



Learning in complexity

Insights from Fair Water Footprints

Nadine Benson and Laura Kelly

Working Paper

March 2026

Water; Monitoring, evaluation and learning

Keywords:

Water governance, monitoring and evaluation (M&E),
evidence of impact

About the authors

Nadine Benson is learning and knowledge manager at IIED
Laura Kelly is director of shaping sustainable markets at IIED
Corresponding author email: nadine.benson@iied.org

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

Acknowledgements

This learning stocktake draws on the collective efforts and insights of the Fair Water Footprints partnership. We are grateful to colleagues across the Carbon Disclosure Project, Water Witness International and Chatham House for their collaboration, reflections and ongoing engagement in shaping this work. We would particularly like to thank Rianna Gonzales and Henning Sandberg for their valuable contributions and insights to this paper, to Morgan Jennings for her support, and Annette McGill for her careful editing.

This briefing has been produced as part of the Just Transitions for Water Security programme, funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office through the Fair Water Footprints consortium. The views expressed do not necessarily reflect those of the donor.

Published by IIED, March 2026

Benson, N and Kelly, L (2026) Learning in complexity: insights from Fair Water Footprints. IIED, London.

iied.org/22725iied

ISBN: 978-1-83759-206-7

International Institute for Environment and Development
44 Southampton Buildings, London WC2A 1AP, UK
Tel: +44 (0)20 3463 7399
www.iied.org

www.linkedin.com/company/iied

www.facebook.com/thelIED

Download more publications at iied.org/publications



IIED publications may be shared and republished in accordance with the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International Public License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0). Under the

terms of this licence, anyone can copy, distribute and display the material, providing that they credit the original source and don't use it for commercial purposes or make derivatives. Different licences may apply to some illustrative elements, in which instance the licence will be displayed alongside. IIED is happy to discuss any aspect of further usage. Get more information via www.iied.org/about-publications

IIED is a charity registered in England, Charity No.800066 and in Scotland, OSCR Reg No.SC039864 and a company limited by guarantee registered in England No.2188452.

This paper presents a learning stocktake from the early phase of the Fair Water Footprints (FWF) initiative, a multistakeholder partnership working to make water use in global supply chains fairer. Drawing on two years of implementation, research and engagement, it examines how change is beginning to emerge in practice. The findings highlight key dynamics shaping progress, including the role of coalitions and trust, the power and limits of evidence, the influence of incentives and accountability, and the non-linear nature of change. The paper sets out priorities for strengthening impact and offers practical insights for similar initiatives operating in complex systems.

Contents

Summary	4	4 What we are learning about...	12
1 Introduction	6	4.1 Coalition building and trust	12
2 The landscape and positioning of FWF	7	4.2 Knowledge, evidence for decision making and whose knowledge counts	13
2.1 Positioning FWF within this landscape	7	4.3 Ambition, incentives and accountability	14
2.2 Five pathways to change	8	4.4 Time horizons and progress	15
3 Activities across the partnership	9	4.5 The changing geopolitics of water	16
3.1 Generation and use of evidence	9	5 Priorities and questions for the next phase	18
3.2 Corporate engagement	10	6 Conclusion	20
3.3 Influencing policy and governance	10	Related reading	21
3.4 Coalition building	11	References	21
3.5 Distribution of activity across pathways	11		

Summary

Water stewardship in global trade systems is a complex and increasingly urgent challenge. Water use is embedded within and shaped by global supply chains, and addressing the water footprints of producers, suppliers and consumers is key to protecting communities and ecosystems for the future. The Fair Water Footprints (FWF) initiative focuses specifically on how these water footprints create unequal impacts in producer contexts, where water-related risks are often concentrated, while the benefits of production are distributed elsewhere. Like many multistakeholder initiatives, it brings together actors across government, private sector and civil society to address a complex, shared challenge. However, FWF is not only an implementation platform. It is also explicitly designed as an adaptive, learning-oriented initiative, combining evidence generation, cross-sector engagement and structured reflection to understand how change in water stewardship can be achieved in practice.

This paper presents a learning stocktake from the early phase of FWF. Rather than a formal evaluation, it is a structured reflection on what has been done, what is being learned and how this can inform the next phase of the initiative. It draws on two years of implementation, stakeholder engagement, interviews and learning workshops to identify early patterns of change and the conditions supporting progress.

Across the work so far, a few clear patterns are emerging about what shapes action and how it evolves over time.

- Multistakeholder coalitions are critical for creating the conditions for influence, but their effectiveness depends on sustained trust building, alignment of incentives and attention to power dynamics. Diversity of participation does not automatically translate into meaningful influence and stronger mechanisms are needed to support continuity and coordination over time.
- Evidence is most influential when it is translated into clear, decision-relevant narratives that resonate with corporate and policy priorities. This includes not only

robust analysis, but also how that evidence is framed, communicated and tailored to different audiences. However, making evidence actionable can obscure issues of equity and lived experience unless these are deliberately incorporated. This creates a tension between usability and inclusion, with implications for the quality and effectiveness of resulting decisions.

- While engagement is often driven by existing incentives, the depth of change is shaped by accountability. In the absence of stronger expectations, action tends to remain incremental. Strengthening accountability, including through indicators, transparency and engagement with financial and regulatory actors, will be critical. This is likely to require approaches that go beyond compliance-driven reporting towards more adaptive and learning-oriented forms of accountability.
- Progress does not follow a linear path. Different actors operate on different time horizons and change is often shaped by moments of rapid progress alongside slower, less visible shifts. Experiences across contexts highlight that pathways to collective action vary significantly, reinforcing the need for flexible and adaptive approaches.
- External shocks and shifting geopolitical dynamics are increasingly shaping both the pace and direction of change. Water is gaining prominence within global discussions of risk, security and economic resilience, creating new entry points for engagement. At the same time, these shocks also introduce uncertainty and volatility.

These insights show that influencing water stewardship means navigating persistent tensions between ambition and feasibility, inclusion and usability, and coordination and accountability, within a rapidly changing system. Here, learning is not just about reflection, but about helping actors interpret these tensions, adapt strategies and respond in real time.

