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# Farmer-led Irrigation Development (FLID) and the Sustainable Water Fund

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# Farmer-led Irrigation Development (FLID) and the Sustainable Water Fund

## Lessons learnt, best practices and recommendations

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# 1 The assignment

The Netherlands Enterprise Agency (RVO) approached the Water Resources management group of Wageningen University to assess five of their projects within the Sustainable Water Fund (FDW) programme, with a particular focus on Farmer Led Irrigation Development (FLID). The primary goal of the assignment was drawing insights and practical lessons from the projects supported by RVO, particularly in relation to the principles and practices of FLID, and to provide the five projects with recommendations for consolidation of results and opportunities for scaling. The overarching aim was to formulate recommendations for future PPP-projects related to irrigation development.
The FWD programme, active since 2012, has as objective to contribute towards sustainable economic growth, self-reliance and the fight against poverty. Target groups are poor populations and vulnerable groups. The programme encompasses 42 projects in three thematic areas:

- Water Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH)
- Water efficiency in agriculture
- Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM)

For this assignment RVO selected five of their projects:

1. FDW16074BF (Burkina Faso) − Focused on integrated water management and efficient water use for off-season horticulture production by (female) smallholder producers.

2. FDW17074BJ (Benin) − Targeting efficient irrigation technologies, solar pumps, and water storage for vegetable production.

3. FDW17072ET (Ethiopia – Ziway-Shalla Basin) –Enhancing irrigation efficiency and water security through improved allocation mechanisms.

4. FDW17253ET (Ethiopia – Awash Basin) − Improve water resources management for more equitable and efficient water use in the Awash sub-basin.

5. FDW17109IN (India – Maharashtra) − Enhancing water use efficiency and sustainable cotton farming practices under climate change.

Online workshops were conducted with the project teams of these five projects during the period of February − March 2025. The workshops were prepared by the WUR team in consultation with the project leaders of each project, while for the workshops themselves all project partners were invited. The focus of the workshops was on familiarizing the participants with the FLID approach, collectively analyzing the project (context) using the FLID spider framework, and drawing best practices and lessons learnt. The main outcomes of each workshop were compiled by the WUR team in a written report which was shared with the project teams for feedback.

While irrigation technology and infrastructure are often central to irrigation development efforts, our review of these projects and reflections with implementers suggest that sustainable impact is more likely when the focus shifts to addressing the broader enabling environment. The Farmer-Led Irrigation Development (FLID) approach emphasizes that farmers are best positioned to develop, adapt, or invest in irrigation solutions when systemic constraints − such as unclear water rights, weak institutions, or inequitable allocation − are resolved. Project experiences support this: when governance structures are strengthened, water access is secured, and support systems are in place, farmers tend to take initiative and drive irrigation development in ways that are more context-appropriate, cost-effective, and sustainable (FDW16074BF (Burkina Faso), FDW17253ET (Awash Ethiopia), FDW17109IN (India). In discussions, project teams often recognized that their implementation practices were already aligned with FLID principles, though their assumptions were not always realistic and targets had to be adjusted during project implementation. For example, the

adoption of new techniques by farmers was sometimes low, business cases for farmers not always clear, the challenge of access to finance insufficiently addressed and the needed investment in infrastructure and equipment underestimated. With better analyses before the start of the project these targets could have been more realistically set, resulting in a more effective implementation strategy. Making the (mis)alignment with the FLID principles explicit helped the project teams to better understand the systemic value of their work and its contribution to long-term irrigation development.

Despite the growing emphasis on enabling environments, *technology push* remains a common feature in irrigation development. This approach – where technologies are introduced without adequate alignment to farmers' needs, capacities, or contexts – can lead to poor adoption, wasted resources, and disempowerment of farmers. Recognizing and addressing this tendency is essential for aligning interventions with the principles of FLID.

## 2 Farmer-led Irrigation Development

Farmer-led Irrigation Development (FLID) is a process wherein farmers autonomously enhance their agricultural water use, largely independent of planned external interventions. FLID processes are observed in varied contexts across the globe, and in many countries, it represents a significant and dominant mode of irrigation development as numerous farmers autonomously enhance their agricultural water use. Despite its scale and importance, FLID is often not formally recognized or adequately captured in official records and data, although the awareness among governments and development partners is increasing recently (Izzi et al, 2021).

