



Policy Plan

2024–2028

Marsa Stichting

Amsterdam, The Netherlands

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I. Introduction

Marsa Stichting was founded in 2020 by a group of cultural organizers, filmmakers, and researchers rooted in the Arab region and diaspora. Named after the Arabic word for “harbor,” Marsa emerged from an urgent need to establish infrastructure that not only supports artistic freedom but also reimagines the structures through which culture is produced, sustained, and shared.

As a foundation based in Amsterdam, Marsa operates at the intersection of Europe and the Arab region, cultivating alternative pathways for cultural collaboration, creativity, and imagination, particularly in contexts where creative expression is under pressure.

This policy plan covers the period 2024–2028 and serves a dual function: it documents what was built and learned in the foundation’s first active programming cycle (2024–2025), and it sets out the strategic direction for the next phase (2026–2028). That next phase deepens Marsa’s investment in its two flagship programs, Storyhouse and Mazal, and pilots a set of new and expanded initiatives across its programmatic pillars.

II. Mission

Marsa Foundation is a non-profit organisation that aims to support and promote freedom of creativity and expression by financially and organizationally supporting the cultural, artistic, film and media activities and spaces in countries and/or areas where such support is lacking.

Marsa exists to cultivate spaces where freedom of creativity and expression, civic imagination, and artistic solidarity are actively supported and sustained. We do this by nurturing artists and practitioners from regions that do not have sustainable support, providing them with the organizational, financial, and ethical support required to produce meaningful work under often precarious or constrained conditions.

We recognize storytelling as a tool for reshaping futures. Marsa supports the development of cultural ecosystems that are equitable, contextually grounded, and collectively governed. Our mission is not only to support art and culture but to rethink how they are held, shared, and distributed, structurally, emotionally, and politically.

III. Report of Activities: 2024–2025

This section constitutes Marsa’s verslag van de uitgeoefende activiteiten for the years 2024 and 2025, as required under the ANBI publication obligation.

The period 2024–2025 was Marsa’s founding and pilot phase. The foundation launched its two flagship programs, consolidated its programmatic approach across all four pillars, and concluded one existing program.

Creative Catalyst

Storyhouse (Pilot)

Storyhouse launched in 2024 as Marsa’s flagship pan-Arab film development platform. In its pilot phase, Storyhouse built an unprecedented cross-regional partnership spanning five organizations across five countries: Imaginarium Films (Jordan), Shashat Association (Tunisia), Setara Films (Yemen), Seen Films (Egypt), and Barzakh (Lebanon). Together, these partners co-designed and delivered a three-phase development program supporting 18 filmmakers and their projects.

The **Creative Development** phase centered on a Peer-to-Peer Creative Retreat in Jordan, offering participants space for supervised project development, one-on-one creative mentorship, and open lectures across four cities. Each of the 18 films was matched with a dedicated creative mentor.

The **Production Development and Financing** phase included two regional workshops. A fiction production workshop was held in Jordan (November 2025), organized by Imaginarium Films and led by producer Rula Nasser, developing a comprehensive curriculum for independent fiction film production and financing. A documentary production workshop followed in Tunisia (December 2025), organized by Shashat and Setara Films and led by producer Jana Wahbe, addressing financing, broadcaster commissioning, and fair practices in documentary production. Both workshops included industry engagement sessions with figures including Mehdi Bakkar (Al Jazeera Documentary), Khalil Benkirane (Doha Film Institute), and Dora Bouchoucha. An ongoing production clinic and legal clinic, led by MENA Business and Legal Affairs specialists, provided one-on-one support to each project.

Storyhouse embedded fair and equitable production practices, including risk assessment, safe working environments, and crew compensation standards, directly into all workshop curricula rather than treating them as supplementary. By the end of the pilot period, the program had generated active peer support networks among participants, with filmmakers sharing funding opportunities, collaborating on test shoots, and providing substantive feedback to one another across borders.

Embodying Stories (Comra Project)

The Embodying Stories program, a performing arts initiative amplifying the narratives of Yemeni women artists and media creators, concluded in 2024. Its activities and learnings have informed Marsa’s ongoing commitment to care-centered and community-rooted programming.

Critical Knowledge

Mazal (Pilot)

Mazal launched in 2024 as Marsa’s long-term collaborative program for engaging with creative archives across the Arab region. It responds to a persistent condition of collective amnesia: knowledge is generated, developed, and used across the region’s cultural sector, but frequently becomes inaccessible, locked in hard drives, paper files, or forgotten organizational archives. Publishing houses close without trace, film companies bury their processes along with their works, and each generation is left to rediscover what previous ones already produced. Mazal takes a transregional approach, connecting artists, researchers, and grassroots collectives to reclaim and reimagine archival practices in constrained contexts.

