Overview of findings from the SVA strategic evaluation

In 2025, the SVA board commissioned an external strategic evaluation to support decision-making about its future approach and priorities for supporting community media organisations in sub-Saharan Africa. The evaluation was conducted by iMedia Associates, a small consulting company specialising in media and communications for development. Research activities focused on the period 2015-2025: document review, desk research on alternative funding models, individual and group interviews conducted in-person and remotely with partners and sub-partners across Burkina Faso, DRC, Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, and site visits to selected partners in Uganda. Interviews were conducted with SVA board members and CAMECO staff and external media development experts. The centrepiece of the evaluation process was a two-day reflection workshop held in Nairobi in September 2025, bringing together SVA partners with SVA board members, the evaluators and independent media practitioners. A summary of findings and recommendations is presented below.

SVA Project Portfolio 2015-2025: overall conclusions

This synthesis draws on partner-level SWOTs, workshop discussions, interviews, and document review to assess the overall performance and positioning of the SVA-supported project portfolio.

Strengths

The portfolio was anchored in **experienced and committed partners**, many of whom have sustained their organisations over long periods and demonstrated strong ownership of SVA-funded initiatives. Most projects addressed **locally relevant issues**—including governance, gender, access to media, and audience engagement—and created platforms for communities and media workers to exchange information and ideas. Several project mechanisms, such as journalists' WhatsApp groups, continued beyond the funding period.

There is evidence that **community trust and engagement** can be built and sustained through well-designed interventions, as demonstrated by initiatives such as Radio Amani's listening clubs and FADECO's awareness campaigns. In several cases, **changed practices persisted independently** of the original projects.

SVA funding enabled **pilot innovations** that empowered local actors, including youth- and technology-focused initiatives, and there were promising results from **networked or consortium approaches** where strong lead organisations coordinated multiple actors. Partners that have existed for many years and demonstrated the ability to mobilise resources and deliver relevant content have shown credible sustainability characteristics.

Finally, the portfolio offers significant **learning value**, including from less successful initiatives. There is growing recognition among partners and the donor that embracing failure as a source of learning—alongside celebrating success—is essential for improving future programming.

Weaknesses

Many projects were **short-term and one-off**, with limited planning for sustaining benefits, institutionalising capacity, or continuing programmes beyond the grant period. Partners were not always sufficiently involved in project design, leading in some cases to misalignment between project concepts and operational realities. Challenges experienced during implementation were not consistently communicated upward, limiting opportunities for adaptive management and learning.

Several projects were **highly dependent on key individuals or lead organisations**, creating vulnerabilities when leadership capacity was insufficient or staff turnover was high. This affected the

sustainability of initiatives such as audience research, where capacity was not retained or embedded institutionally. More broadly, dependency on charismatic founders and weak succession planning reflect structural challenges in the community media sector.

A recurring weakness was the **conflation of activities and outputs with outcomes and impact**. Partners were often able to articulate longer-term change, but this was not consistently captured in written reports. Project design and reporting frameworks did not sufficiently support partners to identify higher-level indicators of change or use simple, context-appropriate assessment methods.

A**dministrative and relational weaknesses** included funding delays, limited continuity in engagement with SVA/CAMECO, and insufficient follow-up after project completion—particularly after 2022. Some partners felt deprioritised, especially in fragile and conflict-affected contexts.

Cross-cutting issues such as **gender, equity, and diversity** were not consistently mainstreamed. Women remain underrepresented in leadership positions among partners, and women-led organisations have not been systematically prioritised. In addition, investments in organisational capacity building and strategic planning were not always accompanied by sufficient follow-through to ensure that partners could operationalise the strategies developed.

Opportunities

Future support could achieve greater impact by **deepening partnerships with high-potential coordinating actors**, including media support organisations, networks, and lead stations capable of delivering multiplier effects. There is scope to shift toward **longer-term, scalable media models**, including social enterprise approaches and youth-focused initiatives.

Partners express strong demand for **peer learning, networking, and cross-border exchange**, including honest reflection on failures as well as successes. Digital transformation presents a major opportunity, both to strengthen rural and isolated radio stations and to integrate more effective audience engagement and research methods, including AI-enabled tools.

Potential to **embed fundraising, income generation, and sustainability mechanisms** explicitly within project designs, and to explore pooled or shared approaches to functions such as audience research. AI also creates opportunities for low-cost contextual analysis, rapid thematic reviews, and new forms of capacity building—provided ethical risks are clearly understood and managed.

Threats

Digital exclusion threatens the relevance of community radio where stations cannot keep pace with technological change. Structural constraints in the sector—including limited commercial revenue, fragmentation, and isolation after project completion—restrict replication and scale-up.

The **closure or withdrawal of major international donors and intermediaries**, combined with declining support for Francophone and conflict-affected contexts, poses a significant risk to partners' sustainability. At the same time, declining audience trust in traditional media and the growing dominance of social media require renewed efforts by radio stations to remain credible and connected to their communities.