*The Farmer-led Irrigation Development Guide: A what, why and how-to for intervention design* (in short "the FLID Guide"), is a comprehensive resource on the FLID approach, published by The World Bank in 2021. The guide reiterates that FLID is not a type of irrigation or tied to certain technologies or to a scale of farming, but that it relates to a dynamic and continuously evolving development process. The FLID Guide presents a comprehensive approach to support and build on the dynamic of ongoing farmers' initiatives to improve and expand their irrigated agriculture. (Izzi et al., 2021)

Supporting FLID often has several advantages compared to irrigation development projects that primarily focus on infrastructure. It typically places a lesser demand on public financial resources and enables farmers to access irrigation more rapidly and at lower individual costs. Furthermore, FLID can extend benefits to a larger number of farmers, including women, by leveraging and building upon their existing initiatives and local knowledge. This approach also fosters greater ownership in the irrigation development process. (Izzi et al., 2021)

Supporting FLID requires a reflexive approach, that first thoroughly comprehends local diversity and identifies inherent weaknesses within the existing agricultural water management systems. Only after this comprehensive understanding is achieved can suitable interventions be thoughtfully identified and strategically implemented to catalyse positive and sustainable change.

While FLID is not restricted by farm size, it commonly involves farmers cultivating less than 10 hectares of land, with a significant proportion operating on less than 2 hectares. The approach specifically focuses on smallholder farmers, recognizing that they often encounter more significant financial and knowledge-related obstacles in overcoming adverse environmental conditions. The ultimate aim of a FLID support programme is to trigger positive changes across the entire system, and at different levels.

The guide champions a diagnostic approach as the initial step in understanding the inherent potential and existing constraints related to FLID by systematically assessing seven key factors. This comprehensive diagnostic process serves as the foundation for identifying and designing appropriate public interventions aimed at creating enabling environments to effectively catalyse FLID. The seven interrelated domains are:

1. The *resource potential* domain considers the availability of natural resources, primarily land and water, and the costs associated with their mobilization for irrigation. Understanding the existing irrigation landscape and the potential for expansion, considering water availability and quality, as well as land suitability, form the central elements of this part of the assessment.
2. The *farmer benefits* domain addresses the crucial question of "Who is the farmer?" and examines the diverse gains derived from irrigated farming. This includes financial benefits, enhanced food security, and the potential for crop diversification. Understanding farmer profiles and typologies is essential for tailoring interventions effectively.
3. The *technology* domain focuses on the role of various technologies in enabling farmer-led irrigation expansion, intensification, and profitability. It emphasizes that technology is not merely a physical object but possesses a social dimension as well. This part of the assessment considers availability, affordability, quality, and local maintainability of irrigation equipment.
4. The *markets* domain underscores the vital importance of farmers having access to agricultural output markets. This includes assessing market systems, value chains, and the enabling environment for market participation. Understanding labour and energy availability, as well as domestic and export market demands, are key aspects.
5. The *knowledge* domain recognizes the strong interplay between knowledge and innovation processes. It examines the diverse stakeholders involved in knowledge provision and the various ways farmers acquire information. This part of the assessment looks at multi-stakeholder platforms, how farmer learning is facilitated, and how information dissemination through various media is enabling farmer-led irrigation development.
6. The *policy & legal* domain examines the rules of the game governing water and land resources in a FLID context. This includes analysing water and land tenure security, relevant legislation, and the impact of formal and informal institutions on farmers' decisions. How rights are managed and who benefits from resource use influences how this part of the assessment sees the environment as enabling or constraining.
7. The *finance* domain considers the implications and options for farmers to finance their irrigation investments. Access to affordable financing, the role of various (formal and informal) financial institutions, and mechanisms such as credit guarantees and subsidies are critical aspects for enabling FLID

Analysing and scoring the enabling and constraining aspects of each domain is a crucial step in understanding how farmers may or may not improve and expand their irrigated agriculture. This is made visual in a spider diagram with seven axes representing the seven domains (see illustration in Figure 1). The approach emphasises that projects intervening in a FLID context should carefully target the most significant constraints in specific local contexts.

