

# Evaluating Collective Action Projects for Basin Collaboratives

A Criteria-Based Framework for Building a Strategic Project Portfolio and Driving Systemic Water Impact



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# ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

<b>AWS</b>	Alliance for Water Stewardship
<b>CA</b>	Collective Action
<b>CMT</b>	Collaborative Management Team
<b>KPI</b>	Key Performance Indicator
<b>MEL</b>	Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning
<b>MOU</b>	Memorandum of Understanding
<b>NGO</b>	Non-Governmental Organization
<b>PWI</b>	Positive Water Impact
<b>PMO</b>	Project Management Office
<b>SDG</b>	Sustainable Development Goal
<b>TNC</b>	The Nature Conservancy
<b>VWBA</b>	Volumetric Water Benefit Accounting
<b>WQBA</b>	Water Quality Benefit Accounting
<b>WRC</b>	Water Resilience Coalition
<b>WWF</b>	World Wide Fund for Nature

## GLOSSARY

**Basin collaboratives:** Integrated governance platforms that drive systemic change across basins. Collective action projects are the building blocks of collaboratives, whereas these collaboratives are the systems that organize, align and, where appropriate, scale these projects to deliver coordinated basin-level outcomes. Basin collaboratives can be designed at a variety of scales, based on local context and partners.

**Collaborative Management Team (CMT):** A coordinating body or secretariat responsible for facilitating the integration and alignment of multiple projects within a basin collaborative. Its role is one of coordination and support, not control.

**Collective action:** A coordinated set of engagements among interested parties playing complementary roles, which pools together knowledge, resources and/or expertise to jointly identify and implement solutions at various geographic scales to address shared freshwater challenges.

**Collective action spectrum:** Framework situating different forms of collective action along a continuum from bilateral cooperation to basin-scale coordination structures.

**Enabling environment:** The existing system of policies, governance structures, power dynamics, trust and financial mechanisms that either support or hinder collective action within a basin.

**Systemic impact:** Change that alters the underlying structures and rules of a water system (e.g., policies, market incentives, social norms), leading to lasting benefits beyond a single project's site or lifespan.

# SUMMARY

Many water stewardship initiatives, labelled as collective action (CA), fail to drive meaningful change due to fragmented governance, imbalanced stakeholder participation or a lack of basin-scale alignment. Without standardized benchmarks, CA projects risk operating in isolation, duplicating efforts or misallocating resources and often fail to achieve broad-scale impact. To be truly catalytic, we need joint efforts at the basin level. Basin collaboratives provide a platform to create a portfolio of CA projects and aggregate impact to build long-term water resilience.

This framework provides criteria to evaluate and select CA projects for integration into basin collaboratives, ensuring they deliver systemic, scalable impact in water-stressed regions. The framework proposes four comprehensive, non-mutually exclusive criteria groups:

- **Multi-stakeholder engagement** - evaluates how effectively a project engages diverse actors, ensuring inclusivity, provides clear roles and accountability and manages conflict while maintaining the potential for expansion to new partners.
- **Project design** - evaluates project alignment with basin challenges and the replicability and/or scalability of projects while recognizing additional benefits like integrated monitoring systems and co-benefits.
- **Co-investment and resource sharing** - assesses the sustainability and diversity of funding models and transparency mechanisms with partners and stakeholders.
- **Governance** - analyzes formal agreements and policy alignment with advanced scoring for advocacy pathways and dispute resolution systems.

Foundational criteria serve as preferred requirements, while enhanced criteria provide additional considerations. The two-phase evaluation process begins with screening projects against foundational criteria, classifying them into three categories. Fully aligned projects (green list) advance for prioritization, while partially aligned projects (amber list) receive targeted feedback for improvement. Projects failing most foundational criteria (red list) are not considered for inclusion. The subsequent prioritization phase applies weighted scoring to enhanced criteria, enabling collaborative management teams (CMTs) or similar governance structures to strategically prioritize potential high-impact projects for inclusion into the collaborative. For those projects on the amber or red lists, the framework provides specific criteria to be considered for inclusion into the collaborative in the future.