These pressures are compounded by **broader contextual threats**—censorship, restrictive regulatory and legal environments, political repression, general insecurity and violence against journalists — which continue to constrain day-to-day operations and long-term viability across the sector.

SVA as a Media Development Funder: Strategic SWOT Overview

This section summarises SVA's positioning as a media development funder highlighting its comparative advantages, structural constraints and the strategic choices available to enhance impact.

Strengths

SVA's defining strength lies in its **independence**. Financial and editorial autonomy allows the foundation to support a small number of **innovative, experimental, and politically sensitive media initiatives** that may be difficult for larger or publicly accountable donors to fund. This discretion could enable SVA to take calculated risks, back solution and community-oriented journalism, and engage with marginalised voices.

The foundation operates with a **high degree of flexibility and minimal bureaucracy**. Decision-making is not constrained by complex procedures or heavy administrative structures, and board running costs are low. This agility enables SVA to respond to opportunities as they arise and to tailor its support to diverse local contexts.

Recent changes in governance represent a further strength. The **current board reflects a stronger balance of skills, experience, gender, and generational perspectives** than in previous iterations. Combined with renewed leadership dynamism, this has created momentum to reassess both *what* SVA funds and *how* it funds, and to develop a more coherent strategic framework to guide future grant-making.

SVA's grant-making model has historically been underpinned by a **technically competent intermediary, CAMECO**, well established in the media development field, with strong links to implementing and partner organisations. CAMECO provided sector intelligence, identified potential grantees, and maintained contact with partners. Programme officers were sometimes able to leverage field visits paid for by other donors to support SVA-funded projects.

From a partner perspective, SVA is viewed favourably compared to other donors. **Reporting requirements are generally considered reasonable**, and long-term partners in particular value the **trust-based relationships** that SVA has developed over successive grants.

Weaknesses

SVA's principal constraint is **scale**. The endowment is modest and generates limited annual income, restricting the foundation to **small-value grants**. However, these grants often require similar levels of selection, administration, and monitoring effort as larger projects, resulting in **relatively high overhead costs** (approximately 20–25% of funds disbursed).

SVA's functioning depends on the **unpaid commitment of a volunteer board**, which poses a long-term sustainability risk in the absence of financial or professional incentives, and poses a challenge to institutional learning and memory.

SVA has operated **without a clearly articulated strategy**, functioning in a largely reactive manner. Guiding principles were insufficiently substantiated and some appeared outdated or based on historical practice rather than on evidence of what works in media development. Until recently, this has limited SVA's ability to articulate a clear theory of change or learning agenda.

SVA has also not functioned as a **learning organisation**. No portfolio-level evaluations have been conducted, and end-of-project evaluations are generally absent due to resource constraints. Learning has relied primarily on partner self-reporting, with limited synthesis across projects or countries. Knowledge management systems for organising portfolio documentation are weak, constraining institutional memory and cross-project learning.

The foundation has been **heavily dependent on CAMECO**, which played a critical operational role but was engaged primarily as a service provider rather than a strategic partner. The relatively low value of the projects and therefore of the intermediary contract limited the time programme officers could dedicate to SVA projects, which are bundled into a much larger donor portfolio. This arrangement has, at times, contributed to overly detailed scrutiny of minor budget variances, risking perceptions of micromanagement and undermining trust.

Finally, SVA's emphasis on **sustainability** has not always been sufficiently nuanced. Sustainability means different things across contexts, yet this has not been clearly defined or differentiated for individual partners. Financial, organisational, technological, and social dimensions of sustainability require more contextualised approaches, particularly in fragile or restrictive environments where long-term donor support may remain essential.

Opportunities

SVA is currently at a **strategic inflection point**. Board renewal, combined with this evaluation process, has created openness to new ideas, improved alignment around reform options, and a shared desire to enhance impact and relevance.

Over the past two decades, a growing number of **robust local media actors and networks** have emerged in the countries where SVA operates. These include community media networks and media support organisations with demonstrated longevity, vision, and convening power. They offer opportunities for more decentralised, locally informed approaches to grant-making and capacity support.

The widespread availability of **digital tools and platforms** presents significant opportunities. Digitalisation can strengthen community media viability by lowering production costs, enabling content sharing, and deepening audience engagement. It also offers SVA cost-effective options for grant management, partner communication, monitoring, and even real-time evaluation, reducing administrative inefficiencies.

There is strong appetite among partners for **peer learning, cross-border exchange, and improved monitoring and evaluation capacity**, including across language divides. Supporting structured exchange and shared learning could amplify impact beyond individual grants and strengthen the community media ecosystem in selected countries or sub-national geographies.

SVA's potential strategic shift aligns well with **emerging global research and debate** on African media viability. Current evidence increasingly emphasises decentralised, locally led decision-making, inclusive governance, and investment in local institutional capacity. Partners appreciated CAMECO's role but there was broad consensus that the majority of grant-making activities should be localised.

Threats

External constraints and challenges to the community media sector, outlined above, are constant and worsening and contextualise all donor support.