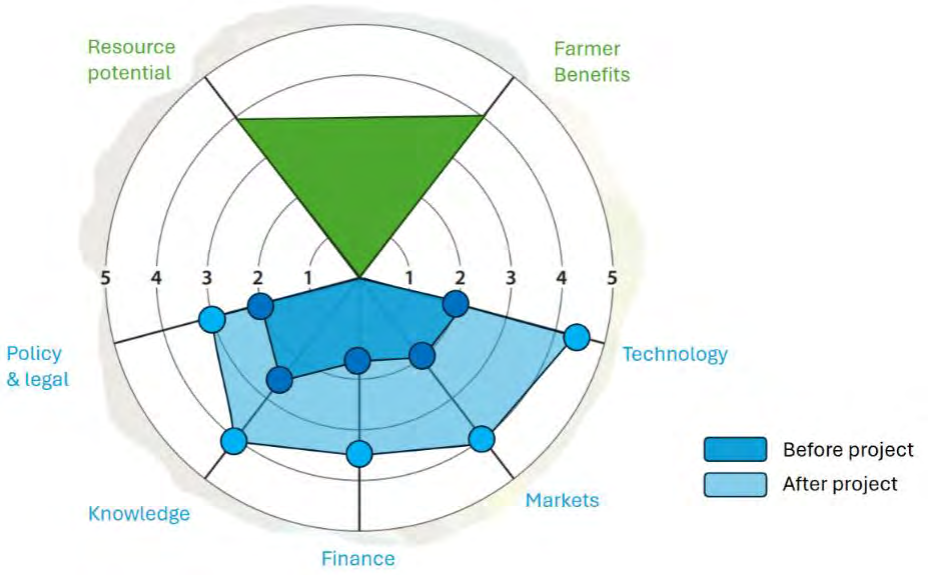


Figure 1 – Spider diagram result of the quick scoring exercise in the workshop with the India-Maharashtra project (FDW17109IN) as an illustration to how such an analysis is graphically reported.

For irrigation development to happen, the approach aims to create an enabling environment in which farmers advance irrigation development. Effective and consistent communication with farmers, along with providing them with a range of viable options regarding technologies and financial products, are crucial aspects for the success of FLID support programmes.

FLID support projects should be distinctly tailored to the context of water availability. In water-abundant contexts, the focus of FLID support may be on expansion of irrigated areas. Interventions could prioritize facilitating access to land and readily available water resources with potentially less emphasis on stringent water management regulations. Conversely, in water-stressed contexts, the primary objectives shift towards optimization of existing water use, increasing water productivity, and ensuring sustainable resource management. Support in such areas would necessitate interventions focusing on water governance arrangements, efficient irrigation technologies, and potentially regulation of water use to address competition and prevent resource depletion.

# 3 Best practices and lessons learnt

When analysing the best practices and lessons learnt that came out of the workshops, three main thematic areas emerged: farmer involvement, the FLID domains, and reflections on the FLID guide methodology. These themes are strongly interconnected, and many of the lessons cut across multiple domains.

*Farmer involvement*

In all five workshops it became apparent that farmer involvement in the project is key to its success. The projects used different approaches to involve farmers. Several projects used farmer field schools to communicate new approaches and technologies to farmers. This allows farmers to observe a new technology in practice, ask questions about it, and learn from other farmers. For example, in the Maharashtra project (FDW17109IN), participatory, group-based learning strategies (similar to farmer field schools) were used to introduce sustainable cotton practices, including water-saving techniques and organic inputs, which farmers quickly adopted and adapted.

Another best practice voiced by several projects is the involvement of farmers in every step of the process. Projects that actively involved farmers from the project design phase indicate that this helped to tailor the project activities to the specific needs of the farmers, and to select the appropriate technologies for the area. In Benin (FDW17074BJ), early engagement with farmer cooperatives helped shape the project's focus on solar irrigation and water storage, ensuring alignment with local priorities.

In Burkina Faso (FDW16074BF), the project worked with women-led producer groups to introduce off-season horticulture using efficient irrigation, which improved both incomes and food security. The farmer organizations function as legal entities, being able to apply for certifications, which add to the credibility of the produce and creates added value. The farmer organization also directly engages with the buyers, which is normally a challenge to arrange for individual farmers.

In Ziway (FDW17072ET), amongst others on the basis of farmers' insights, early into the project it was decided to support and promote the development of improved furrow irrigation instead of promoting drip irrigation.

Several projects also emphasized the importance of understanding different types of farmers and tailoring support accordingly. In Benin, the use of farmer typologies helped identify which groups needed more support in accessing finance or technology. In Awash and India, farmers were observed to creatively adapt technologies to their needs – such as combining solar and diesel pumps or modifying irrigation schedules – demonstrating the value of farmer-led innovation.