The pilot identified and worked with four partner archives: Abnoud Films by Ateyyat Al Abnoudy (Egypt), CARCDAM Collective (Morocco), Barzakh (Lebanon, working also with Sedakhane in Iran), and Yemen Used to Be (Yemen). Through conversations with each partner, Mazal shaped four complementary forms of support: residencies for archives needing space and time to step back and think through their practice; legal and technical one-on-one consultations to address specific bottlenecks; administrative and financial incubation for archival projects without a registered structure or bank account; and collective workshops building a regional community of practice.

Key activities during the pilot period included:

- **CARCDAM–Barzakh Residency** in Beirut, where the Casablanca-based collective CARCDAM spent a week in exchange with Barzakh and the broader Beirut archival ecosystem, including field visits to the Arab Image Foundation, AUB Archives, and Beirut Art Center. The residency included a public roundtable facilitated by Walid Sadek and early discussions toward a pan-Arab critical magazine linking Beirut and Casablanca.
- **Collaboration with Sedakhane** on the pilot publication *Songs of Continuous Cities*, supporting a book translating archival research on Iranian folk music into publicly accessible form. Marsa provided legal and administrative support for publication rights, and technical support for digital archiving workflows.
- **Workshop on Artistic and Cultural Archives** in Cairo, led by Leila Muson (International Institute for Social History, Amsterdam), bringing together participants from Mazal’s partner archives alongside additional collectives including AudioOz and Behna Archives. The workshop covered archival appraisal, arrangement, description, critical archival theory, and the ethics of memory and representation.
- Marsa also supported a year-long effort to digitize and rescue nearly 50,000 documents from the Abnoud Films archive.

Terr.so

Terr.so, Marsa’s online platform for Arabic-language cinema criticism, filmmaking, and audiovisual media discourse, continued its publishing activity throughout 2024–2025. The platform hosts articles, documents, and critical essays on cinema and contemporary filmmaking practice, maintaining a pan-Arab readership and serving as Marsa’s primary vehicle for critical knowledge in digital form.

Meeting Points

During 2024–2025, Marsa facilitated a series of public encounters and professional gatherings connected to its programmatic work. Open lectures linked to Storyhouse’s creative development phase were held across four cities. Marsa also participated in international knowledge-sharing forums on documentary filmmaking practices and community-centered cinema, contributing to field-wide conversations on equitable production and distribution.

Sustainable Support

Marsa provided administrative, financial, and legal infrastructure to independently led cultural initiatives aligned with its mission throughout 2024–2025. This included hosting financial frameworks for project-based work, managing grant-funded programs under agreements with institutional partners, and acting as administrative and financial incubator for archival projects within Mazal that lacked their own registered structure or banking access.

As part of this work, Marsa organized a **three-day Mental Health and Wellbeing Training for Creative Practitioners** in Cairo (April 11–13, 2025), developed and led by Kholoud Saber Barakat and Reem Mroue. Participants included partners and collaborators from Palestine, Jordan, Tunisia, Yemen, and Lebanon. The training covered collective and secondary trauma, burnout and emotional labor in artistic practice, self-reflection and positionality, self and collective care from a feminist perspective, and Psychological First Aid.

The training was a deliberately organizational act: Marsa could not build sustainable programs for cultural memory and creative collaboration without first caring for the people doing that building. Its model has since been embedded into Storyhouse’s production workshops and Mazal’s collaborative methodology. A bilingual digital guide based on this training is in development for publication in 2026, in collaboration with Soteria Consulting for Mental Health and Safeguarding Services.

IV. Objectives (2024–2028)

Over this five-year period, Marsa aims to:

- **Establish and develop Storyhouse and Mazal** as Marsa’s two flagship programs: Storyhouse as a recurring, multi-cohort film development platform, and Mazal as a sustained program for archival practice and cultural incubation.
- **Develop, fundraise, and pilot new and expanded initiatives** across all programmatic pillars during the 2026–2028 period, including the return of Rough Cut Stations, an Audio Documentary Incubator, the Three Cities Summit, and the Currents distribution initiative.
- Support and incubate independent cultural and cinematic work that advances creative freedom and challenges dominant narratives in and about the Arab region and diaspora.
- Foster interdisciplinary and cross-border collaboration, enabling artists, curators, filmmakers, writers, and cultural workers to develop new forms of authorship, knowledge, and experimentation together.
- Advance cultural equity and access, particularly for artists working outside major hubs, and those historically marginalized due to geography, gender, displacement, or political context.
- Strengthen care-centered practices in cultural production by modeling alternative governance, nurturing ethical workspaces, and prioritizing the well-being of practitioners.
- Build sustainable cultural infrastructure, including administrative support, sustainable support frameworks, and long-term partnerships that reinforce the resilience and continuity of critical cultural work.
- Expand public understanding of the role of culture in civic life by engaging diverse audiences through accessible formats, conversations, and participatory events.

