Towards collective action for water stewardship in Malawi

Lessons from emerging practice

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About Fair Water Footprints

The Fair Water Footprints programme is a partnership between governments, the private sector and civil society to transform how the global economy interacts with and values water, by reducing water security vulnerabilities in communities and regions where companies source raw materials and products. It was launched at the 2021 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26) with the Glasgow Declaration for Fair Water Footprints. Learn more about the programme at www.fairwaterfootprints.org

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Water security is critical to Malawi's economic development. The increasing pressure on water resources is creating opportunities to strengthen how water stewardship efforts are coordinated and implemented. Drawing on insights from the Fair Water Footprints Water Stewardship Masterclass and stakeholder interviews, this paper explores how collective action is beginning to take shape in practice. It highlights five key lessons and a growing sense of momentum, showing how existing initiatives, knowledge and actors can be better connected to support more coherent, resilient and system-level responses to shared water risks.

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Summary

Water security is central to Malawi's economy, livelihoods and development, yet increasing pressure on water resources is exposing the limits of existing approaches to water management. Drawing on discussions from the Fair Water Footprints (FWF) Water Stewardship Masterclass and interviews with key stakeholders, this paper explores what is emerging from efforts to strengthen collective action around water stewardship. It highlights a set of interconnected lessons on how coordination, inclusion, incentives, information and learning shape multi-stakeholder approaches, while pointing to a growing sense of momentum and opportunity to build on what already exists.

Water underpins agricultural production, energy generation and industrial activity in Malawi, while sustaining the livelihoods of a largely rural population. However, water systems are under increasing strain due to climate variability, land use change and rising demand. Recent shocks, including Cyclone Freddy in 2023, have demonstrated the scale of these impacts, contributing to significant economic losses, widespread food insecurity and public health crises. These pressures are also being felt acutely by businesses. A recent survey by the Malawi Confederation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry found that 96% of businesses experience water-related disruptions, with some reporting consequential losses of more than 25% of annual turnover. At the same time, there is already a high level of activity across sectors, with government, private sector, civil society and development partners all engaged in responding to water risks.

Malawi has been at the forefront of the FWF initiative, which promotes water use that is sustainable, equitable and resilient. In practice, this has involved bringing together stakeholders to engage with shared risks and explore opportunities for more coordinated action. These efforts are beginning to reveal both the challenges of working across a complex system and the potential for more connected approaches to emerge.

A first key insight is that awareness of water risks is high, but this does not automatically translate into coordinated action. Many initiatives are already underway, but are often implemented in isolation. At the same time, this reflects a system that is still emerging rather than one that is failing. Across discussions, stakeholders pointed to existing pockets of activity that, if better connected, could form the basis of a more coherent approach.

Bringing together actors who do not typically engage in sustained dialogue revealed important interdependencies in water use, particularly across upstream and downstream contexts. However, participation does not yet fully reflect the diversity of stakeholders affected by water challenges. Expanding inclusion would not only improve representation but also strengthen the quality of understanding and decision making.

Misaligned incentives were identified as a persistent barrier. Upstream communities are often expected to adopt conservation practices, while benefits accrue elsewhere. Without tangible incentives, sustained engagement is difficult. At the same time, growing awareness among businesses of water-related risks creates a strong basis for more aligned and collaborative approaches.

Limited access to shared information also constrains coordination. Stakeholders often lack visibility over water use, risks and actors across catchments. There is strong interest in simple, practical tools, such as catchment mapping and shared indicators, which could support a more common understanding and provide a basis for coordinated action.

Finally, learning emerged as a central mechanism for collective action. In complex systems, progress depends on creating the conditions for stakeholders to be able to learn, adapt and act together over time. There is already a strong foundation to build on, with interest across stakeholders and examples of ongoing initiatives that could be more intentionally connected.

Taken together, these insights suggest that the challenge is not to initiate action, but to better connect and align what already exists. The foundations for collective action are already present. The opportunity now lies in strengthening coordination, inclusion, incentives, information and learning to enable these efforts to function more effectively as a system.