This paper sets out clear priorities and open questions for the next phase of the initiative, offering practical insights for other, similar partnerships. These include the importance of strengthening pathways from engagement to action, deepening accountability, improving coherence across activities and developing more practical approaches to integrating equity considerations into decision making. There are also emerging opportunities for comparative learning across country contexts, as well as for strengthening engagement with financial actors and global policy processes.

Overall, the findings suggest that FWF is generating important momentum and opening new spaces for engagement. However, realising its full potential will depend on its ability to sustain this momentum, strengthen alignment across its activities and continue to adapt to a rapidly evolving global context. Ultimately, the value of FWF lies not just in what it delivers, but in how it learns and adapts in real time.

I

Introduction

Water stewardship in global trade systems is a complex and increasingly urgent challenge. Water-related risks are shaped by the interaction of environmental pressures, economic systems and governance arrangements, often extending across national boundaries and involving multiple actors with differing incentives and responsibilities.

In this context, established approaches focused on individual actors or isolated interventions have proven insufficient. There is expanding recognition that influencing water use and governance requires coordinated action across sectors and scales, from decisions made in river basins to those shaped in global policy forums. For this reason, multistakeholder initiatives have become an important way of bringing actors together across these spaces to address shared challenges.

The FWF initiative constitutes one such approach. It seeks to connect research, policy and corporate engagement to influence water stewardship in global supply chains, with a particular emphasis on fairness and equity. In doing so, it engages with key questions about how complex, interconnected systems can be influenced in ways that lead to more equitable and sustainable outcomes.

This paper presents a learning stocktake from the early phase of FWF. It is intended for practitioners, policymakers and funders working on water stewardship and related areas and contributes to wider discussions on how multistakeholder approaches function in practice by asking: How, and under what conditions, is the FWF approach beginning to influence water stewardship in global supply chains?

The paper adopts a simple analytical framing. It first examines what is being done across the programme partnership, then explores the patterns and dynamics that are emerging, and finally, how this learning can be incorporated into the initiative as it moves forward. Rather than providing a formal evaluation, the analysis prioritises early signals of change, recognising that in complex systems, outcomes are often indirect and non-linear, and illustrative of a broader shift towards understanding change as iterative, multi-actor and context specific.

By grounding our analysis in both practice-based evidence and wider literature, this paper seeks to provide a realistic and useful account of how this type of approach is beginning to influence water stewardship, and where its possibilities and limitations lie.

2

The landscape and positioning of FWF

FWF sits within a wide ecosystem of multistakeholder initiatives working to improve water stewardship across sectors and countries. These initiatives reflect a growing recognition that complex resource challenges cannot be addressed by single actors or isolated interventions, but require coordinated action across systems, scales and stakeholder groups.

Within the water sector, this landscape includes a number of established multistakeholder platforms. These include initiatives such as the CEO Water Mandate, which mobilises corporate leadership and collective action; the 2030 Water Resources Group, which supports public–private collaboration at the country level; and partnerships such as Sanitation and Water for All, which focus on political engagement, coordination and accountability across sectors. Alongside these, a range of complementary mechanisms, including standards such as the Alliance for Water Stewardship and disclosure platforms such as the Carbon Disclosure Project (CDP), play important roles in shaping expectations and practices around water use.

Research on water governance shows that no single initiative can address these challenges alone. Instead, progress depends on multiple efforts working in parallel, each tackling a different part of the system. Work by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2015) and the World Bank (Ostrom, 2009) highlights that managing shared resources depends on coordination across actors,

levels and functions. The evidence on multistakeholder initiatives is broadly positive, particularly when they are able to align different types of action.

Most initiatives focus on a specific entry point, such as corporate engagement, policy coordination, or standards setting and disclosure. FWF builds on this by bringing several of these functions together within a single partnership.

2.1 Positioning FWF within this landscape

FWF is a multistakeholder initiative that works to make water use in global supply chains fairer by connecting research, corporate engagement, policy processes and collective action. It emerged from the Glasgow Declaration on Fair Water Footprints¹ as a way to turn its principles into practical action.

FWF is delivered through a collaboration between CDP, Water Witness International, Chatham House and the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), each of which brings different capabilities and entry points for influence. This combination enables the initiative to operate across multiple domains, linking research and evidence generation, corporate engagement, policy processes and multistakeholder convening. In addition to the delivery consortium, a network of pioneering organisations has been vital to the

¹ For more information, see: <https://fairwaterfootprints.org/about-us/>

development and early implementation of the initiative, including Tanzanian civil society organisation *Shahidi wa Maji*, global environmental action nongovernmental organisation the Waste and Resources Action Programme, African civil society platform the African Civil Society Network on Water and Sanitation, and the Water Integrity Network, a network of organisations and individuals promoting water integrity.

Together, these groups are helping to turn the Glasgow Declaration on Fair Water Footprints into action. The declaration is a shared commitment by governments, businesses and civil society to make water use in global supply chains fairer. It recognises that products consumed in one place often depend on water from regions where people already face scarcity and sets out principles for addressing this through better data, stronger accountability and collective action. Signatories to the declaration include a diverse set of stakeholders across government, civil society and the private sector, with some early examples of leadership emerging in countries such as Malawi and Finland. Both have played a championing role in advancing the principles of fair water footprints, demonstrating how the approach can begin to be interpreted and applied across different policy and governance contexts.

2.2 Five pathways to change

Within the wider water governance landscape, FWF represents a distinct configuration, shaped by both its partnership model and its theory of change. The theory of change underpinning FWF is based on the premise that water security emerges from the interaction of governance, markets and social accountability. It brings together five interlinked pathways:

- Civil society oversight, compelling media coverage and public engagement, which trigger
- Focused leadership, accountable governance and strong water-related institutions, which unlock
- Finance, investment and markets, which are harnessed and targeted, which ensures
- Private sector purpose, performance and resilience are transformed, which means that
- Sustainable infrastructure and evidence-based solutions are scaled.

FWF uses these pathways to influence the incentives, norms and decision-making processes that shape water use across global supply chains. In this way, it aims to generate meaningful contributions to broader outcomes, including economic resilience, social justice and ecosystem health.

