



Strathmore University

Foundation

10-YEAR IMPACT REPORT

Designing Partnerships That Last

An External Perspective on Strategic Alliance Governance

Interview Brief & Report

Featuring Prof. Africa Ariño

Professor of Strategic Management, IESE Business School
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Focus: Strategic Management and Partnership

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Purpose of The Interview

As part of Strathmore University Foundation's (SUF) 10-Year Impact Report, this interview engages Professor Africa Ariño of IESE Business School to bring an external, academically grounded perspective on strategic partnership and how alliances are designed, governed, and sustained over time. Her insight is intended to complement SUF's internal partner interviews with a strategic management lens on what makes institutional partnerships durable.

Who Is Prof. Africa Ariño

Africa Ariño is Professor of Strategic Management at IESE Business School and holds the Joaquim Molins Figueras Chair of Strategic Alliances. She holds a Ph.D. in Management from UCLA, an MBA from IESE, and a degree in Economics and Business Administration from the Universitat de Barcelona. At IESE she has served as Deputy Dean for Faculty, Head of the Strategic Management Department, and Director of the Ph.D. Program. She is the former President of the Strategic Management Society (SMS) and was elected an SMS Fellow in 2015.

Her research centres on the governance and management of inter-organisational relationships, with particular emphasis on strategic alliance design and dynamics, published in journals including the Strategic Management Journal, Journal of International Business Studies, Journal of Management, Journal of Management Studies, and Organization Science. She is co-author of Entrepreneurial Alliances and co-editor of Strategic Alliances: Governance and Contracts. Her most recent published work (2026, Academy of Management Review) proposes a stakeholder governance framework for public-private partnerships.

Her Connection to Strathmore

Strathmore Business School (SBS) was itself established in 2005 through a strategic alliance between Strathmore University and IESE Business School, making Prof. Ariño's institution a founding partner of the very ecosystem SUF now operates within. In 2014, she spent six months as a Visiting Professor at Strathmore Business School in Nairobi (alongside a parallel visiting post at Lagos Business School in Nigeria), during which she engaged directly with SBS faculty and students and spoke on the role of business schools in Africa's development at the Association of African Business Schools conference hosted by SBS.

Her current research interests include internationalisation strategies on the African continent, and she writes periodically on African business and strategy topics. This combination, a founding-partner institutional tie, direct teaching experience at Strathmore, and a research specialism in alliance governance, makes her a strong external voice for reflecting on what has made the SUF partnership model work, and what the next decade of partnerships should look like.

Interview Findings

Prof. Ariño's remarks are organised below around the six questions prepared for the interview. Each section synthesises her response and is followed by the practical implication for SUF's partnership model.

ORIGINS & DESIGN

What made the founding design durable?

Prof. Ariño traced her own connection to the region to a 2013 meeting of strategic management academics, where a presentation by a professor from Lagos Business School convinced her that Africa's business schools represented “where the future is.” She took a half-year sabbatical, spending three months at Lagos Business School (LBS) and three months at Strathmore Business School (SBS), and has returned to SBS every year since, except 2021, in roles ranging from curriculum design to, this year, accompanying a group of IESE MBA executive students on an international immersion.

Turning to SBS's founding alliance with IESE, she identified the original intent as the critical design choice: the partnership was built to create an institution, not merely to deliver programmes. IESE faculty did not come to teach and leave, they came to build teaching and research capacity, with SBS faculty shadowing IESE faculty so that dependency would not take root. Ownership of the academic agenda was deliberately transferred over time. As an example, she cited SBS's own pre-doctoral workshop, a week-long programme (reading discussions each morning, applied work on the participant's own research project each afternoon) that helps prospective PhD candidates and admissions committees alike assess fit before an application is made. Although she contributed early design input, SBS now runs it independently, and she has since recommended IESE adopt the same model. The partnership, she noted, was also deliberately built to evolve rather than lock into fixed activities, which let it adapt as new needs and opportunities emerged.

Our partnership was designed and aimed at building an institution — not just to deliver programmes. Eventually, over a long time, SBS was the one who owned the academic agenda.

— Prof. Africa Ariño

Implication for SUF: durability comes from designing partnerships to transfer capability and ownership, not just to deliver a fixed set of activities, and from building in enough flexibility that the partnership's form can change as needs evolve.

WHAT MAKES PARTNERSHIPS WORK

Structural elements of lasting impact

Prof. Ariño named alignment around a shared purpose as the foundational element — goodwill gets a partnership started but is not sufficient to sustain it. Alongside a strong shared goal, she noted, each partner will legitimately hold private goals of its own; the risk is that private goals go undisclosed and end up in conflict with each other or with the shared goal. Avoiding that requires sustained, explicit conversation to confirm both sides genuinely understand each other's position, not just their own.

As a cautionary example from the corporate world, she described the alliance between Coca-Cola and Nestlé to produce and distribute ready-to-drink coffee products: the partners moved quickly into a formal agreement without resolving structural questions or confirming they were genuinely aligned, and the alliance broke down early despite visible early activity.

Second, she pointed to genuine complementarity: each partner should bring something the other finds difficult to build on its own. For a university–corporate partnership, this means the relationship should not be reduced to funding. A university brings knowledge, developed talent, and institutional mission; a strong brand also confers legitimacy on the corporate partners associated with it. A corporate partner, in turn, can bring domain expertise, networks, and credibility of its own.

Third, trust is essential but not sufficient on its own, it has to be paired with good governance: clear processes, clearly assigned roles, regular communication routines, and defined mechanisms for resolving problems as they arise.

Trust is always important, but trust has to be supported by good governance. It does not substitute for clear processes, clear roles, and communication routines.