1 Introduction

"Water security is economic security. It's a fact," said the keynote speaker at the Fair Water Footprints (FWF) Water Stewardship Masterclass in February 2026. In Malawi, water underpins agricultural production, energy generation and industrial activity, while sustaining the livelihoods of a largely rural population. More than 80% of rural livelihoods depend on rain-fed agriculture (Ireland, 2025), which contributes up to 32% of GDP (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, no date) and over 80% of export earnings (United Nations Capital Development Fund, 2023), while hydropower accounts for 88% of electricity production (The Energy Poverty PIRE in Southern Africa, 2022).

The pressures on Malawi's water resources are also well documented. Just 18% of Malawians have access to safely managed drinking water services (World Bank Group, no date), and approximately 92% rely on rain-fed water systems for their water needs (Dinko and Bahati, 2023), leaving both livelihoods and agricultural production highly exposed to climate variability. Increasingly, water quality issues, catchment degradation and increasing demand from agriculture and industry are placing additional strain on already-stressed systems. As these pressures intensify, driven by climate variability, land use change and competing demands, their impacts are becoming increasingly visible. In 2023, Cyclone Freddy caused over US$500 million in economic damage, contributed to severe food insecurity affecting nearly four million people and was linked to the most severe cholera outbreak in the country's history. Looking ahead, climate change impacts could reduce Malawi's GDP by up to 20% by 2040 (World Bank, 2024). These trends underline that the limits of established approaches to water management are becoming more visible.

In the context of these pressures, Malawi was one of the co-founders of the Glasgow Declaration for Fair Water Footprints, part of the Just Transitions for Water Security (JTWS) programme funded by FCDO. A fair water footprint refers to water use that is sustainable, equitable and within environmental limits, while protecting ecosystems, ensuring access to water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) and building resilience to climate and water-related risks. The FWF initiative operates as a multistakeholder platform and enabling model, working by generating evidence, strengthening civil society engagement, supporting government leadership and highlighting financial incentives, with the aim of shifting behaviours across supply chains.

Since 2021, government stakeholders in Malawi have been pioneers and key champions of FWF, and it was the first country to submit a delivery plan. This has created early foundations for collective action at catchment level across key sectors, including within the tea, sugar and nut sectors, as well as across government and civil society. This has included preparing for delivery through strategic planning with the wider JTWS programme, the creation of a multistakeholder advisory group chaired by the ministry responsible for water, supporting joint sector reviews, collaboration on the Presidential WASH Compact and, in 2025, a leadership forum was hosted that highlighted engaging business as a top priority in the water sector. In a recent survey by the Malawi Confederation

of Chambers of Commerce and Industry, 96% of businesses reported facing water-related challenges, including unreliable supply, flooding and drought impacts, poor water quality and limited infrastructure. For many, these impacts were significant, with some reporting losses of over 25% of annual turnover. Limited technical capacity and access to finance were identified as key barriers to managing water-related risks.

To address these challenges, in February 2026, the Water Stewardship Masterclass brought together leaders from government, business, academia and civil society to explore how businesses can respond to growing water and climate-related risks. Organised by the Alliance for Water Stewardship (AWS) and Water Witness, the Water Stewardship Masterclass was a week-long case-based learning course held in Senga Bay, enabling participants to explore catchment-level water challenges and apply the AWS Standard in practice. Bringing together stakeholders who often act independently enabled a deeper understanding of different experiences of water risk, while highlighting tensions and interdependencies in water use. It also provided an opportunity to reflect on progress towards the objectives of the FWF approach and to explore practical steps for water stewardship through the internationally recognised AWS Standard.

Masterclass facilitators noted that water stewardship is the "how" for achieving Fair Water Footprints. To succeed at scale, collective action around water stewardship must be implemented at the local level. This paper draws on discussions and interviews with key stakeholders to explore what has been learned from applying this approach in Malawi. The insights are presented as five interrelated lessons that reflect how water stewardship is being put into practice within the FWF approach, with relevance for wider multistakeholder efforts. Each lesson shares an emerging idea about how to adapt based on the evidence generated.