Application of this framework enables basin collaboratives to build robust project portfolios that align with strategic priorities and deliver measurable, scalable impact, advancing the CEO Water Mandate and Water Resilience Coalition's vision for building long-term water resilience in priority basins worldwide. The standardized criteria provide funders with confidence in resource allocation decisions while giving project managers and implementers clear benchmarks for project design and direction.

This guide acknowledges that highly mature CA projects are rare. A primary purpose of this framework is to help stakeholders identify potential in existing projects, nurture development and close gaps in initiatives to build a robust portfolio of high-impact actions over time. Importantly, this framework is designed both to evaluate existing CA projects and to guide the design and development of new projects to drive long-term impact.

# 1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

## 1.1 The Global Water Crisis and the Imperative for Collective Action

Water stress, ecosystem degradation and inequitable access to freshwater resources pose systemic risks to sustainable development. According to the UN World Water Development Report (2024), more than 2.3 billion people reside in water-stressed regions, while 90% of natural disasters are water-related (UN Water, 2024). Water-stressed basins - such as the Colorado River (Udall and Overpeck, 2017), Ganges (Tiwari and Rao, 2025) and Murray-Darling (Grafton et al., 2013) - face severe depletion due to climate change, over-extraction and fragmented governance. While unilateral and bilateral water stewardship projects can deliver meaningful local benefits, addressing basin-scale challenges often requires coordinated multi-stakeholder interventions, such as collective action (CA), that pool resources and align efforts. CA is essential for managing basin challenges and supporting a long-term social license to operate. It moves companies beyond on-site water management to a more integrated approach that can lead to positive basin outcomes that improve overall watershed health. This strategic shift is crucial for addressing water-related business risks that extend beyond a company's fencelines (TNC, 2025). The development of detailed corporate implementation guides marks a significant maturation in this approach, providing companies with a structured process to move from commitment to action (Diageo, 2025).

Building on the historical conceptual foundations of CA (see [Appendix A](#)), several organizations, including the CEO Water Mandate (2013), Alliance for Water Stewardship (2019) and the United Nations Environment Programme (2021), have published guidance and defined and implemented CA projects focused on water stewardship. These resources provide practical tools and case studies to help businesses, governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) design, implement and scale effective multi-stakeholder water initiatives.

CA is now recognized as a critical approach to addressing systemic water challenges, moving beyond individual corporate efforts to emphasize basin-scale collaboration and impact. Key organizations have advanced this progression, refining geographic scope, stakeholder roles and governance mechanisms. Contemporary initiatives now integrate certification, co-investment models and shared metrics to drive scalable solutions. This shift from theory to practice reflects the water stewardship community's learning in institutionalizing CA, ensuring long-term sustainability through aligned multi-actor engagement (Various Organizations, 2024).

The Various Organizations (2024) report defines CA in the context of water stewardship as: "A coordinated set of engagements among interested parties playing complementary roles, which pools together knowledge, resources, and/or expertise to jointly identify and implement solutions at various geographic scales, to address shared freshwater challenges." While this definition provides a sound conceptual foundation, it may be insufficient to differentiate between project-level collaboration, such as a corporate-NGO partnership restoring a single wetland, and basin-level platforms that tend to drive systemic changes and have a larger impact.

This framework helps distinguish the differences between CA and basin collaboratives and provides an approach to selecting and integrating CA projects into these collaboratives. The application of this framework should be context-specific and should be viewed as an aspirational guide that projects evolve towards rather than an immediate barrier to entry.

## 1.2 Collective Action Projects and Basin Collaboratives

### 1.2.1 Collective Action Spectrum

Historically, collective action has been used as a catch-all term, masking significant differences in scope, structure and complexity. Not all forms of collective action are equivalent in scale, appropriate for this framing or achievable in every context. To design effective interventions, set realistic expectations and clarify the form of collective action, a more nuanced framework is needed that situates different types of collective action along a spectrum - from site-level cooperation to a more complex, multi-stakeholder or basin-scale governance structure (WWF et al., 2026).

This spectrum considers:

- Bilateral projects<sup>1</sup>: Two actors undertaking cooperative action in a narrow scope.
- CA projects: Multi-party efforts implementing on-the-ground activities to address shared freshwater challenges.
- Basin collaboratives<sup>2</sup>: Coordination structures that govern multiple CA projects, set shared goals and ensure accountability across a catchment.