V. Strategic Approach

Marsa's strategy is grounded in a belief that cultural transformation requires both content and structure: imaginative works, and the systems that allow them to exist. Our practice operates across four interrelated programmatic pillars.

1. Creative Catalyst

Marsa supports the development of original works through mentorship, co-creation formats, and operational support. Storyhouse is the flagship initiative of this pillar, offering a dedicated space for narrative experimentation and collaborative film development in and from the Arab region and diaspora. Alongside it, Rough Cut Stations offers late-stage film development support, and the Audio Documentary Incubator, launching in 2026, will open a dedicated space for practitioners working in audio documentary forms.

2. Critical Knowledge

We facilitate learning environments that spark conversation and critical reflection: labs, residencies, seminars, and informal gatherings where knowledge is generated collectively. Mazal anchors this pillar, operating at the intersection of memory, documentation, and emergent cultural forms. Terr.so, our online platform for cinema criticism and discourse, serves as the primary digital channel for critical knowledge production.

3. Meeting Points

Marsa creates spaces, both physical and digital, for cultural practitioners and communities to gather, share, and co-imagine. The Three Cities Summit provides a biennial platform for gathering artists, thinkers, and curators across geographies. Currents, piloting from 2026, extends that logic into a continuous, year-round model for documentary screening and distribution.

4. Sustainable Support

Recognizing the systemic gaps faced by small initiatives and freelance practitioners, we offer financial, administrative, and legal infrastructure to enable cultural work to unfold with greater autonomy, accountability, and care. We accompany our partners not only as funders but as long-term allies.

Across all pillars, Marsa's work is guided by horizontal governance, contextual intelligence, and a politics of care. We hold space for vulnerability, doubt, and emergence, treating structure not as constraint but as support.

VI. Activities (2026–2028)

The 2026–2028 period has two parallel tracks: deepening the two flagship programs built in the pilot phase, and launching or expanding a set of initiatives that test new formats and extend Marsa’s programmatic reach.

Creative Catalyst

Storyhouse

Flagship development

Storyhouse is Marsa’s pan-Arab film development platform, supporting co-authorship, narrative experimentation, and the reimagining of creative infrastructure in the Arab region and diaspora. From 2026, Storyhouse moves from pilot to recurring program, running annual or biennial development cohorts for fiction and nonfiction cinema. Each cohort offers residencies, editorial mentorship, and collective development labs. The expanded program will deepen its partnership infrastructure, develop alumni support mechanisms, and build toward a public-facing dimension that connects development with distribution.

Rough Cut Stations

Development for return

Rough Cut Stations supports filmmakers in the final stages of their work, helping them investigate structure, narrative, and context, and identify alternative screening and distribution possibilities. Guided by social studies scholars, cross-disciplinary artists, writers, and editors, the program was piloted in earlier years and will be redeveloped during the 2026–2028 period. Marsa will refine its model, secure dedicated funding, and prepare the program for a full return with expanded reach and frequency.

Audio Documentary Incubator

In development

The Audio Documentary Incubator is a new program in development, designed to support practitioners working at the intersection of sound, journalism, and storytelling. It will offer development support, mentorship, and production resources for works in formats including long-form radio documentary, narrative podcasts, and experimental sound journalism from the Arab region and diaspora. During the 2026–2028 period, Marsa will develop the program’s methodology, build its partnership network across the audio and broadcast landscape, and secure the funding required to launch its first cohort within the period.

Critical Knowledge

Mazal

Flagship development

Mazal is Marsa’s long-term program for engaging with creative archives across the Arab region. It supports artists, researchers, and grassroots collectives working at the intersection of memory, documentation, and cultural continuity, and cultivates collaborative methodologies for research, translation, and creative engagement with suppressed or inaccessible histories.