A move towards **devolved or locally embedded decision-making**—while strategically promising—carries risks. Without carefully designed safeguards, such models could expose SVA to conflicts of interest, perceptions of favouritism, or governance challenges that would undermine credibility.

> **Taking the two assessments together the evaluation concludes that portfolio performance reflects SVA's distinctive strengths—discretion, flexibility and risk tolerance—while also revealing structural constraints typical of small-grant funding, notably short time horizons, limited follow-up capacity, and weak portfolio-level learning. It also highlights a pathway to increased impact: prioritising networked delivery models, embedding light touch grant management, monitoring and learning mechanisms, and leveraging digital tools to reduce administrative friction and strengthen partner exchange.**

Recommendations for SVA's future strategy

Priority Geographies

- Based on comparative risk, opportunity, and partner capacity, SVA should focus on familiar, high-need regions where it has relationships and contextual knowledge: eastern DRC, Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania.
- Within these countries focus on marginalised, fragile and highly information-constrained contexts where flexible, trust-based funding adds the most value.
- Existing partners would like to pilot a cross-border initiative to encourage:
    - lesson sharing and peer learning
    - regional content production
    - shared campaigns on peace, climate, migration, and social cohesion.

Decentralisation and Governance

- **Devolve decision-making** through a hybrid governance model that combines:
    a) A respected **institutional intermediary** (media network or media support organisation) with administrative capacity in each focus country (no suitable regional entities exist).[1]
    b) **Independent regional or country-level technical advisors** with strong contextual, linguistic, and sector knowledge.
- **Phase implementation**: start in one country/region in Year 1, then scale to two or three additional contexts based on learning. E.g. start with Eastern DRC and Uganda in 2026-27 and when those are established re-include Kenya and Tanzania from 2028
- **Develop clear contracts/MOUs** to guide partnerships with local hub organisations and advisors.
- **Apply clear safeguards** to avoid conflicts of interest, including transparent selection criteria, separation of advisory and applicant roles, and formal contracts.

Grant design and management

- **Adopt a hybrid funding approach** (award grants that combine core funding for organisational stability with innovative project funding).

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[1] Potential hub organisations (subject to further due diligence): Eastern DRC: Afia Amani Grands Lacs, SYMUF, CORACON; Uganda: African Centre for Media Excellence, COMNETU, EARS (audience research and marketing); Kenya: KCOMNET; Tanzania: Tanzania Media Foundation, TAMWA

- **Prioritise fewer, longer-term programmatic grants** (worth €100-200,000 over 2-4 years) but retain a small sum (say €20,000 per annum for rapid reaction grants to support stations facing emergencies or urgent equipment needs).
- **Target initiatives which combine mutually reinforcing elements and build in sustainability along two or more axes** (financial, organisational, technical, social): e.g. programme-making that builds capacity and engages communities with potential for enduring change OR audience research training and implementation interventions that explicitly link the research outputs to marketing/business development/fundraising efforts.
- **Focus on networked and consortium approaches**, including flagship or lead radio stations that model good practice and coordinate peers (these might be led by the hubs themselves).
- **Application process should use two-stage closed calls** for efficiency (partner scouting/ identification by hubs and advisors leading to submission of concept notes, then co-designed proposals from selected partners). Ensure that application criteria integrate gender, diversity and inclusion, as well as due diligence questions, and use a simple online application template.
- **Hub organisations could host pre-funding discovery and co-creation** workshops to align grants with felt needs.
- **Grant management** should be light, combining proportional oversight with outcome-focused reporting and spot checks; **MEL** should be learning-oriented with reflective check-ins, end-of-cycle learning sessions, using digital tools.
- **Hold periodic participatory peer learning and knowledge exchange opportunities**. To be convened by the hubs either at country or at regional level.

Priority Needs

- **Organisational resilience:** leadership development and management skills, coaching, governance strengthening, and succession planning.
- **Financial innovation and sustainability**: diversified income streams (services, memberships, advertising etc), business planning, and professionalisation of revenue generation.
- **Audience research and engagement**: practical, scalable methods linked directly to programming, marketing, and fundraising.
- **Content linked to community engagement and sustainability**, rooted in audience research and local needs (e.g. peace, gender, disinformation, health, environment).
- **Digital transformation and inclusion**: support for digital production, distribution, audience engagement, ethical AI use, and—where justified—equipment grants.
- **Peer learning and collaboration**: regional networks, cross-border exchange and campaigns, and shared learning on success and failure.
- **Multi-station initiatives** that strengthen shared services, digital inclusion, audience insight, and coordinated programming.

Funding model

During the workshop SVA and partners discussed possible exit strategies: the evaluation leans towards an option that fits with recommendations for the grant-making strategy in the future. That is: **SVA should draw down on its endowment over a 15-year period, making (mostly) larger multi-year grants, working through hub organisations in three-four geographies on programmes which address priority areas of need.** This enables SVA to retain its independence, justify the time and expense of transitioning into a new operational model with decentralised grant-making screening, selection, management and monitoring, and have greater impact on the community media ecosystem in east Africa.