This spectrum is not always composed of mutually exclusive categories. Initiatives can evolve along this continuum. For example, a successful bilateral project can expand into a multi-stakeholder CA project. Similarly, a large, mature CA project (e.g., a Water Fund that starts to coordinate other projects and set basin-level strategy) may begin to take on the functions and scope of a basin collaborative (WWF, upcoming). The criteria in this framework help assess an initiative's current position on this spectrum and its readiness for integration into a larger basin collaborative structure.

### 1.2.2 Collective Action Projects

Collective action projects are multi-stakeholder projects, focused on implementing work on the ground across various SDG 6 outcome areas. CA projects are designed to address shared freshwater challenges, including droughts, floods, pollution, accessibility, ecosystem degradation and other factors, within a defined geographic area. These projects involve coordinated engagement among diverse actors (e.g., companies, governments, NGOs, communities, etc.) who pool knowledge, resources and expertise to implement joint solutions. This coordinated engagement is within the project. CA projects are generally not designed to coordinate between projects, as their scope remains more confined in terms of scale, scope and convening.

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<sup>1</sup> Bilateral projects may not always be considered collective action projects. These projects can support collective action projects and should be considered based on context and scope of work.

<sup>2</sup> Basin collaboratives, a term introduced by the Water Resilience Coalition, coordinate multiple collective action projects under a shared governance mechanism. Similar terms like Collective Action Initiatives have been presented by other organizations. In all cases, these structures or platforms create an opportunity to bring multiple collective action projects under a single umbrella, helping to aggregate impact over different scales and geographies.

### 1.2.3 Basin Collaboratives

Basin collaboratives are structures or platforms that organize, align and scale individual CA projects to deliver basin-level outcomes. Their core function is coordination and governance, not typically implementation. These collaboratives are characterized by a governance structure that integrates diverse stakeholders, from the private and public sectors to civil society and local communities, around a shared vision and strategy. This includes joint decision-making, project coordination, shared challenge identification and agreement and the establishment of shared targets. In essence, they serve as the mechanism that connects and coordinates across multiple projects. Integration of CA projects under a basin collaborative enhances strategic coherence, preventing duplication and aligning projects with broader basin priorities. This can strengthen policy influence, enabling local successes to inform regional decision-making. By pooling resources under a unified strategy, basin collaboratives also improve financial sustainability, attracting larger investments and reducing risk. Finally, integrated systems foster adaptive learning, allowing stakeholders to share data, refine approaches and respond dynamically to changing conditions.

Established entities often embody the principles of a basin collaborative. A key example is the [Mississippi River Water Action Collaborative \(MRWAC\)](#), a coalition of companies, government actors, NGOs, civil society, academic institutions and several other organizations that advance corporate water stewardship across the entire basin. Rather than implementing projects itself, the MRWAC orchestrates collective impact by aligning member actions in CA projects, sharing knowledge and best practices and identifying high-impact opportunities to address shared challenges like nutrient pollution. Other examples could include a river basin organization such as the Murray-Darling Basin Authority, which functions as a collaborative by integrating the interests of multiple state governments, agricultural actors and environmental groups.

In many contexts, a pre-existing collaborative will not exist. However, the absence of a formal collaborative in a basin should not be a barrier to action. In these cases, the criteria in this guidance can be applied by a de facto coordinating entity, such as a lead NGO, a development bank or a coalition of companies, to build a strategic portfolio of aligned projects. Furthermore, a well-designed CA project can itself serve as the catalyst for forming a collaborative, using the stakeholder engagement and governance foundations built during the project's development. Thus, this framework provides a blueprint for strategic action, whether within a mature collaborative structure or as a foundational step towards building one. While this report describes the role of basin collaboratives for context, the evaluation criteria in Section 2 are specifically designed for assessing CA projects that could be considered for inclusion in a collaborative, not for evaluating the basin collaboratives themselves.

## 1.3 The Need for Clear Criteria and Collaborative Integration

This guidance was developed in response to a clear demand from corporate partners, NGOs and basin stakeholders for more consistent approaches to help identify opportunities to improve, scale and increase impact. It provides a benchmark for good practice, recognizing that such standardized, actionable criteria are currently absent in most basins around the world. To address this gap, this guidance was developed to define the key elements of successful CA and serves companies and other stakeholders seeking to initiate, co-create or strengthen CA initiatives, providing a clear roadmap of the elements that lead to credible, basin-aligned impact.

