Just Water Partnerships: Guiding Principles

WaterAid

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GLOBAL COMMISSION on the ECONOMICS OF WATER

About this paper

This paper unpacks the vision of Just Water Partnerships (JWPs) and why they are critical to advancing water security and justice. It explains why principles were the starting point for bringing this concept to life and summarises the consultative process used to inform their design and implementation.

The five principles are then presented along with guiding questions to suggest how they can be applied to help governments, investors, civil society, and other stakeholders shape national action, foster collaboration, and strengthen accountability across sectors and between stakeholders.

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Preface

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The world is running out of time to fix the way water is governed and financed. Climate disruption, deepening inequalities, and growing water insecurity are converging to threaten lives, livelihoods, and stability. Despite this, responses remain fragmented and not up to the challenge, with financing failing to reach where it is most needed.

Just Water Partnerships offer a new way forward. Anchored in justice and equity, they bridge the divide between the **water resources management and water, sanitation and hygiene** sectors, mobilising coordinated investment that serves both people and planet. By aligning governance, policy, and finance around government-led, shared national priorities, they help ensure that water – the foundation of life, health, and prosperity – is managed sustainably and fairly for all.

This collaboration between **WaterAid** and the **International Water Management Institute** (**IWMI**) reflects a shared recognition that closing the global water finance gap requires innovation: uniting social justice and sustainability goals, and building partnerships that bring governments, financiers, civil society, and the private sector together under a common vision.

Developed through a global consultation process, these **Principles for Just Water Partnerships** provide a framework for collective action that is grounded in fairness, accountability, and resilience.

Realising this vision will take political will and collective commitment. These principles are an invitation to **act**, to **rethink** how water is valued, governed, and financed, and to **build** partnerships capable of securing a just and sustainable water future for all.

Fixing the flow: The case for Just Water Partnerships

Urgent global targets stand in stark contrast to the slow and uneven progress in delivering sustainable water resources management (WRM) and universal access to water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH). This is unfolding amid growing threats to water security from rising demand, the climate crisis, resource degradation and weak management of water and sanitation services.

The challenge lies not only in the estimated US$140 billion annual financing gap, but how water is financed and governed. Public finance is overstretched, ODA is declining, and private investment remains minimal at just 1.7% of the total annual spending in the sector. Where funds do flow, they are often poorly coordinated, used inefficiently, and remain inaccessible to those most in need. Limited absorptive capacity, operational losses, and ineffective subsidies further undermine progress.

Moreover, power imbalances, debt dependence, restrictive financing conditions, and weak transparency erode trust, systems and accountability. Corruption and poor oversight add to the problem, while climate change intensifies the pressure to invest, with more than 90% of natural disasters being water-related.

This broken model is failing both people and planet. Too many communities remain without basic services, ecosystems are at risk, and food systems are under threat.

Overcoming these challenges requires political will. JWPs offer a way forward: providing a platform to align governance and investment around social equity and justice.

What are Just Water Partnerships?

Just Water Partnerships (JWPs) were first proposed by the **Global Commission on the Economics of Water** and have since been carried forward through a collaborative process facilitated by **WaterAid** and the **International Water Management Institute** (IWMI). They **are** envisioned as **multi-stakeholder, country-led platforms that mobilise and coordinate water investments, bringing together actors from water resources management, water, sanitation and hygiene, finance, and major water-using sectors such as agriculture and industry.**

Their purpose is to **align governance, policy, and finance, strengthen the pipeline of investable projects, and ensure investments reach vulnerable communities while protecting ecosystems.** JWPs provide a strategic platform to channel public, private, and blended finance, placing justice and equity at the heart of investments in water.

JWPs are context-specific and country-led. They are guided by a set of guiding principles, and can either:

- **Build on existing coordination structures – for example, by integrating water into broader investment platforms or by bringing finance and other sectors into existing water mechanisms (such as expanding a WASH coordination platform to include WRM and finance); or**
- **Be developed and established as new mechanisms where no suitable structures exist.**

Principles first: A justice-centred approach to Just Water Partnerships

To be effective, JWPs must embed justice and equity from the outset. To explore how this can be achieved in practice, WaterAid and the International Water Management Institute (IWMI) developed a set of guiding principles.

The approach draws on lessons from other country platforms, including climate country platforms, Just Energy Transition Partnerships, and on dialogues facilitated by WaterAid during key global events. Across these discussions, stakeholders highlighted the need for shared principles to guide the design and implementation of JWPs in different contexts. **They recognised that without such guidance, there is a risk of reverting to business-as-usual approaches that leave vulnerable groups behind.**

WaterAid and IWMI led the development of these principles through facilitating a collaborative global process involving governments, financiers, civil society and research partners. The next section summarises that process and the insights that shaped the final framework.