From 2026, Mazal moves from pilot to recurring program. It will expand its network of partner archives beyond the initial four, deepen the four support formats established in the pilot (residency, consultation, incubation, and collective workshop), and grow its publishing and public-facing output. By 2028, Mazal aims to have produced a body of publicly accessible archival work and to have established a transregional community of practice around independent creative archives, connecting practitioners across the Arab region and its diaspora.

Terr.so

Terr.so continues as Marsa’s pan-Arab platform for Arabic-language cinema criticism, audiovisual discourse, and critical knowledge on filmmaking practice. In the 2026–2028 period, Marsa will develop Terr.so’s editorial capacity, broaden its contributor base, and deepen its integration with Storyhouse and Mazal as a publication and dissemination channel for the knowledge those programs generate.

Meeting Points

Three Cities Summit

In development

The Three Cities Summit is a biennial cultural convening bringing artists, thinkers, and curators together across three cities: Amsterdam and two rotating partner cities. Weaving together exhibitions, film screenings, workshops, and public dialogues, the Summit explores shared artistic vocabularies, interdisciplinary knowledge, and diasporic networks. During the 2026–2028 period, Marsa will develop the curatorial framework, identify and secure partner institutions in each city, and raise the funding required to launch the first edition within the period.

Currents

Pilot

Currents is Marsa’s documentary screening and distribution initiative. It selects curated programs of independent documentary films from the Global South, building each program around a thematic or social thread, and mobilizes communities around screening spaces to sustain engagement with documentary as an art form and a civic tool. Currents addresses a structural gap: the festival circuit offers documentary films visibility without longevity, leaving filmmakers without sustainable pathways for circulation.

Each program licenses 10 to 15 films through transparent agreements ensuring fair filmmaker compensation, and circulates across cinemas, cultural spaces, universities, NGOs, and alternative venues over a sustained period. Screenings are accompanied by moderated discussions connecting films to local realities. Alongside physical screenings, Currents explores multi-channel distribution including VOD platforms and television. Revenue from ticket sales, institutional partnerships, and event funding is shared with filmmakers through pre-agreed models. In its 2026 pilot, Currents will develop one or two programs, establish venue partnerships, and test its licensing and revenue model, building toward year-round operation from 2028.

Sustainable Support

Marsa offers practical support to small-scale initiatives aligned with its mission. This includes:

- Hosting financial and legal frameworks for independently led cultural programs.
- Providing project-based administrative and production support for cultural workers lacking access to formal infrastructure.
- Acting as a conduit between funders and grassroots cultural organizers in politically sensitive or legally complex contexts.
- **Developing and publishing a bilingual (Arabic/English) digital guide on mental health and wellbeing for creative practitioners**, building on the 2025 training. The guide will cover collective trauma, burnout, emotional labor, positionality, and self and collective care from a feminist perspective. It is designed as both a practical resource and a sector-wide advocacy tool, arguing for wellbeing as a fundable and structural priority in the arts. Target publication: October 2026, in collaboration with Soteria Consulting for Mental Health and Safeguarding Services.

Marsa prioritizes flexibility and responsiveness in its programming. Cultural relevance cannot be pre-scripted, and programs must grow from real needs, relationships, and opportunities.

VII. Fundraising

Marsa Stichting's fundraising strategy is guided by the principles of autonomy, sustainability, and ethical alignment. We seek to build long-term relationships with institutions and individuals who share our commitment to cultural freedom, equity, and creative collaboration.

In 2025, Marsa engaged development consultant Farah de Haan to design a roadmap for strengthening the foundation's fundraising strategy and positioning, with a focus on mobilizing funds within the Netherlands after years of operating primarily in the Arab region. The consultancy produced a mapping of relevant Dutch and international funders, and identified several key features of the landscape that inform Marsa's approach for 2024–2028.

Key findings from the 2025 funding mapping

- **International reach is rare among Dutch funds.** Very few Dutch funds actively support arts and culture organizations working internationally, and fewer still name the Arab region as a priority. Where international components do exist, they are often limited in scope, restricted to specific conditions, or accessible only by invitation.
- **Project support dominates over core support.** The vast majority of identified funds are project-based. Structural or multi-year support from Dutch public cultural funds is typically reserved for a small number of large, well-established institutions. Unrestricted core support exists but is rare, and most of it comes from international rather than Dutch sources.
- **Grant sizes are modest and co-financing is standard.** Most grants fall within the €5,000–€50,000 range; grants of €100,000 or more are rare. Many funders will only finance 50–80% of a project's total budget, making co-financing across multiple funders both common and, in many cases, a formal requirement.