While the pathways are broadly recognised as critical to improving water stewardship, what distinguishes FWF is how it connects and operationalises them within a single, integrated and learning-oriented approach.

A central feature of this approach is its focus on both the supply and demand sides of water stewardship systems. The initiative works to strengthen practices and governance in producer contexts, while also shaping the incentives and expectations that influence behaviour from the demand side. This reflects an understanding that improving water stewardship requires not only changes in how water is managed locally, but also shifts in the broader systems that reward or constrain those practices.

FWF also places fairness and distributional outcomes at the centre of its approach. While many initiatives focus primarily on efficiency, risk or compliance, FWF explicitly engages with questions of how water is allocated and whose needs are prioritised, including considerations of gender, disability and social inclusion.

The initiative further positions international trade and supply chains as key entry points. This creates a direct link between water stewardship and financial systems and situates water risks within wider economic dynamics, including sourcing decisions, investment flows and corporate accountability.

Importantly, FWF places learning at the centre of its approach. This is not only to improve implementation and deliver evidence, but also serves as a mechanism for navigating complexity, aligning actors and adapting to changing conditions over time. In this sense, learning is embedded within the initiative's design, rather than treated as a separate or downstream activity.

Overall, FWF is positioned not as a standalone intervention, but as a bridging initiative; one that seeks to connect different parts of the water stewardship ecosystem, align actors across sectors and scales and create pathways through which evidence, policy and corporate practice can interact. While the approach enables engagement across different parts of the system, it also requires navigating differences in incentives, knowledge, time horizons and external conditions. By bringing together different functions within a single partnership and creating space for ongoing reflection, the initiative is designed to influence water stewardship outcomes and also to generate insights into how change can be achieved in practice.

The following sections draw on this experience, examining both what is being done and what is being learned as the initiative evolves.

3

Activities across the partnership

To understand what is changing, it helps to look at what FWF is actually doing in practice. To achieve the objectives and principles of FWF, the programme operates through a distributed set of activities undertaken by different partners, which together span multiple entry points for influencing water stewardship. A dedicated learning strategy underpins the initiative, with processes such as learning workshops, stakeholder interviews and reflective learning events deliberately designed to generate insight, test assumptions and inform adaptation over time.

The following is not an exhaustive list of activities, but provides an overview of the main areas of work currently being undertaken across the partnership, including by both implementing partners and some signatories to the declaration.

While the initiative engages in multiple countries, more sustained and in-depth engagement has focused on a smaller number of contexts, including Malawi, Morocco and Peru. In Malawi, this has centred on capacity strengthening and multistakeholder dialogue to support collective action. In Morocco, work has focused on convening government, private sector and civil society actors in the Souss-Massa basin to build a shared evidence base and identify priority actions. In Peru, engagement has focused on generating evidence on water inequalities and working with civil society actors to raise awareness and sustain momentum in a more constrained political context. These contexts, alongside pockets of research and engagement in other countries, provide important insights into how the approach is

being applied and adapted, and we have incorporated these throughout this section and the learning that follows.

3.1 Generation and use of evidence

Much of FWF's activities have focused on the generation and use of evidence. Partners are producing analyses of water risks within supply chains and catchments, as well as agricultural production systems, governance arrangements and the distribution of water-related impacts. This includes research on water use and risk exposure in specific commodities (for example, cocoa, sugar and tea) and sourcing regions, alongside analysis of how water governance operates on the ground. A growing focus area is understanding how water use and allocation interact with local livelihoods and governance systems — highlighting the unequal ways in which water risks and impacts are distributed. There is emerging work on developing indicators that can more fully capture the distributional dimensions of water use, including gender and social inclusion.

This evidence is the starting point for engagement, particularly where it can make water risks visible in ways that resonate with corporate and policy priorities. In several cases, such analysis has been used to initiate dialogue with companies operating in specific sourcing regions, creating entry points for engagement where water had not previously been a central concern.

However, experience across the programme highlights that evidence can do more than catalyse dialogue; it can also highlight issues of accountability and reshape how water-related risks are understood across supply chains.

In Malawi, for example, research examining the impacts of water use by a large sugar plantation on surrounding communities highlighted how investments in climate resilience at the estate level were not matched by protections for neighbouring populations. This has contributed to an ongoing legal case in UK courts examining corporate responsibility for downstream impacts during flooding events, with potential implications for how accountability for water-related risks is addressed within global supply chains. Similarly, in Peru's Ica Valley, one of the driest regions in the world, evidence has exposed stark inequalities in water access within a highly productive export system. Intensive groundwater extraction has enabled large-scale production of crops such as asparagus, blueberries and grapes, while many local communities, including agricultural workers, continue to lack reliable access to water and sanitation. In this context, evidence has helped civil society organisations to raise awareness and advocate for change, often under increasingly constrained political conditions.

Evidence has been effective when it connects distant consumption to local water stress in ways that resonate with decision makers and the public. For example, FWF outputs highlighting that around one third of tomatoes consumed in the UK are sourced from drought-affected regions in Morocco have helped to make supply chain risks more tangible, linking consumer demand to increasing pressure on water systems and a growing reliance on solutions such as desalination to maintain production.

Across these examples, evidence functions not only as a technical input but also as a mechanism for shaping narratives, strengthening accountability and influencing decision making. By making inequalities visible, linking corporate practices to downstream impacts and connecting distant consumption to local water stress, evidence creates pressure for response across different parts of the system. In some cases, this includes formal accountability mechanisms, such as legal action, while in others it operates through public awareness, civil society advocacy or shifts in corporate and policy engagement. These pathways differ, but together they show how evidence can move beyond informing dialogue to actively driving change by creating new expectations, shifting incentives and increasing scrutiny across the system.

3.2 Corporate engagement

Using the evidence generated, partners are working directly with business stakeholders to explore how water stewardship can be integrated into supply chain practices. This includes supporting companies to understand water risks, supporting dialogue with local partners and identifying practical approaches to managing those risks. The integration of water risk into CDP's disclosure data has generated valuable knowledge of how water interacts with corporate practices and supply chains, which then enables dialogue with businesses to interpret and respond to evidence on water risks in their sourcing regions. There are also emerging efforts to connect corporate engagement with existing standards and disclosure frameworks, enabling companies to align water stewardship actions with wider sustainability commitments.

