networks, engage thematically with new content-related initiatives and further consolidate structurally with the transfer of the trilateral working group to an Advisory Board and the continuation of the Management Unit associated to the trilateral Common Wadden Sea Secretariat. A future institutionalisation of the Partnership Hub remains a possible long-term perspective, perhaps also related with a future Wadden Sea foundation.

Since 2018, PROWAD Link has continued with the World Heritage Brand activation, developed tools to enhance sustainable entrepreneurship and communication with locals, conducted a number of surveys amongst visitors and inhabitants on their needs, co-created new products, established an online exchange platform, and much more. All these will be used, implemented, and further developed in the coming years in the framework of the Partnership Hub. With that, PROWAD Link has laid a foundation to engage even more partners in the protection of the Wadden Sea World Heritage Site in the coming years.

## 4. Conclusions

Building a partnership initiative is a process that needs careful consideration of the specific existing conditions of the institutional landscape, different management cultures, and stakeholder networks in place.

This process usually cannot be planned entirely as a straightforward progression, but includes detours, regressions, or dead ends, which nevertheless provide valuable experiences.

For such an initiative to succeed, there needs to be a shared understanding of the added value that a partnership approach beyond public administration/ the governmental sector can bring to all partners.

It also needs a team of people, a coalition of the willing, with commitment and perseverance who firmly believe that the sum of partnership activities always adds up to more than the mere addition of the individual parts.

The future challenges are to further and sustain engagement and a sense of shared ownership of the partnership by all partners, and to secure permanent reliable resources to enable the Partnership Hub to facilitate partnership activities in future.

### **Get in contact**

For further information and questions, you can contact the Partnership Hub Management Unit at the Common Wadden Sea Secretariat

# ANNEX

## Related PROWAD Link products

Product	Type	Abstract	Link
<b>Trilateral Partnership Hub - Memorandum of Understanding</b>	Agreement	Memorandum of Understanding on forming the strategic, multi-stakeholder “Trilateral Partnership in support of the UNESCO Wadden Sea World Heritage”.	<a href="http://www.waddensea-worldheritage.org/node/760">www.waddensea-worldheritage.org/node/760</a>
<b>Partnership Hub Wadden Sea - Vision, Mission, and Principles</b>	Concept	The first concept for the Partnership outlines its purpose, vision, mission, and objectives.	<a href="http://www.waddensea-worldheritage.org/node/1038">www.waddensea-worldheritage.org/node/1038</a>
<b>Wadden Sea Funding Guide</b>	Guidebook	Analysis of funding opportunities for future project activities of the Trilateral Partnership in support of the UNESCO Wadden Sea World Heritage Site	English: <a href="http://www.waddensea-worldheritage.org/node/1692">www.waddensea-worldheritage.org/node/1692</a> German: <a href="http://www.waddensea-worldheritage.org/node/1836">www.waddensea-worldheritage.org/node/1836</a>
<b>Taking Stock: An Inventory of existing Partnership Programmes at North Sea region World Heritage Sites and Protected Areas</b>	Research study	An inventory of all existing partnership programmes in the project’s pilot regions of the Wadden Sea (DK, D, NL), Geirangerfjord (NO), Wash & North Norfolk coast (UK)	<a href="http://tenseducation.com/partnerships-coordination-and-cooperation-for-sustainable-development/">tenseducation.com/partnerships-coordination-and-cooperation-for-sustainable-development/</a>
<b>Wadden Sea World Heritage branding toolbox</b>	Toolkit	To enable stakeholders in the Wadden Sea to engage with the Wadden Sea World Heritage brand, the Common Wadden Sea Secretariat developed an online brand guideline.	<a href="https://waddensea.brandspace.online/b/">https://waddensea.brandspace.online/b/</a>
<b>Webinar videos on PROWAD Link publications</b>	Video series	Recorded webinars on brand audit, funding guide, visitor survey, tourism radar, and the North Sea Sustainable Innovation Challenge.	<a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kCSX-9mp_XI&amp;list=PL_81rsR-fZDQqTMSt7Q_SQsFXn-8DxXkl">www.youtube.com/watch?v=kCSX-9mp_XI&amp;list=PL_81rsR-fZDQqTMSt7Q_SQsFXn-8DxXkl</a>