

NETHERLANDS FOOD PARTNERSHIP WATER & FOOD WORKSHOP

Best Western Premier Hotel, Nairobi

17 June 2026

WORKSHOP REPORT

This report summarises the Water & Food Systems Workshop convened by the Netherlands Food Partnership (NFP) in Nairobi on 17 June 2026. It combines the Mau Region case study findings with the practical insights, partnership opportunities and organisational contributions identified by Kenyan, Dutch and international stakeholders.

1. Introduction and strategic context

Workshop purpose

The workshop was organised in response to the recognised need to better connect the water and food agendas. While water and food systems are deeply interdependent in practice, they are still often addressed through separate sectoral lenses in policy, research and development programming. This fragmentation can limit the effectiveness of interventions, particularly in landscapes where agricultural production, water management, climate resilience and livelihoods are closely linked.

It responded to growing interest from the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, NFP and other partners to better integrate Dutch expertise and sectoral focus areas in international development, and to identify practical opportunities for collaboration in Kenya. By bringing together public, private, research and civil society actors, the workshop sought to explore how more integrated approaches could support sustainable food systems, improved water stewardship and stronger partnerships.



Embassy perspective

Mr. Jelmer van Veen, First Secretary for Water, Food Security and Climate at the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, underlined that the divide between water and food is often strongest in policy and science agendas, while farmers experience these systems as one reality. Irrigation illustrates this tension: it can be treated as a water issue, an agricultural issue, or a shared development priority, depending on the institutional setting.

The discussion therefore called for stakeholders to look beyond sector mandates and work from the needs of landscapes, farmers, communities and businesses. The Embassy welcomed the workshop as a constructive step towards more integrated cooperation, while stressing that partnership building needs clear ideas, credible actors and practical entry points.

2. Kenya's water–food nexus and the Mau case

Research framework and methodology

The presentation of Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture & Technology (JKUAT) by Josiah Ateka, Forah Obebo and Mercy Njeri provided the technical foundation for the workshop. It framed water as a cross-cutting connector in food systems, linking production, livelihoods, nutrition, ecosystems, finance and governance.

The research engaged community leaders, households, Water Resource Users Associations (WRUAs), Community Forest Associations (CFAs), Ogiek community representatives, Dutch-linked businesses, civil society platforms and government actors. This broad engagement helped connect upstream ecosystem protection with downstream water use, food production and market dynamics.

Overarching water–food nexus findings

- Water and food challenges in Kenya are deeply interconnected. Water scarcity, pollution and inefficient management constrain food production, while agricultural expansion, irrigation, agrochemical use and land conversion increase pressure on water resources.
- Many challenges are not caused by a lack of technical solutions alone, but by weak coordination, fragmented institutions and siloed planning across agriculture, water, environment, finance and private sector actors.
- Water–food nexus thinking is still insufficiently embedded in policy and implementation. This leads to parallel projects, fragmented data, limited evidence-based decision-making and missed opportunities for joint action.
- Governance and finance are central bottlenecks. Local institutions often lack the capacity, mandate or resources to coordinate long-term catchment restoration, enforce regulation and mobilise investment.
- Stronger multi-stakeholder platforms are needed to connect public agencies, private sector actors, researchers, civil society, farmers, WRUAs, CFAs and cooperatives around shared landscape outcomes.

Learnings from the Mau case

- The Mau Forest Complex is a critical water tower, serving as the catchment for 12 rivers and supporting water security, food production, hydropower, biodiversity and livelihoods across multiple regions.
- The area faces linked pressures from population growth, settlement expansion, deforestation, overgrazing, wetland degradation and unsustainable farming. These pressures reduce dry-season river flows, worsen water quality, increase soil erosion and undermine agricultural productivity.
- The case showed that integrated landscape approaches are most effective when they combine restoration with viable livelihood opportunities. Environmental protection needs to be linked to farmer income, productivity, market access and resilience.
- The Stawisha Mau model, convened by IDH Kenya, demonstrated the value of long-term multi-stakeholder coordination between private companies, public agencies, NGOs, community groups and local institutions.
- Relevant interventions include forest restoration, community tree nurseries, spring protection, agroforestry, soil health management, water stewardship, improved dairy productivity, high-value crops, collective marketing, SACCO finance and bundled cooperative services.
- Cooperatives, WRUAs, CFAs and SACCOs can help scale solutions, but their roles need to be clearly aligned to avoid duplication and fragmented implementation.
- Trade-offs need to be managed early. High-value crops such as avocado can improve incomes but may increase water demand. Dairy intensification can support livelihoods but may compete with land and biomass for staple food production. Fast-growing commercial tree species can conflict with biodiversity goals.