In practice, this engagement takes a range of forms. In addition to dialogue and risk assessment, partners are increasingly working with companies to explore how these insights can be translated into concrete actions within supply chains. This includes supporting the integration of water considerations into sourcing decisions, engagement with suppliers and local stakeholders, and alignment with emerging expectations from standards, disclosure frameworks and investors. In some cases, this engagement is also linked to broader accountability processes, including increasing scrutiny from civil society, regulatory developments and evolving due diligence requirements. In parallel, engagement with investors and banks is helping to embed water stewardship within financial systems, which will link corporate action to investment decisions, risk management and capital allocation.

3.3 Influencing policy and governance

A further area of work focuses on policy and governance processes. Partners are engaging in national and international policy discussions, engaging with government actors and supporting efforts to strengthen water governance frameworks. This includes participation in global policy dialogues related to water and trade, as well as engagement with national governments on issues such as water allocation, catchment management and regulatory systems. In some contexts, partners are also supporting dialogue and coordination across ministries and sectors, recognising that water governance challenges often cut across institutional or national boundaries.

In the UK, collaboration between FWF and the Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP) has also influenced the development of the UK Water Roadmap, shaping how water stewardship is approached across major supermarkets and the wider food sector. Evidence generated through FWF has informed revisions to the roadmap's strategy, including a stronger emphasis on water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) and climate resilience. These priorities are now being tested through a pilot collective action initiative in the town of Naivasha in Kenya with WWF Kenya, demonstrating how research can inform both strategic direction and practical implementation across supply chains.

3.4 Coalition building

Coalition building is also a central feature of activity across the partnership. This includes convening stakeholders at national and basin levels, facilitating multistakeholder dialogue and supporting coordination across sectors. In practice, this has involved organising workshops, roundtables, conferences and ongoing engagement processes that bring together actors from government, private sector and civil society. These processes are intended to align actors around shared priorities and create the conditions for collective action. They often involve navigating differences in incentives, mandates and levels of influence across stakeholders.

For example, a recent capacity-building event in Malawi brought together local business and government representatives to discuss shared water challenges and identify opportunities for collective action. Stakeholders emphasised that such spaces are rare but critical for building relationships and developing a more integrated understanding of water systems. A key outcome of the meeting was the idea of developing a 'collective action accelerator', a structure to coordinate and support local working groups to build on the ideas from the meeting.

Similarly, in Morocco, a multistakeholder workshop in the Souss-Massa basin in March 2026 brought together government, private sector and civil society actors to move beyond information sharing towards locally owned collective action. Over two days, participants built a shared evidence base, surfaced diverse perspectives and developed priority actions to address water security challenges in the basin. These discussions created a foundation for ongoing coordination, with partners now exploring how to take forward collective action through locally led initiatives.

3.5 Distribution of activity across pathways

When viewed across the five pathways to change in the FWF theory of change, activity is present in each area, though it is not always neatly aligned to a single pathway. A mapping exercise undertaken with representatives from across the partnership suggests that much of the work spans multiple domains simultaneously, reflecting the interconnected nature of the issues being addressed. Crucially, a central strength of FWF lies in the fact that many activities sit at the intersections between pathways. For example, work often links evidence generation with corporate engagement and coalition building, combining research and convening dialogue within a single process. This reflects an approach that operates across, rather than within, discrete domains and is consistent with the initiative's intention to influence multiple parts of the system in parallel.

The work outlined above demonstrates both the breadth and the distributed nature of activity across the partnership. The initiative is operating across domains and levels, but these activities are not always tightly coordinated. This reflects both the strengths and the challenges of a multistakeholder approach: the ability to engage across different parts of the system, alongside the difficulty of sustaining coherence across varied and distributed efforts.

Importantly, the activities are not only implemented but also actively used as a basis for learning and adaptation. Through a structured learning strategy, including workshops, interviews and dedicated reflection spaces, the partnership is able to test emerging insights, refine its approaches and adjust its strategies in response to changing conditions. In this sense, activities function not only as a delivery mechanism, but also as sites for generating and applying learning in real time.

4

What we are learning about...

As an initiative that places learning and adaptation at its core, FWF provides both an opportunity to implement activities and to examine how change is taking place. Building on the overview of activities above and also discussions, interviews and events, this section draws together insights from across the partnership to identify patterns and dynamics that are shaping progress. These patterns reflect both the internal dynamics of the partnership and wider features of the systems in which it operates.

4.1 Coalition building and trust

LESSON 1

Multistakeholder coalitions can help to build influence across systems, but their effectiveness depends on sustained trust building, alignment of incentives and deliberate attention to power dynamics. Diversity alone does not guarantee meaningful participation or influence; how participation is structured and facilitated shapes both decision quality and the distribution of responsibility.



A clear pattern across FWF activities is that coalition building is not only foundational to progress but also a primary mechanism through which influence is exercised. However, its effectiveness depends on the ability to build trust, align diverse actors and navigate underlying power dynamics.

The diversity of actors involved in FWF, spanning civil society, government and private sector research organisations, creates the potential to exercise influence across multiple parts of the system. This diversity contributes to legitimacy and reach, particularly in contexts where no single actor has the authority or capacity to drive change independently. At the same time, it introduces challenges related to alignment, coordination and power.

Stakeholders enter the partnership with different incentives and priorities. Corporate actors often focus on risk management and business continuity, civil society organisations emphasise equity and accountability, and governments balance political and fiscal considerations. Without deliberate alignment, activities risk working in parallel rather than being mutually reinforcing.

Trust building is therefore a central condition for effective coalition building. Research shows, and FWF stakeholders have repeatedly emphasised, that collaboration depends on developing confidence in both the intentions and the roles of other actors (Wanner and Miljand, 2025). This applies internally

within the partnership and also externally, particularly in engagement with companies and governments. As noted by a speaker at a FWF-focused conference at Chatham House in February 2026, “trust arrives on a turtle and leaves on a horse”, underscoring the fragility of trust and the need for sustained, consistent engagement over time.