2

Coordination can unlock momentum

As discussed above, water risk in Malawi is widely recognised across sectors and stakeholders consistently described water as central to agriculture, energy and livelihoods. Malawi has demonstrated strong leadership in establishing policies and institutional frameworks for water management, including a national water policy, legal framework and integrated water resources planning. Flagship initiatives, such as the Shire River Basin Management Programme, reflect sustained commitment by government and partners to address water challenges under complex and resource-constrained conditions.

However, discussions with participants highlighted that the core challenge is not due to a lack of awareness but alignment. Malawi's water landscape is characterised by a high level of activity across government, private-sector actors, civil society and development partners. These efforts include catchment restoration, WASH programming, irrigation support and certification-driven improvements within agricultural practices. While each intervention responds to real needs, many are designed and implemented in isolation, without a common understanding of catchment dynamics or visibility of other ongoing initiatives. This lack of coordination means that locally rational activities may not contribute to system-level outcomes.

At the same time, participants emphasised that many initiatives, while overlapping, are also under-resourced and slow to respond to changing circumstances. For example, participants frequently raised the low capacity of bureaucratic structures to award permits or enforce regulations. While the Water Resources Act of 2013 mandated the creation of catchment management committees as spaces for coordination and stakeholder engagement at the catchment level (Chunga et al., 2022), discussions during the session revealed ongoing constraints affecting their effective operation. This creates a dual challenge: a landscape that is both crowded with activity and constrained in its capacity to respond to the needs of a changing and increasingly stressed water system.

In summary, Malawi's water landscape is characterised by considerable activity across sectors, but limited mechanisms to align these efforts at the catchment level. The result is a system that is active but not integrated and where greater coordination could strengthen overall coherence and impact. Importantly, this fragmentation should not be understood as a system that doesn't work, but rather one that is still emerging. Many of the dynamics described reflect that Malawi is a country in transition, where water stewardship efforts are relatively new and largely voluntary. As a result, what exists today is not a fully formed system, but a series of promising, yet disconnected, initiatives.

IDEA

Make existing activity visible and connected by mapping who is doing what at catchment level and using coordination platforms, such as catchment committees, to align efforts and build from existing pockets of work.

3

Multistakeholder processes enable connection, but require broader inclusion

A key contribution of the session was the way it brought together stakeholders who do not typically engage in sustained dialogue, including smallholder farmers, estate managers, business executives, government representatives, civil society, academics and technical experts. This created a space where different experiences of water use and risk could be understood in relation to one another, revealing interdependencies that are often recognised in principle but rarely explored collectively in practice.

For example, discussions on agricultural processing revealed how coffee cooperatives rely on direct river abstraction during the harvest season, with water diverted through locally constructed channels. However, upstream land use changes, including small-scale farming expansion, were reported to affect water availability and quality at these processing sites, sometimes leading to conflict. Participants also noted that upstream land use decisions are often driven by immediate livelihood needs, while government stakeholders stressed the challenges of monitoring and regulating water use across dispersed systems. These dynamics are usually experienced in isolation, but when brought together, they illustrate how closely linked water decisions, incentives and impacts are across the catchment.

At the same time, the range of participants highlighted important gaps in the perspectives that were represented. Participation reflected existing institutional and social dynamics, meaning that some voices, particularly those shaped by gender, disability or other dimensions of marginalisation, were less heard within discussions. As a result, certain perspectives, particularly those of women, who often play a central role in household water collection and management and represent 75% of the agricultural

labour force (UN Women, 2024), were potentially missed. This signifies an important gap in how water challenges are understood and risks that plans for action are not inclusive of the differentiated needs of marginalised groups.

This reflects a broader insight: no single actor holds a complete view of the system. Knowledge is distributed, with different actors holding partial perspectives shaped by their roles and experiences. Multistakeholder partnership, therefore, functions not only as a coordination mechanism but as a way of assembling a more complete understanding of how water systems operate in practice. In doing so, it creates the conditions for more informed, equitable, adaptive and collectively grounded responses. Inclusion is therefore not only a question of representation, but of knowledge: whose perspectives are present shapes how problems are defined and which solutions are considered viable.