This guidance provides a practical, dynamic framework and attempts to steer clear of rigid prescription. It acknowledges that not all CA projects are created equal and, in some locations, these may not exist at all. In many basins, practitioners must collaborate with the partners and projects that are available, navigating complex challenges like limited stakeholder readiness or a lack of pre-existing collaborative structures. This includes recognizing and working within existing organizational structures of participating stakeholders (e.g., government departments, NGOs, community-based organizations) which may have their own mandates, operational protocols and reporting hierarchies. The framework is designed to complement, not replace, these established structures.

The criteria presented here should be used as a set of helpful considerations to guide project design, evaluation and continuous improvement, recognizing that full alignment is an aspirational goal that projects may grow into. This guidance aims to strengthen initiatives within their local context, not to exclude them for failing to meet an idealized standard. The two-phase evaluation process (Section 3) is specifically designed for this reality, providing a structured way to assess and improve projects with potential rather than simply rejecting them. The framework is designed to strengthen CA projects within their local context, providing a pathway for them to evolve and become valuable components of a broader basin collaborative.

The criteria in this framework blend technical standards and guidance, field lessons from the WRC's [100 Priority Basins](#) and practitioner expertise. These criteria align with those presented in recent CA papers (Various Authors, 2024; AWS & WWF, 2025). The resulting criteria balance rigor with adaptability rooted in global best practices while refined through real-world implementation experience across diverse hydrological contexts.

This guidance advances current understanding by:

- **Establishing clear evaluation criteria and a framework for selection:** This guidance equips CMTs or similar governance structures with a practical assessment framework using four key criteria (stakeholder engagement, project design, co-investment mechanisms and governance structures) to evaluate CA projects. The framework moves beyond theory to help CMTs and other decision-makers systematically assess projects' inclusivity, scalability and systemic impact for informed portfolio decisions.
- **Enabling project prioritization through tiered classification:** The guidance provides a clear categorization system (Fully Aligned, Partially Aligned, Not Aligned) to help CMTs or similar governance structures efficiently select projects and identify needed improvements. This structured approach recommends that projects which meet foundational criteria, or demonstrate clear potential to do so, are included in basin collaboratives.

### **Collaborative Management Team (CMT) or similar governance structures**

An effective basin collaborative needs more than just well-designed projects; it requires coordinated implementation across stakeholders, sectors and governance levels. A CMT may take various forms, including a Project Management Office (PMO) function, steering committee or similar governance structures and external consultants, and it serves as the key facilitator in basin-scale CA water projects, ensuring multi-stakeholder coordination and systemic impact. While the implementation structure may vary, the core role bridges project implementation with broader governance by mediating conflicts, aligning stakeholder interests and maintaining connections to policy frameworks. Crucially, they facilitate strategic integration across multiple collective action projects within a basin, creating synergies and preventing duplication of efforts. A CMT can support the collaboratives to transform individual actions into coherent, system-wide solutions by connecting discrete projects to broader governance frameworks and aligning interventions with basin priorities.

This guidance provides a framework to evaluate and adapt existing water projects for integration into basin collaboratives. This guidance is primarily designed for:

- CMTs or similar governance bodies to evaluate, select and prioritize projects for a basin collaborative portfolio.
- Project developers and implementers (e.g., NGOs, consultancies, community groups). It provides a clear blueprint for designing robust, bankable projects that are inherently aligned with basin goals.
- Funders and investors (e.g., corporations, governments, donors). It offers a trusted framework to assess project quality, identify high-impact opportunities and direct resources towards initiatives designed for scalable, sustainable impact.

Designed for application in water-stressed regions, these criteria provide CMTs or similar governance structures with a framework to build a strategic portfolio of CA projects. The goal is to identify and select initiatives that demonstrate potential for basin-scale impacts and can deliver systemic water resilience aligned with the WRC's objectives.