From these aforementioned best practices and the experiences in the FLID guide, it can be concluded that farmer involvement should start at the very beginning of the project (in the design / proposal phase) in order to make sure the project will match the farmer needs. In order to closely identify the needs of the farmers, related to the seven domains in the FLID guide, the FLID spider diagram was seen to form a good basis for a systemic analysis.

*FLID domains*

In the workshops we explicitly explored the domains of *Technology*, *Policy & Legal*, and *Markets*. Due to time constraints, it was not always possible to analyse all seven domains in one workshop; this was only possible with one of the projects. The WUR team together with the project leader therefore selected the most relevant domains for the project to be treated in the workshop. For most projects these were the *Technology* and *Market* domains. The specific best practices gathered for these domains are reported in this section.

*Technology*

Across the projects, the role of technology in enabling or constraining farmer-led irrigation development was a recurring theme. While the availability of irrigation equipment has increased in many areas, access remains uneven, and the suitability of technologies varies widely depending on local conditions, service ecosystems, and farmer capacities.
In Burkina Faso, the introduction of bande d'aspersion (spray lines) was widely appreciated for its simplicity, effectiveness, and adaptability to local farming practices. Farmers reported reduced water use, lower fuel consumption, and improved crop health. The technology was seen as easy to operate and maintain, and its adoption was supported by demonstration plots and farmer-to-farmer learning. In contrast, mini-pivot systems introduced in the same project area were found to be too complex and fragile, with limited uptake. This example illustrates the importance of aligning technology choices with farmers' needs, capacities, and the local service environment. Therefore it is important to involve farmers directly, from the start of the project.

In Benin, the presence of a local supplier (CSF) was seen as a major asset, yet challenges remained in terms of awareness, affordability, and quality control. Farmers often lacked information about where to obtain equipment or how to assess its quality. Solar pumps were identified as a promising solution, but their performance was constrained by limited sunlight during peak irrigation hours and the high upfront costs. These experiences highlight the importance of not only introducing appropriate technologies but also ensuring that farmers have the knowledge, financial tools, and supply chain support to adopt and maintain them.

In India, the project focused on digital and water-saving technologies, including weather stations, soil moisture sensors, and sprinkler systems. These tools were integrated with advisory services and decision-support tools, enabling farmers to make more informed irrigation decisions. However, the underdeveloped service and maintenance ecosystem was noted as a barrier to sustained use. Water scarcity in the region was seen as a driver of openness to new technologies, but the return on investment remained a concern, especially for smallholders.

In Ethiopia's Awash and Ziway basins, farmers expressed strong interest in solar pumps, driven by rising diesel costs and the appeal of low operating expenses. However, access to these technologies was limited by import challenges and the absence of local manufacturing. In Ziway, the project opted to promote improved furrow irrigation over drip systems, based on considerations of cost, availability of spare parts, and farmer familiarity. This decision was seen as successful, with farmers quickly adopting the improved practices and reporting increased water and fuel efficiency.

Across the workshops, participants emphasized that technologies are not neutral tools but are embedded in broader systems of knowledge, finance, and governance. When technologies are introduced through participatory processes, demonstrated in practice, and supported by local supply and service networks, they are more likely to be adopted and adapted by farmers.
These experiences underscore the importance of context-specific, demand-driven approaches to technology in FLID. Technologies that are simple, robust, and compatible with existing practices – such as *bande d'aspersion*, solar pumps (where feasible), and improved furrow irrigation – have shown strong potential when introduced through collaborative and adaptive processes.

*Policy & Legal*
Across the workshops, the policy and legal domain emerged as a critical yet often under-addressed factor influencing the success of farmer-led irrigation development. While some projects engaged directly with governance issues, others encountered constraints that were outside their immediate scope but nonetheless shaped the enabling environment for FLID.

In Burkina Faso and Ziway, access to land – particularly for women – was identified as a key issue. In both cases, project interventions facilitated land access for women, which was seen as transformative for household income and community participation. In Burkina Faso, this was described as an innovation in the project area, where women had previously been excluded from land ownership. These examples illustrate how land tenure arrangements, even when informal or locally negotiated, can significantly affect who benefits from irrigation development.