At the same time, trust is not evenly distributed. Power dynamics further shape participation, including whose perspectives are prioritised and whose voices are visible. Resource asymmetries can limit consistent engagement, particularly for producer-country actors. Participation within multistakeholder settings is not neutral and certain voices, particularly from groups shaped by gender, disability and other intersecting forms of marginalisation, as well as actors with fewer institutional resources, may be less visible or carry less influence. While the implementing partnership has placed considerable emphasis on bringing together different viewpoints, ensuring this diversity translates into meaningful participation and influence remains an ongoing challenge.

This is especially relevant in producer-country contexts, where local actors often have the most direct experience of water-related impacts, but may have less access to global platforms and decision-making spaces. Ensuring that those most affected by water insecurity are meaningfully included in decision making is therefore not only a matter of representation but also essential for grounding decisions in lived realities and improving their effectiveness, as explored further in Section 4.2.

However, inclusion alone is not sufficient if responsibility remains unevenly distributed. At a recent workshop in Morocco, for example, stakeholders noted the limited presence of consumer country actors, with discussions tending to focus on actions within producer contexts. This risks reinforcing a dynamic in which responsibility for addressing water challenges is concentrated on those already most affected, while actors shaping demand-side incentives remain less engaged. Strengthening participation requires putting those most affected at the centre of decision making, while ensuring responsibility for action is shared more equitably across both the supply and demand sides of the system.

Early examples of progress appear strongest where coalitions operate at the national or basin level. In Malawi, for example, bringing together actors across sectors for training on water stewardship in February 2026 created opportunities to connect perspectives and build shared understanding (Benson et al., 2026). Structured spaces for dialogue have been particularly important in making differences visible and more manageable, enabling more coordinated forms of action.

Experience across contexts highlights that the effectiveness of these spaces depends on how they

are composed and facilitated. At the recent workshop in Morocco, the stronger presence of private sector actors, compared to the meetings in Malawi, shaped the dynamics of the discussion. While at times this created tension, it also surfaced underlying differences in priorities and perspectives that might otherwise have remained unaddressed. These experiences underline that who is in the room, how engagement is facilitated and how space is structured are critical factors in determining whether convening processes enable alignment or reinforce existing power dynamics.

4.2 Knowledge, evidence for decision making and whose knowledge counts

LESSON 2



Evidence is most effective when it is framed in ways that resonate with corporate, financial or policy priorities. However, without deliberate inclusion of equity and lived experience, efforts to simplify complexity into actionable formats risk weakening the quality of decisions they are intended to inform.

A second important lesson is how knowledge and evidence shape engagement and decision making.

Evidence can act as a catalyst for engagement, particularly where water risks are made visible in ways that connect with corporate and policy priorities. In several instances, analysis of water risks has prompted companies to engage in dialogue where water had not previously been a central concern. This is consistent with wider research showing that companies are more likely to react to environmental issues where risks are quantified and linked to operational or financial exposure.

However, the experience of FWF also highlights the limits of technical evidence alone. Water systems are inherently complex and context specific, shaped by hydrology, governance and socioeconomic dynamics. Stakeholders, particularly corporate actors, tend to engage most readily with evidence that produces clear actions linked to tangible, near-term outcomes, such as site-level water risk assessments, supply chain exposure analyses and metrics linked to operational or financial performance.

In practice, this can lead to prioritising certain types of knowledge over others. Local and experiential knowledge, particularly from communities and stakeholders operating within catchments, provides

critical insight into how water systems function and how risks are experienced. Different groups experience water access, use and risk in different ways, shaped by social roles, power and livelihoods. However, these differentiated experiences are not always captured in conventional forms of evidence. Translating this complexity into operational insights creates tension between inclusivity and usability.

However, inclusive evidence does not emerge automatically, but depends on inclusive processes of knowledge production. While convening diverse actors is a necessary starting point, it is not sufficient. Ensuring that stakeholders can meaningfully shape agendas, contribute to the framing of evidence and influence decisions requires deliberate design. This includes creating space for co-design, investing in facilitation and addressing power dynamics that shape whose knowledge is heard and acted upon. In this sense, participation is not separate from evidence generation but a core programme function that determines the quality, relevance and legitimacy of the evidence produced.

The concept of 'fairness' illustrates this challenge. While it resonates strongly across stakeholders as a shared normative goal, it remains difficult to operationalise. Different actors interpret fairness in different ways and translating this into indicators and decision-making tools remains complex. Discussions noted that existing metrics often do not capture intrahousehold dynamics, differential access or the lived experience of water insecurity. This has emphasised the need not only to develop practical indicators and shared definitions, but to ensure that the process through which fairness is defined is itself inclusive. Without this, efforts to promote equitable outcomes risk being shaped by partial perspectives from the outset.

Even where evidence draws on diverse and inclusive perspectives, it must still be framed in ways that resonate with decision makers and create incentives for engagement. Case-based evidence was frequently identified as one way to bridge this gap, connecting lived experience with the types of insights that inform corporate and policy decisions. Well-developed case studies help make complex dynamics more tangible for different actors. In both supply chain contexts and country-level engagements, such as in Malawi, case studies have helped to bridge the gap between abstract concepts and real-world decision making.

Standards and disclosure frameworks can also play an important role in translating complex data into actionable formats, helping turn analysis into implementation. In practice, companies can use standards and frameworks to convert complex analysis into clear metrics and reporting requirements that are more readily integrated into decision making. By providing a common language and set of reference points, they can support

alignment across actors and create clearer pathways from evidence to action. When designed inclusively, these approaches can translate complex realities into actionable insights while still reflecting diverse perspectives, supporting more robust and informed decision making.

Taken together, these insights suggest that evidence functions not only as a source of information but also as a catalyst for engagement and change. Its effectiveness depends on its ability to do two things at once: translate complex water systems into actionable insights that resonate with decision makers and, at the same time, meaningfully incorporate diverse forms of knowledge, including the lived experience of women and marginalised communities. These objectives can sit in tension. Approaches that prioritise clarity and action risk oversimplifying or excluding important perspectives, while those that fully reflect complexity may struggle to influence decision making.