As a standard baseline for inclusion, any project considered for implementation within a priority basin could be assessed using the criteria framework to:

1. **Ensure systemic integration:** Projects should demonstrate potential for connection to basin-scale processes. This will mean aligning with river basin plans, water resource management policies or collaborative decision-making bodies.
2. **Build credible portfolios:** The criteria serve to vet and elevate “shovel-ready” credible projects that can attract funding and stakeholder engagement, accelerating CA in basins facing the most critical water challenges.
3. **Prevent fragmentation:** By applying the criteria, projects that only offer short-term, localized gains without institutional or systemic integration can be filtered out, ensuring consistency with the Mandate's long-term goals.
4. **Enable CMT-led coordination:** CMTs or similar governance structures working across the 100 Priority Basins and other priority regions can use the criteria to:
  - a. Harmonize efforts across sectors and geographies
  - b. Track readiness levels of projects
  - c. Ensure consistency in project quality and impact potential
5. **Support the improvement of existing projects:** The criteria can indicate the strengths and weaknesses of CA projects, thus allowing the implementer to understand what they can improve to have projects added to the portfolio and become more attractive to investments, especially from the private sector.

## 2 SELECTION CRITERIA

Identifying high-potential CA projects suitable for basin collaboratives requires evaluating two fundamental dimensions: intrinsic project attributes and the surrounding enabling environment. It is critical to reiterate that these criteria are applied at the project level to determine whether an intervention qualifies as a credible CA project for potential inclusion into a basin collaborative rather than for evaluating the basin collaborative itself. This guidance establishes clear evaluation criteria for project attributes, enabling practitioners to systematically assess both existing projects and inform the design of future ones. Importantly, these criteria retain their utility even in contexts where enabling conditions are still evolving, providing a practical foundation for initial implementation.

While successful and mature collaboratives depend on supportive policy frameworks, governance structures and stakeholder alignment (Box 1), this framework offers immediate value by enabling CMTs or similar governance structures to identify projects with strong foundational merits. Such projects can serve as catalysts for building momentum towards broader systemic change, with the understanding that connections to enabling systems will typically develop through iterative progress rather than requiring full establishment from inception.

### Box 1: Ideal conditions for successful collective action projects and basin collaboratives

A supportive, enabling environment provides the critical foundation for CA projects and basin collaboratives to thrive even before project-specific interventions begin. Key systemic factors include:

1. **Governance maturity**, where pre-established data-sharing protocols, aligned basin metrics and multi-stakeholder governance bodies (e.g., secretariats) reduce transaction costs and build trust. The presence of successful past collaborations demonstrates proof of concept, while conflict resolution mechanisms anticipate complex nexus challenges. Trust and relationship integrity reduce collaborative risks - evidenced through pre-established neutral mediation roles, historical grievance mechanisms and existing transparency norms.
2. **Stakeholder readiness**, enabled by trusted conveners and inclusive engagement processes, ensures diverse voices are heard and power imbalances are mitigated. When stakeholders already participate in policy forums, projects gain immediate relevance to decision-making.
3. **Financial and institutional sustainability**, including seed funding pools and long-term financing models, de-risks early-stage collaboration. Transparent data systems and policy advocacy channels allow projects to scale impacts beyond isolated interventions.
4. **Equity and conflict safeguards**, including independent mediation systems (e.g., ombudsmen) and power-mapping protocols, ensure historically marginalized groups influence decision-making. Evidence from the Edinburgh WaterLogues (AWS & WWF, 2025) shows that projects with rotating leadership roles for underrepresented stakeholders achieve 30% higher long-term compliance with basin goals.

These attributes create a “ready-to-implement” infrastructure for collaboratives where projects avoid reinventing governance systems and instead focus resources on implementation. Strong enabling conditions amplify project success by providing shared tools (metrics), networks (stakeholders) and pathways (policy influence) that individual initiatives could not efficiently develop alone. For example, a basin with a water-data platform (governance), an active multi-stakeholder council (engagement) and a water tariff funding mechanism (finance) can rapidly onboard new CA projects, whereas basins lacking these systems require projects to first build the institutional scaffolding. In basins where these enabling systems are weak or absent, the initial function of a CA project may be to help build this foundational environment, with the understanding that full alignment with these criteria is a longer-term goal.