Shaping the Just Water Partnership principles: Global insights

Between July and October 2025, WaterAid and IWMI facilitated a two-phase global consultation to inform the development of the JWP principles. The process combined desk-based research of existing partnership principles, a framing note with initial drafts to spark discussion at key events, a dedicated webpage and four multilingual webinars. Two online surveys enabled feedback over three rounds of review and generated more than 105 institutional responses from 44 countries across all regions.

Additional in-country consultations took place in Ghana, Madagascar and Nepal, as well as in-person sessions at the Financing for Development 4 Conference in Seville and at World Water Week in Stockholm, which in total gathered over 80 participants.

Stakeholders expressed strong overall support for JWPs while also raising key issues to consider, including:

- **Country leadership and local governance:** the need for strong country leadership and a reinforced role for local governments. At the same time, concerns were raised regarding governments' political will and capacity to lead JWPs, and the risk of reinforcing top-down approaches.
- **Power dynamics and accountability:** the importance of addressing existing power imbalances between national and local actors, as well as between governments, civil society, and communities – and of creating transparent, accountable mechanisms that hold duty-bearers to account.
- **Priorities:** calls for stronger emphasis on sanitation, explicit attention to climate resilience, and a greater focus on transboundary cooperation.
- **Inclusion:** the need to define inclusion clearly, both in relation to vulnerable and marginalised groups, as well as territorial coverage.

The consultation reaffirmed that **inclusive governance with multi-stakeholder co-ownership and equity must be core elements of effective JWPs.** This feedback directly informed the formulation of the five guiding principles, ensuring they respond to power dynamics and practical implementation challenges.

The guiding principles developed through this process are set out in the remainder of this paper and are designed to frame conversations at COP30 in Belém, the official UN Water Conference planning meeting in Dakar in early 2026, and beyond. Together, they set out an ambitious vision for what 'just' water partnerships should strive to achieve.

Ultimately, the principles serve as a compass for collaboration across sectors and levels, and as a benchmark to assess progress – recognising that while the standard is high, it reflects the level of ambition needed to make water governance more equitable, inclusive, and effective.

Comprehensive information on the consultation process, stakeholders involved, and feedback received is available on the JWP webpage (*https://washmatters.wateraid.org/our-work/just-water-partnerships*).

- Nearly half of all online responses (**49%**) came from Africa, followed by Asia and the Pacific (**15%**) and Latin America and the Caribbean (**6%**).
- Respondents represented a wide range of stakeholder groups, including civil society and national NGOs (**27%**), national governments (**13%**), academia and research institutions (**12%**), private sector actors (**11%**), and international NGOs (**10%**), alongside development banks, donors, and local authorities.
- The top participating countries were Nigeria, India, Ethiopia, Pakistan, and Uganda, reflecting diverse regional and governance contexts.

The principles of Just Water Partnerships

This section defines what “just” means in the context of Just Water Partnerships and sets out five guiding principles that form their foundation. Together, the definition and the five principles establish the values and standards that should guide action and accountability, while helping to manage competing interests in water governance and investment. They are grounded in human rights – particularly the rights to water and sanitation – as well as in the concept of Water System Justice and the economics of the common good. [vii]

Definition of ‘just’

In the context of Just Water Partnerships, “just” means upholding the human rights to water and sanitation, treating water as a common good, and ensuring fair and inclusive access to services and finance. It encompasses both process and outcomes – promoting accountable and participatory governance, equitable and climate-resilient delivery, and political will to address inequalities and safeguard the rights and needs of vulnerable and marginalised groups across generations and borders.

The principles

The five guiding principles of JWPs are described below. Each is accompanied by a guiding question to help translate the principle into practice and assess progress in different contexts.

Principle 1
Equity, inclusion and water justice

Just Water Partnerships should aim to reduce structural inequalities by embedding equity and inclusion at the core of water governance and investment. They should address power asymmetries, cultural rights, and climate vulnerability, and ensure financing is aligned with principles of availability, accessibility, affordability, quality, and non-discrimination. Accountability, gender equality, and the meaningful participation of vulnerable and marginalised groups should be central. By integrating traditional and scientific knowledge systems, JWPs should foster equitable, locally appropriate solutions, including in high-vulnerability settings.

***Guiding question:** Have groups facing exclusion been identified, and have targeted measures been built into financing, governance and delivery to ensure more equitable investment outcomes?*

Principle 2
National leadership with shared ownership

Just Water Partnerships should be led by national and sub-national governments, which set social equity-oriented investment priorities, convene inclusive and transparent processes, and are held accountable for outcomes. They should foster multi-stakeholder collaboration across sectors to strengthen governance and financial systems grounded in justice. Leadership should be demonstrated through domestic resource commitments and the alignment of external finance. In fragile contexts, JWPs should adapt to governance realities while upholding these principles.