In Awash and Ziway, the governance of water resources was a central concern. In Awash, participants noted that while water resources are abundant, they are already fully allocated, and shortages occur downstream. The project aimed to address this by supporting more equitable and efficient water use, but the absence of a fully implemented national water allocation framework limited the reach of these efforts. Similarly, in Ziway, the lack of a legal framework for water pricing and permitting was seen as a constraint. Although a basin authority exists and is mandated to manage water distribution, its ability to enforce equitable allocation remains limited in the absence of national legislation.

The workshops also highlighted the complexity of regulating irrigation in contexts where smallholder farmers operate informally and at a scale that is difficult to monitor. In India, for example, policies around irrigation and water conservation exist, but compliance was described as weak. Governance structures were disrupted during the COVID-19 pandemic and are only now beginning to refocus on irrigation. In this context, the project worked primarily through farmer producer organizations, which helped bridge the gap between policy and practice by facilitating access to inputs, certification, and markets.

In several cases, participants reflected on the importance of hybrid governance arrangements. In Ziway, the project helped farmers to navigate formal rules alongside local norms and informal practices. This was echoed in Awash, where farmers were seen to adopt new technologies and practices even in the absence of formal regulation, often relying on local arrangements and informal agreements.

Overall, the workshops underscored that while formal policies and legal frameworks are important, they are often incomplete or inconsistently applied. In practice, farmers rely on a mix of formal and informal mechanisms to access land and water. Understanding and engaging with this hybrid reality is essential for supporting FLID.

*Markets*

The ability of farmers to access and benefit from output markets was a recurring theme across the projects. While market access is often framed in terms of physical infrastructure or price signals, the workshops revealed a more complex picture in which organizational structures, timing, and value chain integration play equally important roles.
In Burkina Faso, the introduction of storage facilities was seen as a key enabler for market participation. Women's groups used these facilities to delay sales until prices improved, reducing post-harvest losses and increasing profits. The project also supported the organization of producer groups, which helped farmers engage more effectively with buyers and negotiate better terms. However, challenges remained in terms of market transparency and standardization. For example, the lack of consistent units of measurement for onions made it difficult for farmers to secure fair prices.

In Benin, cooperatives played a central role in linking farmers to microfinance and facilitating access to solar irrigation technologies. These organizational structures also helped farmers engage with markets more collectively, improving their bargaining power. However, the workshop also highlighted that many farmers were still unaware of market opportunities or lacked the means to reach them, underscoring the importance of information dissemination and logistical support.

In India, the establishment of farmer producer organizations (FPOs) was a cornerstone of the project's market strategy. These organizations obtained certification for sustainable cotton, which attracted international buyers and created a premium market. The FPOs also facilitated direct engagement with brands, reducing the number of intermediaries and increasing the share of value retained by farmers. This model was seen as particularly effective in creating robust business cases for smallholder farmers.

In Ethiopia's Awash and Ziway basins, market access was shaped by both geography and infrastructure. In Awash, the proximity to urban centres and the presence of microfinance institutions created favourable conditions for market engagement. In Ziway, the project focused more on improving production efficiency, but participants noted that further support would be needed to connect farmers to markets, particularly in more remote areas.
Across the workshops, participants emphasized that market access is not just about selling produce – it is about being able to plan production, access inputs, and negotiate from a position of strength. Organizational structures such as cooperatives and producer groups were repeatedly cited as critical enablers. These structures not only facilitated access to finance and inputs but also helped farmers respond to market signals and manage risk.

The discussions also pointed to the importance of timing and storage in market engagement. Where farmers could store produce and wait for favourable prices, they were better able to capture value. Conversely, where storage was lacking, farmers were often forced to sell immediately after harvest, when prices were lowest.
Overall, the projects demonstrated that market access in FLID contexts is best supported through a combination of organizational strengthening, infrastructure development, and information sharing. When farmers are organized, informed, and connected, they are better positioned to make irrigation investments pay off.

*Reflections on the FLID guide methodology*

Several projects highlighted that the FLID method, as conducted in the workshops, helped them generate new insights regarding how irrigation technologies and irrigation practices depend on the wider system to function well.
The methodology was also seen as useful for adaptive management and reflection. In Ziway and in Maharashtra, participants appreciated how the spider diagram made implicit project logic more explicit and helped identify opportunities for future scaling. Though the methodology separates the domains, in practice these are highly connected and actions to stimulate irrigation development often affect multiple domains at the same time.
The FLID framework was also seen as a valuable tool for project design. In several cases, participants noted that using the spider diagram earlier could have influenced the composition of the project team, ensuring that all critical domains were adequately addressed.