However, this is not only a question of inclusion for its own sake. Evidence that draws on a wider range of perspectives is more likely to identify risks, surface unintended consequences and support decisions that are more robust and effective over time. The challenge, therefore, is not whether to balance these objectives, but how to design approaches that can do both: inform decisions that are not only actionable, but better grounded in the contexts and systems they are intended to shape.

4.3 Ambition, incentives and accountability

LESSON 3

Incentives tend to steer actors towards what is easiest to do, rather than what drives the most meaningful change. Accountability, in turn, can shape whether action moves beyond these incremental steps towards more transformative outcomes.



While evidence plays a critical role in catalysing engagement, particularly among private sector actors, it does not by itself determine the depth or direction of action. Engagement is ultimately shaped by the incentives, constraints and accountability structures that actors operate within. This shifts the focus from how stakeholders are brought into the conversation to what enables or limits meaningful change once they are involved. FWF operates in a space that requires significant systemic change, including transformations in how water is governed, valued and allocated. At

the same time, actors are constrained by existing institutional and economic incentives, which shape what is feasible in reality. This points to a central lesson: engagement may be driven by evidence, but the depth and direction of change are shaped by incentives and accountability.

This dynamic is particularly visible in corporate engagement. As discussed in Section 4.2, early signals suggest that companies are more responsive to water-related issues where these are framed in terms of business-relevant risks, such as business continuity, supply chain resilience or regulatory exposure. In contrast, appeals based solely on reputational considerations or wider sustainability narratives appear to have more limited influence. This dynamic is further reinforced by a shifting geopolitical context, in which water is increasingly framed as a material risk linked to economic and resource security, shaping how companies prioritise and respond to water-related issues (see Section 4.5).

At the same time, there is a clear trade-off: what is easiest to do is not always what drives the most meaningful change. Approaches that are tangible and measurable tend to gain traction more quickly but may not fully address underlying issues related to water allocation and governance. Conversely, more transformative approaches may be harder to operationalise and less immediately attractive.

This tension between what is practical and what is transformative has direct implications for accountability in multistakeholder partnerships. Where expectations are weak or voluntary, actors tend to prioritise actions that are feasible, measurable and aligned with existing incentives. More transformative changes, particularly those related to fairness and distribution, are less likely to be pursued without stronger forms of accountability that shift expectations or requirements.

At the same time, as a voluntary multistakeholder initiative, FWF relies on the willingness of actors to engage and collaborate. This creates flexibility and inclusivity, but has also raised questions about how far voluntary approaches can drive sustained change. Stakeholder discussions suggest that this tension remains unresolved. There is interest in strengthening accountability beyond voluntary commitments, while recognising that overly rigid approaches may undermine participation.

Strengthening accountability does not necessarily require a shift towards more burdensome or compliance-driven reporting. Discussions across the partnership suggest a preference for approaches that reinforce expectations and transparency while remaining aligned with the collaborative and learning-oriented nature of the initiative. This includes lighter-

touch mechanisms such as reflection on commitments, shared learning and examples of change, which can help demonstrate progress without diverting effort from systemic action.

The growing importance of regulatory and legal approaches is a stronger push towards accountability. Discussions across the partnership highlighted increasing interest in what was referred to as 'legal water', or the use of regulatory frameworks, due diligence requirements and standards to formalise expectations around water use and stewardship. Such approaches have the potential to move beyond voluntary engagement, creating clearer accountability and more consistent incentives for action across actors.

At the same time, these approaches remain emergent and unevenly developed. Questions remain about how legal and regulatory tools can be designed and implemented in ways that are both effective and equitable, particularly across different national contexts and governance systems. Nevertheless, the increasing prominence of these issues reflects a broader shift towards embedding water stewardship within formal accountability structures, rather than relying solely on voluntary action.

4.4 Time horizons and progress

LESSON 4

Change unfolds across uneven and misaligned timelines; it does not follow a linear trajectory. Effective approaches, therefore, depend on flexibility, iteration and the ability to sustain momentum across periods of both rapid progress and slower, less visible change.



A fourth area of learning relates to time horizons and how they shape progress. While multistakeholder approaches aim to align actors around shared goals, these actors operate on fundamentally different timelines, which shapes both the pace and form of progress. Corporate decision making is commonly shaped by quarterly or annual reporting cycles, while governments operate within political terms. Civil society organisations are influenced by project-based funding and communities experience water challenges on a daily basis.

These differences create structural challenges when aligning action. Interventions that require long-term investment, such as catchment restoration or

governance reform, may struggle to gain traction if they cannot demonstrate short-term results. However, short-term actions may fail to tackle the underlying drivers of water risk.

Evidence from the Malawi workshop illustrates this tension clearly. Stakeholders emphasised the need to address upstream land use and catchment degradation to secure long-term water availability, while also recognising the immediate pressures faced by farmers and local institutions. These differences create difficult trade-offs between short-term responsiveness and long-term sustainability.

However, progress does not follow a linear trajectory. Rather than unfolding as a predictable sequence from evidence to action to outcome, change in complex systems is often uneven and iterative, involving periods of rapid progress, stagnation or reversal. Stakeholders consistently noted that change is shaped by shifting priorities, institutional cycles and moments of opportunity that create uneven openings for action. For example, early experiences in Malawi and Morocco highlight how both the timing and entry points for collective action can differ across contexts, shaped by differing institutional dynamics and stakeholder relationships. In Malawi, a change in government following elections meant that relationships had to be rebuilt and new ones established. While this slowed progress in the short term, it also created opportunities to engage new actors and align more closely with emerging national priorities.

At a more local level, similar dynamics play out in everyday decisions. For example, stakeholders in Malawi discussed examples of changes in rainfall patterns or market conditions that can lead farmers to shift what and how they grow crops, affecting water use in ways that are not always predictable or aligned with wider stewardship goals. But if these farmers are involved in collective action towards water stewardship, they are more likely to recognise emerging water challenges earlier and coordinate responses to address them. This means that for FWF, progress may not always be visible through immediate outcomes, but through gradual shifts in relationships and coordination that create the conditions for change over time.