— Prof. Africa Ariño

GOVERNANCE OVER TIME

Moving from personal to institutional relationships

Asked what should change as a partnership matures, Prof. Ariño emphasised that trust needs to shift from being personal to being institutional and embedded in each organisation, precisely because people and circumstances change over time. She illustrated the risk with the Coca-Cola–Nestlé case: the alliance had been championed by two individuals nearing retirement who saw it as a capstone achievement, but its purpose was never embedded in either organisation. Once those two individuals left, the goodwill that had let them resolve issues with a phone call was gone, and disputes that could once have been settled informally ended up requiring linguists.

She also stressed the need for candid, ongoing conversation as circumstances change, discussing openly how shifts are affecting each partner, what new private goals may have emerged, and where things have not worked well, rather than avoiding those conversations. This should feed

into periodic, deliberate reassessment: if the partnership were being designed today, knowing what is now known, what would be kept, dropped, added, or restructured in the partnership.

Implication for SUF: as the Foundation moves past its first decade, formal succession and institutional memory around each partnership, not reliance on the individuals who originated it, becomes a governance priority.

MULTI-STAKEHOLDER BALANCE

Balancing interests without diluting purpose

On managing multiple stakeholders, donors, corporates, government, community without losing the partnership's original purpose, Prof. Ariño's central point was that engagement has to stay anchored in that shared purpose rather than trying to satisfy every stakeholder equally; attempting to average everyone's interests typically leaves no one satisfied. The greater danger with a diverse stakeholder set, in her view, is not diversity itself but the risk that the loudest voice comes to dominate the relationship, crowding out others.

Her recommended safeguard is to create a deliberate forum in which every stakeholder can voice its interests, so that when one stakeholder makes a specific request, everyone can see its implications for the others. She also recommended establishing clear, if informal, “information rights” tailored to each stakeholder's actual interests, a standing commitment to keep each partner informed on the matters that concern it. This improves transparency and builds trust, since no partner is taken by surprise, and it opens space to discuss trade-offs and remedies before decisions are finalised.

The danger, more than having multiple and diverse stakeholders, comes from letting the one with the loudest voice dominate.

— Prof. Africa Ariño

AFRICAN PARTNERSHIP DYNAMICS

What a generic playbook misses

Prof. Ariño's central caution for international partners entering Africa is to treat the local partner as a co-creator, not an implementer, the international partner does not arrive to dictate a solution that the local partner simply executes. As illustration, she recounted an international organisation that installed a well close to a village to spare women a 15-kilometre walk for water, only to find the women continuing to make the long walk anyway: the walk itself was the social occasion the women valued, a dynamic the outside organisation had missed by not partnering with someone who understood the local context well enough to design the intervention differently.

She also noted that trust matters everywhere but is especially critical in Kenya and the wider region, given how relationship-oriented the society is, relationship-building has to be treated as foundational, not incidental. Finally, she urged that outside partners evaluate success in terms of capability building rather than programme delivery alone: delivering the programme matters, but the deeper purpose is building institutions on the ground that can sustain themselves.

She also referenced a related cautionary example raised elsewhere in her visit: an international partner that benchmarked Strathmore's practice of providing students laptops for online study, but replicated the online programme elsewhere without also providing the laptops delivering the format without the enabling infrastructure the original model depended on.

THE NEXT DECADE

What to protect, and what to change

Asked what SUF should protect going into its next decade, Prof. Ariño pointed first to the integrity of the founding mission itself Strathmore's commitment to developing people and expanding access to education paired with accountability that gives donors and partners confidence in that mission. This, again, means anchoring trust at the institutional level rather than in individual personal relationships, even though it is individual people who ultimately build and hold that trust.

On what should change, she pointed to two shifts. First, a shift in time horizon: from funding discrete projects toward building enduring institutional capacity. Individual scholarships remain important, but efforts such as endowments and endowed chairs create self-sustaining capacity (an endowment invested so that only a small share of returns, on the order of 4–5%, is drawn each year to fund activities, preserving the principal indefinitely). These structures pay off on a longer horizon but are ultimately more resilient and efficient.

Second, a shift in scale: from individual interventions toward ecosystem-level impact for example, connecting scholarships to national priorities such as STEM, entrepreneurship, ethical leadership, or community impact, so that donors are positioned as partners in building the conditions for a country to flourish, rather than simply funders of individual opportunities.

It's not just that you are giving them an opportunity to donate — you are giving them an opportunity to build the capabilities and institutions that, when combined, their impact is compounded.

— Prof. Africa Ariño

Summary: Key Takeaways for SUF

Across all six questions, five themes recur in Prof. Ariño's perspective:

- Build institutions, not just programmes — design partnerships to transfer ownership and capacity to the local partner over time, rather than to deliver a fixed set of activities.
- Anchor engagement in shared purpose — goodwill starts a partnership; explicit, ongoing alignment on shared and private goals is what sustains it.
- Institutionalise trust — pair personal relationships with formal governance (clear roles, processes, and communication routines) so the partnership survives when individuals move on.
- Give every stakeholder a voice, anchored in purpose — use structured forums and clear information rights to prevent the loudest stakeholder from crowding out the rest.
- Treat local partners as co-creators — particularly in the African context, where relationship-orientation is central and generic “best practice” playbooks can miss what a community actually values.

Looking to the next decade, her advice converges on a single strategic shift: from funding individual, time-bound interventions toward building durable, self-sustaining institutional capacity, through mechanisms such as endowments and endowed chairs and from individual impact toward ecosystem-level impact that positions donors as partners in national development rather than as funders of discrete opportunities.

Source: Interview conducted by Jacob Oreki with Prof. Africa Ariño, 25th August 2026. This report synthesises the conversation on strategic alliances for SUF's 10-Year Impact Report.