*Gender and social inclusion*

While gender and social inclusion were not always central to the project design, several workshops highlighted their importance. In Burkina Faso and Ziway, efforts to improve land access for women were highlighted as transformative. In India, training programs specifically targeted women, leading to the establishment of women-led enterprises. These examples show that FLID can be a powerful vehicle for promoting gender equity and social inclusion, especially when these goals are made explicit.

*Cross-domain integration and sequencing*

Many projects noted that domains are interdependent. For example, technology adoption often depends on access to finance and knowledge dissemination. In Ziway, sequencing interventions – starting with capacity building and followed by technology introduction – proved effective. In India, integrating water-saving technologies with market access initiatives created a more coherent and impactful approach. In Awash, the combination of meteorological data, farmer training, and microfinance access enabled farmers to make more informed and profitable irrigation decisions.

Burkina Faso – implicitly an approach to enabling FLID

The Drops for Crops project in northern Burkina Faso illustrates how a multi-dimensional approach can create fertile ground for farmer-led irrigation development. Without explicitly applying the FLID framework, the project addressed key domains: it improved access to water through IWRM measures and water committees, facilitated land tenure for women via long-term exploitation permits, and supported market access through storage infrastructure and cooperative sales. Farmers were trained in pump maintenance and water-efficient practices, and demonstration plots helped spread innovations like bande d'aspersion. Though solar pumps faced practical challenges, the project's phased approach allowed farmers to experiment and adapt. The cooperative ASPMY played a central role in organizing inputs, credit, and sales, linking farmers to services and buyers. Despite operating in a conflict-prone region, the project's strong local embedding and integrated support enabled smallholders—especially women—to invest in irrigation and improve their livelihoods.

# 4 Recommendations

A key insight from our review of multiple irrigation projects and discussions with their implementers is that sustainable irrigation development is rarely achieved through the direct provision of infrastructure alone. The FLID approach highlights the importance of first addressing the contextual barriers that prevent farmers from acting − such as insecure water rights, fragmented institutions, or lack of transparency in allocation. When these foundational issues are resolved, farmers are more likely to invest in and maintain irrigation technology and infrastructure themselves. Project teams reflected that many of their practices were already in line with this approach, and that articulating this alignment helped them recognize the broader value of their work − not just in delivering outputs, but in enabling farmer-led, adaptive, and sustainable irrigation systems. Project teams also highlighted that applying the FLID approach from the start of the project could be beneficial in building up the consortium and assessing the enabling environment thoroughly.
Adopting the FLID approach more consciously and explicitly would yield more thorough analyses of the implementation environment to enable more effective strategies. This requires more time and financial investment in the analysis phase.

Future irrigation-related projects should explicitly guard against technology push by ensuring that technology choices are demand-driven, co-developed with farmers, and embedded in broader support systems. RVO could encourage project teams to assess technology fit through participatory diagnostics and prioritize flexibility in technology selection to reflect diverse farmer realities. RVO could play a role in ensuring that project teams possess the necessary expertise to adequately address all identified critical domains, including early and continuous engagement of farmers. Drawing from the FLID guide and the project reflections, RVO could consider incorporating participatory approaches such as farmer field schools and multi-stakeholder platforms to ensure that interventions are genuinely farmer-led and responsive to their needs.

RVO could systematically integrate central elements of the FLID approach as a guiding principle across the entire project cycle, from the initial project proposal stage through implementation and evaluation. This involves utilizing the seven interconnected domains of the FLID framework as a foundation for project design to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the local context and farmer-led dynamics. This could also include applying the diagnostic process and connecting it to the template for an impact pathway. The FLID spider analysis could also be used to assess project interventions during mid-term or completion reports. In many countries where RVO-projects operate national-level FLID-assessments have already been conducted and RVO could point project owners to check this with the relevant ministries.

These insights also point to the need for more integrated governance approaches that reflect the interdependence of food production and water resource management. While RVO currently supports separate programming streams for water efficiency in agriculture and integrated water resource management (IWRM), the experiences from these FLID projects suggest that closer collaboration − or even integration − between these domains would be beneficial. A food−water nexus perspective could help align objectives, reduce fragmentation, and support more coherent and context-sensitive interventions.

# 5 References

Izzi G. Denison J., Veldwisch G.J., 2021, The Farmer-led irrigation development Guide: A what, why and how-to for intervention design. World Bank, Washington DC.

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