Main conclusions for future collaboration

- Water–food interventions should be designed around real catchment dynamics, not separate sector mandates.
- Technical solutions need to be combined with trusted convening, inclusive governance and long-term finance.
- Restoration is more likely to last when it is linked to a clear business case for farmers and land users.
- County Integrated Development Plans, basin planning and national frameworks offer important entry points for mainstreaming water–food nexus approaches.
- Promising areas for scale include solar irrigation, water harvesting, soil and water testing, digital water tools, payment for ecosystem services, blended finance and outcome-based finance.
- The main lesson from the Mau case is that sustainable impact depends on connecting household-level incentives, community institutions and landscape-level coordination.

3. Input from partner pitches

The pitches demonstrated that viable water–food collaboration is already emerging through business hubs, catchment planning, utility partnerships, payment for ecosystem services, data systems and community-based natural resource management. Across the examples, stakeholders emphasised that the nexus becomes actionable when ecological restoration is linked to a clear business case and to community benefits.

1. **Holland Greentech** presented a hub model that combines inputs, advice, farmer training and market-oriented horticulture. The model shows how profitable horticulture can be linked with sustainable land and water management.
2. **World Resources Institute (WRI)** shared experience with payment for ecosystem services in the Lake Naivasha watershed, using indicators such as sedimentation, runoff and groundwater levels to connect restoration outcomes with flower businesses, hotels and other downstream users.
3. **World Waternet** described the Thika basin experience, where businesses, farmers, banks, churches, universities, public actors and security institutions are being brought into shared river planning and data use. Biodiversity indicators were also presented as a way to make ecosystem health visible.
4. **VEI/ WaterWorx** introduced a utility perspective through water operator partnerships and catchment pilots, including lessons from Eldoret and the ‘catchment to cup’ approach for restoring water balance.



4. Outcomes of the group discussions

Shared challenges

The group discussions confirmed that the water–food nexus is not primarily a technical issue. Participants identified **governance, coordination, incentives and trust as decisive factors for success**. The most urgent challenge is to create collaboration models that can hold together catchment protection, farmer livelihoods, private sector interests, public mandates and long-term financing.

- **Governance and policy alignment:** Nexus thinking is still weak at policy level. Political goodwill, county–national alignment and enforcement against encroachment are essential, but often difficult to sustain.
- **Finance and business case:** Participants stressed the need to make water stewardship investable. This includes payment for ecosystem services, blended finance, SACCOs, private sector commitments and business models that reward catchment protection.
- **Knowledge and data:** Information does not flow well enough between researchers, farmers, water actors and policymakers. Participants called for shared data, citizen science, MEL frameworks, baselines and accessible farmer advisory tools.
- **Technology and uptake:** Solar irrigation, circular water systems, household water-saving technologies, soil and water testing, and nature-based solutions are promising, but uptake remains constrained by cost, capacity, incentives and trust.
- **Community role:** Communities are not only beneficiaries; they are central to protecting forests, managing catchments, monitoring water quality and shaping locally relevant solutions. Women’s roles in cooperatives and community platforms were specifically noted.

Opportunities identified

- Participants saw strong potential for operationalising a **Water–Energy–Food–Ecosystems (WEFE) approach** in Kenya, provided it is anchored in catchments and connected to markets. Existing spatial plans, agroecology policies, county platforms, farmer organisations and private sector networks can provide starting points. Demonstration sites, centres of excellence and innovation hubs can help translate the nexus into visible practice.
- The discussions also pointed towards a **Public–Private–Community–Partner (PPCP) model**. Such a model would bring together public agencies, companies, community organisations, WRUAs, CFAs, farmer groups, research institutions, NGOs and development partners around a shared catchment agenda. Participants stressed

that this requires a strong convenor, long-term commitment, inclusive governance and tangible demonstration activities.

5. Contributions offered by participating organisations

The workshop generated a broad overview of what different organisations can contribute. Rather than a list of isolated projects, the contributions form a potential partnership architecture across five functions: convening, policy influence, data and evidence, business development, and community capacity.