IDEA

Strengthen multistakeholder processes by working through local organisations to include underrepresented groups, and by adapting formats to enable meaningful participation in discussions and decision making.

4

Misaligned incentives are a hidden barrier to collective action

Throughout the masterclass, upstream–downstream dynamics between water users emerged as one of the most persistent issues. While the need to protect catchments and water sources is widely recognised, the incentives to do so are unevenly distributed.

Participants described situations where competing water use, particularly between commercial estates and surrounding communities, has led to disputes, mistrust and, in some cases, vandalism and conflict. It was shared that upstream communities are often expected to adopt conservation practices, such as protecting riverbanks or limiting certain farming practices, but the benefits of these actions are realised downstream by commercial users or urban populations. In circumstances where livelihoods are already constrained, this creates a major obstacle to sustained stewardship. As one participant noted, "*If there is no benefit for them, they will continue to use the land as they need to.*"

Another example highlighted how a catchment restoration initiative struggled when external labour was brought in. Community members resisted the intervention, as it did not directly benefit local workers. The approach was subsequently redesigned to employ local people both in restoration activities and as security guards protecting water sources. This adaptation enhanced trust and long-term sustainability, incentivising participation in water stewardship rather than creating divides.

These examples and others pointed to a clear lesson: stewardship must be grounded in tangible incentives that correspond with environmental objectives and local economic realities. Businesses are increasingly aware of water-related risks to production and supply chains, creating a strong incentive to engage in stewardship efforts. However, these risks are shaped by factors beyond the control of any single actor, including upstream land use and catchment-level dynamics. As a result, while the private sector can act as a driver of action, its effectiveness depends on its ability to engage in collective approaches that reach beyond site-level interventions. And, just as businesses can incentivise water stewardship among communities through employment initiatives, they also must be incentivised to invest. Financial instruments and tax reductions for water stewardship were popular ideas throughout the week's discussions.

IDEA

Align water stewardship with tangible benefits by linking upstream conservation efforts to local livelihoods, while enabling downstream and private sector actors to invest in and share the benefits of catchment-level stewardship through tax or other financial incentives.

5

Coordination is key, but is constrained by information gaps

Participants identified the lack of accessible, shared information about water systems as a constraint to planning effective interventions. This includes basic data or information, such as how much water is available, how it is being used or which actors are active within a given catchment, as well as disaggregated data, which is critical to understanding differentiated impacts and barriers experienced by marginalised groups and to ensuring fair allocation of water.

Without this information, coordination remains difficult. Decisions are made based on partial or localised knowledge, and opportunities for alignment are easily missed. As one participant described: *"We take water from the river for processing, but what is happening upstream, we don't always know. When the flow reduces, we just see the impact at the factory."* This illustrates how limited visibility across the catchment constrains actors' ability to anticipate and manage shared risks.

Importantly, alongside efforts to ensure inclusive participation in multistakeholder dialogues, information systems must also consider differentiated gender equality, disability and social inclusion (GEDSI) experiences. Without deliberate efforts to capture perspectives, including those shaped by gender, disability and other social characteristics, there is a risk that existing data reinforces partial understandings of water systems and excludes those most affected by water insecurity.

There was strong interest in tools that could support a more common understanding of water risk. These included catchment assessments, stakeholder mapping and simple indicators that could help translate complex system dynamics into useful insights. Importantly, participants emphasised the need for these tools to be practical and accessible, rather than highly technical or expensive and that they be collectively shared for regular validation and use. In this way, information and data are not only a technical input, but a coordination mechanism. Shared information — and its collaborative generation — provide a basis for dialogue, planning and accountability across stakeholders.

IDEA

Enable coordination by building a shared understanding of water systems through simple, accessible tools, such as catchment mapping and indicators, that are co-created and regularly updated by stakeholders.

6

Learning is the cornerstone (not a by-product) of collective action

The masterclass demonstrated that bringing stakeholders together can create important opportunities for dialogue and alignment. Participants pointed to the importance of structured discussions, navigating different perspectives and sustaining focus on joint objectives. They also stressed the importance of continued engagement beyond one-off events, including follow-up processes and institutional support through existing platforms such as catchment committees. Without this, initial alignment is difficult to sustain.