This has important implications for how progress is understood and assessed. In complex systems, the absence of immediate or visible outcomes does not necessarily indicate a lack of progress. Instead, early signals of change may emerge through greater coherence across actors and stronger shared understanding, which can later enable more tangible outcomes.

These dynamics reinforce the importance of adaptive approaches. Rather than following predefined pathways, effective strategies require continuous adjustment in

response to evolving conditions, as well as the ability to sustain momentum across uneven and sometimes unpredictable trajectories of change.

4.5 The changing geopolitics of water

LESSON 5



External shocks and shifting geopolitical dynamics can significantly reshape both the pace and direction of progress. This creates new entry points for engagement, but also introduces uncertainty, requiring approaches that can adapt to changing conditions in real time.

Progress is not only uneven and non-linear; it is also shaped by what is happening in the wider world. Learning from the early phase of FWF shows how geopolitical and economic changes can shift both the pace and direction of progress, often in unpredictable ways.

Indeed, recent shocks, including ongoing supply chain disruptions linked to conflicts, escalating instability affecting global trade, and increasing frequency and severity of climate extremes such as droughts and floods across key sourcing regions have reinforced how water risks are shaped by wider economic systems, trade dynamics and geopolitical instability.

These shifts have already challenged some of the underlying assumptions within the FWF theory of change, particularly around the pace, sequencing and predictability of engagement and progress. When this theory was developed, there was a growing momentum on corporate social responsibility and environmental, social and governance (ESG) standards, particularly in consumer countries. This has been challenged by shifting geopolitical and economic priorities, a softening of momentum around ESG in some consumer markets, and increasing emphasis on short-term economic resilience and financially material risks over broader sustainability commitments.

As noted above, periods of disruption can create new urgency and entry points for engagement, particularly where water risks become more visible or financially material. At the same time, they can divert attention, reconfigure priorities or constrain the capacity of actors to engage consistently. In practice, this has meant that progress is not only non-linear but also increasingly shaped by factors beyond the direct influence of the partnership.

Experience across contexts illustrates how these dynamics have already required adaptation in practice. FWF has launched engagement in multiple countries, generating a range of context-specific insights. In Peru, shifts in the national political context significantly altered the space for engagement, requiring a rethinking of entry points and a greater reliance on civil society actors to sustain momentum under more constrained conditions. In Malawi, economic pressures and changes in government priorities reshaped the operating environment, prompting a stronger emphasis on aligning with national processes and identifying entry points that could maintain relevance. In Morocco, periods of instability affected continuity and required flexibility in how engagement was sequenced and sustained. At the same time, shifts in the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's strategic focus have required the partnership to adjust how and where effort is directed. Across these cases, progress has depended on the ability to pivot strategies, reframe engagement and sustain relationships under changing conditions. These examples highlight that adaptability is not only a strategic principle but also an operational requirement for maintaining relevance and influence in a shifting landscape.

These experiences reflect a broader shift in how water is understood within global systems. Water is increasingly recognised as a structural issue, shaped by a range of interconnected dynamics. Climate variability and extremes are intensifying pressure on water systems, while growing competition across sectors is increasing the political and economic significance of allocation decisions. At the same time, supply chain disruptions and geopolitical uncertainty are elevating the importance of resource security.

There are also important shifts in how environmental risks are understood within financial systems. While some aspects of ESG are experiencing reduced momentum, there is growing attention to financially material risks, including water. This creates new entry points for engagement, particularly where water risks can be linked to economic performance. These dynamics are reflected in what some have termed a 'Blue Davos' moment, referencing the growing presence of water in high-level forums such as the World Economic Forum, where it is increasingly treated not as a niche environmental issue, but as a core economic and security concern. At the same time, there is increasing attention to equity and distributional questions, including how water is allocated and whose needs are prioritised. This reinforces the relevance of concepts such as fairness, while also revealing the challenges of operationalising them.

In this context, initiatives such as FWF have the potential to shape emerging norms and expectations, particularly in areas where formal regulation remains limited. However, doing so requires the ability to respond to a changing and uncertain environment, where priorities, risks and opportunities continue to shift. The experience of FWF shows that multistakeholder initiatives cannot operate as static platforms. Just as partners and stakeholders have had to respond in real time to evolving global dynamics, there is a broader lesson that such approaches must be inherently adaptive and learning-led. The ability to interpret changing conditions, adjust strategies and maintain relevance over time is not an additional feature, but a core requirement for influencing complex and rapidly evolving systems.

5

Priorities and questions for the next phase

The lessons set out above point not to a single set of solutions, but to a set of strategic implications for how the initiative evolves. This section draws on both the analysis presented above and on priorities identified by stakeholders during a recent learning workshop in February 2026, where participants reflected on emerging challenges and areas for focus. Together, the insights highlight where effort may need to shift, deepen or become more deliberate to move from early signals of change towards more consistent and demonstrable outcomes.

Building on Lesson 1, a key priority is to **strengthen how coalitions translate dialogue into sustained influence and action**. While the partnership has successfully convened diverse actors, progress depends on moving beyond dialogue towards more structured and enduring collaboration, underpinned by trust, particularly at the national and basin levels. This includes strengthening local ownership, anchoring the coalition within existing institutions and supporting mechanisms such as collective action, which can carry forward momentum beyond initial convening processes. The experience of FWF in Malawi highlights that sustained coordination and trust built over time are critical for translating engagement into lasting change.

Lesson 2 highlights both the power and limits of evidence as a catalyst. A central priority is, therefore, to **strengthen how evidence is generated inclusively and translated into formats that can directly inform decision making and be used in practice**.

This involves ensuring that evidence is not only clear and actionable but also meaningfully incorporates diverse forms of knowledge, including lived experience and gender equality, disability and social inclusion (GEDSI) dimensions. This requires deliberate choices about what is prioritised, how complexity is translated and whose perspectives are represented.

There is also a need to **strengthen the links between evidence and action**. This includes developing well-grounded case studies that translate complex dynamics into practical insights, as well as making greater use of existing standards and frameworks as a bridge between evidence and implementation. The challenge is not only to generate evidence, but also to ensure that what drives action does not come at the expense of inclusion and equity.