Fundraising priorities for 2024–2028

Based on this mapping and analysis, Marsa's fundraising priorities are:

- **Deepen relationships with a shortlist of high-potential funders** identified through the mapping, spanning Dutch funds with international focus, Dutch funds with national or sub-national scope, and international funds offering rare unrestricted core support.
- **Sustain the existing international donor base** through continued relationships with partners who have supported Marsa's programmatic work in the Arab region, alongside active outreach to new aligned foundations.
- **Adapt program development to the Dutch context.** To access Dutch funding effectively, Marsa will develop initiatives and adapt existing programs to include activities implemented in the Netherlands, in collaboration with Dutch-based creatives, and engaging Dutch audiences, including Arab diaspora communities and Dutch people with Arab heritage. This reinforces Marsa's bridging function between the Arab region and Europe.
- **Invest in Dutch networks and visibility.** Participation in sector events, collaborative programming, and relationship-building with Dutch institutions and peer organizations, before and independent of any specific application.
- **Diversify income beyond grants.** Develop earned income pathways through the Currents model, including screening revenues and distribution agreements, as a contribution to long-term financial sustainability.

- **Prioritize and phase.** Given current organizational capacity, Marsa will pursue funding pathways in sequence rather than simultaneously, aligning fundraising priorities with the phased development of programs across the 2024–2028 period.

Fundraising is approached as a collaborative process, one that requires shared values and mutual learning.

VIII. Asset Management & Financial Governance

Marsa Stichting operates on a non-profit basis, with all assets dedicated exclusively to the realization of its public-interest objectives. We follow Dutch governance and compliance standards while tailoring our internal systems to reflect our care-centered values.

Key principles of our financial governance include:

- Dual-signature oversight for all major expenditures.
- Annual review by external financial advisors and approval by the board of directors.
- Transparent reporting, including publication of annual accounts within six months of fiscal year-end.
- Fair and contextual remuneration of staff and collaborators in line with sector standards, within the limits of our budget.

All financial decisions are made with consideration for long-term sustainability, ethical sourcing, and the minimization of bureaucratic burden for collaborators.

The board members of Marsa Foundation provide their services on a voluntary basis. They do not receive compensation for their work as board members. They are entitled to reimbursement of costs incurred in the performance of their duties. Executive board members may be compensated for day-to-day work leading the organization, or for their roles in the implementation of specific projects and programs.

IX. Organization & Governance

Marsa is structured as a hybrid foundation, with both executive and non-executive board members. The organization is led by a collective of practitioners with expertise in film, cultural organizing, research, and community-based practices.

Board of Directors

Dirk Wanrooij

Chairman

Dutch writer and educator, author of the book “Oproer,” recognized among the best fifteen journalistic books of 2015 by the Brussepijs.

Sara Ishaq

Executive Director

Independent director, researcher, and producer. Her films were nominated for an Academy Award for Best Documentary (Short Subject), premiered at IDFA and supported by the Nederlands Filmfonds and Hubert Bals Fund (Rotterdam Film Festival).

Mostafa Youssef

Executive Director

Director and producer who produced three films collectively screened in over 20 international festivals. His short fiction was officially selected for the International Film Festival of Rotterdam.

Fatma Abed

Non-Executive Director

Marketing, PR, Communications, and Media Consultant. Worked with leading advertising agencies and founded and led marketing departments for multinational retail companies, international brands, and cultural organizations.

- Executive Directors are responsible for daily management, program development, fundraising, and operational coordination.
- Non-Executive Directors provide oversight, strategic counsel, and accountability.

Marsa operates with a horizontal ethos, prioritizing shared leadership, relational accountability, and flexible labor structures. Our internal policies emphasize care, inclusion, and thoughtful co-working, recognizing that the health of a cultural initiative begins with those who sustain it.

Staff

The Foundation has no full-time employees. Executive Directors work in the capacity of project managers for their respective programs and are compensated for this only, not for the management of Marsa Foundation. The team includes part-time and consultancy-based members:

Farah de Haan*Fundraising Consultant*

Specialized in project management, proposal writing, and community building. Co-founder of Noss e Noss and Arabic teacher at Taalhuis Amsterdam. MA (cum laude) in Middle Eastern Studies, University of Amsterdam.

Kholoud Saber Barakat*Mental Health, Safety and Wellbeing Consultant*

Specialized in designing and implementing care policies that foster mental health and wellbeing within civil society organizations. Brings a strong commitment to safeguarding, feminist values, and advancing workplace wellbeing.