More fundamentally, the discussions reinforced that learning is not a secondary outcome, but the feedback mechanism through which change occurs. Given the uncertain, variable and interdependent nature of water use, flexible solutions are needed. Progress depends less on identifying solutions in advance and more on creating the conditions for different stakeholders to learn, adjust and act together over time. Multi-stakeholder processes provide a platform for this kind of adaptive learning, but only where they are sustained.

In this context, FWF can play a catalytic role by supporting these processes over time: connecting stakeholders, knowledge and action across the system, while complementing and building on existing government structures rather than creating parallel systems. In this sense, the FWF programme is not only a mechanism for delivering water stewardship activities, but the model itself is a lever for enabling them to function as a system. The model operates less as a delivery mechanism and more as an enabling architecture for coordination, learning and collective action, which are necessary for addressing water risks at the catchment level.

The workshop showed that there is a strong foundation for future action. Across the board, stakeholders, particularly producer groups, showed a clear interest and willingness to engage, alongside examples of ongoing initiatives that could be brought together into a more coherent whole. This suggests that the challenge is not to initiate action, but to connect and align what already exists.

The workshop identified several practical entry points for this. These include opportunities to organise collaboration around specific value chains, such as sugar and tea, and to connect industrial users in Blantyre, where shared water risks create a natural basis for coordination. There is also potential to leverage existing institutional actors and development partners to support alignment and resourcing, and to build on existing structures such as catchment committees. Rather than creating new mechanisms, there is an opportunity for government stakeholders, particularly the National Water Resources Authority and Ministry of Water and Sanitation, to bring these spaces to life by connecting them more directly to the interests and incentives of water users.

A consistent theme across discussions was the need for more concrete guidance on how collaboration can take place in practice. Stakeholders expressed interest not only in engaging, but also in understanding how to engage, particularly with government and other water users. This points to a role for FWF in articulating practical pathways for collaboration, helping actors move from shared awareness to coordinated action.

IDEA

Sustain collective action by embedding ongoing, structured learning processes, such as regular dialogue and reflection, that enable stakeholders to adapt and align over time.

7

Conclusion

The discussions and interviews during the masterclass highlighted ongoing challenges for collective action for water stewardship in Malawi: while awareness and activity are high, the system to connect these efforts remains underdeveloped. However, discussions also revealed a strong underlying sense of opportunity: the foundations for collective action are already present, even if they are not yet fully connected. Policies, initiatives and technical solutions are in place, yet they commonly operate in parallel, limiting their collective impact on shared water risks. While grounded in the Malawian context, these challenges mirror those faced in many settings. The masterclass highlighted emerging strategies for strengthening collective action on water security in practice, both in Malawi and in other contexts. These include:

- Strengthening coordination mechanisms at the catchment level to align existing initiatives and reduce fragmentation
- Fostering inclusive, multistakeholder engagement to build shared understanding and ownership of water challenges
- Creating incentives for collective stewardship that deliver tangible benefits, especially for communities most affected by water resource pressures
- Investing in accessible, shared information systems to close data gaps and inform joint decision making, and
- Institutionalising ongoing learning and adaptive management as a core function of water stewardship efforts.

Focusing on these priorities will help ensure that Malawi's considerable efforts in water management contribute to greater coherence, resilience, equity and sustained progress toward water security.

The insights from the discussions suggest that the challenge is not simply to do more, but to enable what already exists to function as a system. This requires approaches that align stakeholders, incentives and information where water systems operate: largely at the catchment level. Multistakeholder processes play a key role in this alignment, not only by coordinating action but also by making the system visible and creating the conditions for better-informed and adaptive responses.

In this context, the FWF approach delivers a distinct contribution. Its value consists not only in supporting specific interventions but also in strengthening the relationships, learning processes and coordination mechanisms that allow those interventions to work together. The model itself becomes a lever for change, enabling collective action in a system where no single actor has full control. More broadly, the experience in Malawi points to a wider lesson for water stewardship and beyond: in complex systems, progress depends less on identifying the right solution in advance and more on creating the conditions for stakeholders to learn, align and act together over time.

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