Lesson 3 suggests that while engagement is driven by incentives, the depth of change may be shaped by accountability. A key priority is therefore to **strengthen expectations and accountability mechanisms**

within and beyond the partnership, but in a way that continues to encourage participation. This includes developing shared indicators, strengthening transparency and exploring how financial and regulatory systems can reinforce more ambitious action. This also points to the importance of strengthening engagement with financial actors, including investors and insurers, whose expectations increasingly shape corporate behaviour and can reinforce stronger incentives for action.

Lesson 4 highlights the challenges created by differing time horizons and non-linear progress. This points to the need for **greater coherence across a diverse and distributed set of activities.** Strengthening alignment requires clearer articulation of how different strands of work contribute to shared outcomes, while recognising that progress may be uneven and not immediately visible. Without clearer connections between these efforts, there is a risk that activities remain fragmented, limiting their cumulative influence.

Finally, Lesson 5 highlights the importance of positioning within a rapidly changing global context. A key priority is to **strengthen how the partnership engages with emerging geopolitical, economic and financial dynamics.** This includes aligning water stewardship with broader narratives of risk, resilience and economic stability, while maintaining the ability to adapt to shifting priorities and external shocks.

At the same time, this stocktake highlights a number of issues that remain unresolved and that will shape how this work evolves. These include:

- Further exploration of the role of accountability within voluntary initiatives and what forms of expectation or enforcement are both effective and appropriate.

- How to balance depth and scale, including whether to prioritise intensive engagement in particular contexts or broader reach across systems.
- While evidence has proven to be a critical lever for engagement, what types of evidence are most effective in influencing behaviour among different actors.
- How the approach is applied across different country contexts. Early experiences of FWF's engagement in Malawi and Morocco suggest that, while the overall objectives of collective action are shared, the pathways through which this is initiated and sustained can differ significantly. This points to an important opportunity for deeper comparative learning on how multistakeholder approaches take shape in practice, and what this implies for sequencing and adapting interventions across contexts.
- How to translate GEDSI considerations into practical indicators and tools that can inform decision making, while still reflecting the complexity and lived realities of different groups.
- How to sustain momentum over time, particularly in the context of shifting political, financial and institutional landscapes.

These issues do not reflect limitations of the approach, but instead reflect the complexity of the system in which it operates. As such, they point to areas where continued learning, experimentation and dialogue will be essential.

6

Conclusion

A distinctive feature of FWF is its emphasis on learning as a core function, rather than as a by-product of implementation. Learning is not only generated, but tested and applied, with approaches continuously adapted in response to emerging evidence and changing conditions. In this sense, learning functions as an instrument of systems change, shaping how actors engage, how strategies evolve and how decisions are made over time. This is particularly important in complex systems such as water stewardship, where pathways to change are uncertain, non-linear and shaped by multiple interacting forces.

This stocktake provides an early indication of how a multistakeholder approach can begin to influence water stewardship in global trade systems. The findings point to a set of interacting dynamics: the role of coalitions in aligning actors, the importance of evidence in catalysing engagement, the influence of incentives and accountability in shaping action and the ways in which time horizons and external shocks affect how change unfolds.

Taken together, these insights reinforce that progress in complex systems is not primarily driven by the delivery of discrete activities, but by the ability to

shape the conditions under which change becomes possible. This includes making risks visible, aligning incentives, strengthening relationships and adapting to evolving contexts.

The value of multistakeholder initiatives such as FWF, therefore, lies not only in what they deliver, but in how they operate. As platforms for alignment, learning and adaptation, they can help to navigate complexity and generate momentum, even where outcomes remain emergent. However, realising this potential requires sustained investment, clearer pathways from engagement to action and increasing attention to accountability and coherence.

Ultimately, influencing water stewardship is less about applying fixed solutions and more about navigating a set of persistent tensions between ambition and feasibility, inclusion and usability, and between coordination and accountability within a changing system. In this context, learning is not an add-on, but the mechanism through which these tensions are interpreted, tested and translated into action. As water becomes increasingly central to economic, environmental and geopolitical systems, the ability to learn and adapt in real time will be critical.

Related reading

Benson, N, Kelly, L and Muhammed, A (2026) Towards collective action for water stewardship in Malawi: Lessons from emerging practice. IIED, London.
www.iied.org/22723iied

References

Benson, N, Kelly, L and Muhammed, A (2026) Towards collective action for water stewardship in Malawi: Lessons from emerging practice. IIED, London.
www.iied.org/22723iied

Ostrom, E (2009) A polycentric approach for coping with climate change. Policy Research Working Paper No. 5095. World Bank, Washington DC.

OECD (2015) Stakeholder engagement for inclusive water governance. OECD Publishing, Paris.
doi:10.1787/9789264231122-en.

Wanner, MST and Miljand, M (2025) Unlocking the transformative potential of multistakeholder partnerships for sustainable development: Assessing perceived effectiveness and contributions to systemic change, *World Development*, 191, 107007. doi:10.1016/j.worlddev.2025.107007.

This paper presents a learning stocktake from the early phase of the Fair Water Footprints (FWF) initiative, a multistakeholder partnership working to make water use in global supply chains fairer. Drawing on two years of implementation, research and engagement, it examines how change is beginning to emerge in practice. The findings highlight key dynamics shaping progress, including the role of coalitions and trust, the power and limits of evidence, the influence of incentives and accountability, and the non-linear nature of change. The paper sets out priorities for strengthening impact and offers practical insights for similar initiatives operating in complex systems.

IIED is an international policy and research organisation working with partners globally to build a fairer, more sustainable world. Together, we challenge the destructive economic models, unjust power dynamics, entrenched mindsets and protectionist laws that perpetuate poverty, suppress rights and hinder progress towards a thriving world. We explore solutions to complex economic, social and environmental crises, using research, action and influencing to tackle the root causes of climate change, nature loss and inequality.



International Institute for Environment and Development
44 Southampton Buildings, London WC2A 1AP, UK
Tel: +44 (0)20 3463 7399
www.iied.org



Knowledge
Products