Convening and partnership building

- NFP can support the partnership-building process by creating a safe space for joint agenda-setting, connecting diamond stakeholders and helping shape follow-up pathways.
- IDH, SNV and Stawisha Mau Trust bring experience in convening landscape partnerships, engaging private sector actors and protecting gains from previous restoration efforts.
- Trust2Impact, ASNET and local innovation hubs can support county-level platforms, farmer-facing demonstrations, social enterprises and private sector mobilisation.

Policy, advocacy and public-sector alignment

- PELUM, Slow Food Kenya, Solidaridad, ASNET and Kennawrua can support advocacy, county and national government engagement, farmer organisation strengthening and policy formulation.
- WRA contributes regulation, catchment coordination, water resource data, technical expertise and capacity building in water resource management.
- County governments were recognised as key players for integrating water actors into agricultural platforms, aligning spatial plans and ensuring that funds follow agreed landscape functions.

Evidence, technology and data

- AKVO can contribute technology and data systems, including advocacy around data sharing and MEL frameworks.
- IWMI can support river-basin approaches, trade-off analysis and foresight modelling.
- WRI, World Waternet, SPARD, BrightPath and universities can provide technical assistance, data, modelling, water management expertise and learning support.
- JKUAT can contribute innovation centres and locally relevant technologies, including household-level water-saving irrigation systems.
- Cropnuts can provide soil and water testing, soil health advice and regenerative agriculture consultancy, while Justdiggit can contribute landscape condition data and nature-based solution guidance.

Business models, finance and value chains

- Solidaridad can support farmer capacity building, contract farming, market access, service delivery, access to finance and sustainable value chain development.
- ASNET can leverage private sector convening power, business-to-business linkages, compliance and standards support, solar irrigation technologies and blended finance models.
- Holland Greentech and other agribusiness actors can help connect inputs, advisory services, production hubs and market-led models for sustainable horticulture.
- Financial institutions, SACCOs and development partners can help turn catchment protection and climate-resilient production into investable propositions.

Community capacity and inclusion

- WRUAs, CFAs, CBOs, farmer groups and cooperatives were identified as essential implementation partners for catchment protection, water monitoring and sustainable farming practices.
- Slow Food Kenya, PELUM, KATIC and other training actors can strengthen farmer knowledge on agroecology, safe alternatives, certification, standards and new technologies.
- Participatory guarantee systems and other certification approaches can help recognise sustainable practices while strengthening market trust.

6. Emerging collaboration agenda

The workshop pointed to a practical agenda for follow-up. The strongest opportunities are those that combine catchment-level governance, a credible business case, community ownership and measurable outcomes for water, soil, production and nutrition. The following options were mentioned and will be explored further in the coming period, together with interested partners.

- Select one or more catchment-based pilots where water stress, food production and restoration needs clearly overlap, such as Mau, Nyandarua, Thika, Naivasha or Nakuru/Kabatini.
- Develop a shared data and MEL framework, combining scientific indicators, citizen monitoring and business-relevant metrics such as water security, sedimentation, soil health and production resilience.
- Map existing county platforms, spatial plans and agricultural coordination mechanisms to identify where water actors can be integrated rather than creating parallel structures.
- Build an investable business case for water stewardship, including PES, blended finance, SACCO finance, contract farming, certification and private sector commitments.
- Use demonstration sites, centres of excellence and innovation hubs to show practical WEFE solutions, including solar irrigation, circular water systems, nature-based restoration and sustainable farming practices.
- Strengthen the role of communities, farmer organisations, women's cooperatives and local institutions in governance and implementation.

7. Conclusion and next steps

The workshop confirmed that water and food challenges cannot be addressed through separate agendas. Farmers, communities and businesses experience water scarcity, excess water, soil degradation, energy costs and market risks as interconnected realities. Effective partnerships therefore need to start from the landscape itself and from the people and institutions managing it.

As a next step, NFP would like to continue conversations with partners interested in shaping a concrete partnership on the water–food nexus in Kenya. These follow-up discussions will help define the core challenge the partnership should address, clarify shared objectives, identify the relevant actors and explore what convening structure and roadmap would be needed for joint action.

NFP welcomes participants to engage in this next phase and jointly explore how such a partnership can support more integrated, catchment-based approaches to sustainable food systems, water stewardship and landscape resilience.