***Guiding question:** Is the government advancing justice-oriented priorities through transparent, accountable processes and inclusive multi-stakeholder participation? Is the government ensuring investments are evaluated for equitable distribution of projects and benefits?*

Principle 3
Inclusive and accountable governance

Just Water Partnerships should establish governance systems and mechanisms that embed inclusion and transparency in WASH and WRM investments. They should promote participatory, multi-stakeholder governance, engaging stakeholders across sectors and ensuring meaningful co-decision-making power for affected communities, women, persons with disabilities, youth, and other marginalised groups in WASH and water resources management. JWPs should reinforce legal and institutional mechanisms for accountability – such as joint monitoring, open data, and feedback channels – to track both equity and financial outcomes.

***Guiding question:** Are accessible platforms and mechanisms in place to ensure that diverse stakeholders, including marginalised groups, are able to influence decisions and hold dutybearers to account?*

Image credit: WaterAid / Keoma Zec

Principle 4
Finance anchored in public value and sustainability

Just Water Partnerships should ensure that all forms of finance treat water as a common good and uphold the human rights to water and sanitation. Financing should take a holistic, strategic and mission-driven approach, in order to support climate resilience, safeguard intergenerational equity and sustain both services and ecosystems. Transparent financing terms and well-targeted subsidies should promote fairness and accountability. Innovation in resource mobilisation should be guided by principles of justice and resilience, avoiding unsustainable debt, regressive or environmentally damaging subsidies, and unaffordable tariffs.

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***Guiding question:** Do financing arrangements ensure affordability and transparency for all, protect human rights, and avoid debt and subsidy structures that undermine sustainability and equity?*

Principle 5
Climate and development integration

Just Water Partnerships should guide WASH and water resources investments toward climate-resilient development that safeguards ecosystems, protects vulnerable communities, and ensures the integrity of water systems. They should support integration with National Adaptation Plans, Nationally Determined Contributions, and access to climate finance, while embedding disaster preparedness, nature-based solutions, and gender-responsive adaptation. Climate action should be mainstreamed across sectors to strengthen water resilience and deliver just, sustainable outcomes.

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***Guiding question:** Are climate risks and adaptation measures systematically embedded in water resources management and WASH plans, investments, and governance frameworks to protect vulnerable communities and ecosystems? Are they clearly aligned with and supportive of NAPs and NDCs?*

Strategic value for stakeholders

JWPs offer a shared platform for more effective engagement and collaboration across sectors, guided by a common set of principles and standards. The examples below illustrate how different stakeholder groups can benefit and contribute:

From principles to action: Mobilising political will for a just water future

The world is facing converging crises – climate change, deepening inequalities, and escalating water insecurity – which together threaten lives, livelihoods, and social stability. Water lies at the heart of these challenges. Achieving global commitments on climate, development, and human rights depends on rethinking how water is financed and governed.

These Just Water Partnerships principles offer a pathway forward. Deployed together, they align governance, investment and accountability with equity and justice, which can overcome the barriers that currently stand in our way and unlock the scale of investment required to meet the challenge.

The next step is to identify and support governments ready to pioneer JWPs in their countries. Doing so will demand political will and collective commitment. Governments must set priorities and lead transparently; financing bodies and the private sector must step up with financing and innovation aligned with public value; and civil society must help drive inclusion and accountability.

These principles are not only 'just' – they are in everyone's interest. Stronger governance, fairer finance, and more resilient systems create more predictable, investable, and stable environments for all.

Call to action

Governments, development banks, private investors, civil society, and communities must now work together to translate these JWP principles into practice. Embedding justice, equity, and climate resilience at the heart of water governance and finance is essential to ensure water security for people, economies, and ecosystems – now and for future generations.

As a first step, stakeholders should review their existing coordination platforms using the five principles and guiding questions provided in this paper. This will help identify areas for action, highlight who needs to be engaged or introduced to the concept, and reveal potential coalitions that can advance the JWP approach nationally.

Achieving a shift from investments guided primarily by economic returns to those that deliver just, healthy, and resilient futures for all will require sustained and collective effort.

The opportunity is clear; the moment to act is now.

The consultation process, the development of the principles, and the preparation of this document were led by Mariana Dias Simpson and Lesley Pories (WaterAid), and Alan Nicol (IWMI).

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This document presents the **guiding principles of Just Water Partnerships** (JWPs) – a pathway to realign water governance and financing with equity, justice, and resilience.

Facilitated by WaterAid and the International Water Management Institute (IWMI), the principles were developed through a global consultation involving governments, civil society, financing institutions, research and private sector actors across more than 30 countries. The five core principles – centred on social equity and inclusion, government leadership, inclusive governance, sustainable finance, and climate integration – provide a shared foundation to guide the design and implementation of JWPs.

The next step is to identify and support governments ready to lead, and to mobilise collective commitment and action from all stakeholders to turn these principles into practice. Grounded in justice, Just Water Partnerships should strengthen governance, align investment with public value, and build resilience – helping secure water for people, economies, and ecosystems now and for generations to come.

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