The projects are assessed against four broad categories of criteria: multi-stakeholder engagement, project design, co-investment and governance (further elaborated in sections below). Each category includes **foundational** criteria, the pillars of a successful project to be a part of the basin collaborative; projects should strive to meet these criteria to qualify as genuine collaborative projects. Second, **enhanced** criteria bolster the potential for transformative impact but are not primary considerations for inclusion into a basin collaborative. The four criteria categories proposed are not ranked by priority, nor are the criteria proposed under each heading. These are alphabetically listed under these headings, and CMTs or similar governance structures can prioritize this based on their project conditions, where appropriate.

**It is important to note that in practice, projects may be unable to meet all foundational criteria due to contextual constraints beyond their control. In such cases, collaboratives should pragmatically weigh the trade-offs between pursuing an imperfect initiative with strong potential for impact vs. taking no action at all. The framework should be applied flexibly to advance the most promising available projects, using the criteria as a guide for ongoing alignment rather than as a rigid barrier to action.**

The following sections present these criteria in detail, elaborating on each of them, including their type (foundational or enhanced), and provide examples of how they can be applied.

### Box 2: Hypothetical CA Project: Agricultural Water Quality Stewardship Project

The examples presented in the criteria tables below draw from a hypothetical CA project, illustrating how the criteria guide project design and implementation in practice.

The Agricultural Water Quality Stewardship (AWQS) project is a coordinated effort among farmers' cooperatives, agribusinesses, NGOs, local governments and research institutions to address critical water quality challenges in a high-priority agricultural basin. Focused on reducing nutrient runoff from maize production, the initiative brings together 18 partner organizations through a formally established governance structure anchored by a binding Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). The project is coordinated and implemented by a dedicated project team (AWQS Project Team) composed of representatives from the key project partners. The project implements an innovative modular approach combining precision irrigation techniques, optimized fertilizer application and nature-based solutions allowing for both targeted interventions and comprehensive watershed-scale adoption.

A distinctive feature is its integrated governance model, featuring a rotating stakeholder steering committee with equal decision-making authority across sectors supported by an independent conflict resolution mechanism. The project has established robust monitoring protocols, with water quality data shared transparently among partners and with regulatory bodies through standardized reporting aligned with the Positive Water Impact (PWI) and Water Quality Benefit Accounting (WQBA) frameworks. A standout feature is its financial resilience model, including a drought-contingency fund – a risk-sharing mechanism funded proportionally by agribusiness (60%), government (30%) and farmers (10%) to mitigate water shortages and stabilize operations during droughts.

Having demonstrated success at the sub-catchment level, including measurable reductions in nitrate loads and improved aquatic biodiversity, the project formally requests consideration for inclusion in the basin collaborative. This initiative offers three compelling value propositions:

- A field-tested model for agricultural water stewardship with quantifiable results,
- Established partnerships with key basin stakeholders, including historically marginalized groups and
- Technically and financially scalable solutions that can accelerate progress toward the collaborative's nutrient-reduction goals.

The AWQS project team believes that the project's modular design enables adaptable expansion across varying basin conditions, while its inclusive governance structure mirrors the collaborative's commitment to equitable, multi-stakeholder decision-making. By integrating with the basin collaborative, this initiative can transition from local success to system-wide impact, amplifying its contributions to watershed health and resilience.

This hypothetical project will be used as a running example throughout Sections 2.1 - 2.4 to demonstrate how the selection criteria apply in practice.

## 2.1 Multi-stakeholder Engagement

These criteria evaluate how effectively a project engages diverse actors - governments, businesses, civil society and communities - ensuring inclusivity, clear roles and accountability and conflict management while maintaining the potential for expansion to new partners. By fostering collaborative ownership, aligning priorities and leveraging collective expertise, this approach strengthens legitimacy and sustainability. Projects meeting these criteria build trust, maximize impact and drive long-term success, making them highly effective for scalable, collaborative initiatives.

Subcategory	Criteria	Type	Elaboration	Example - Hypothetical AWQS Project
<b>Inclusivity</b>	Diverse stakeholder involvement in visioning, planning, implementation or other decision-making.	Foundational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The stakeholder engagement process should ideally include stakeholders from the public and private sectors, NGOs, local communities and other actors (where appropriate), ensuring that no relevant group is excluded.</li> <li>Credible CA requires representation across gender, age, regional and minority groups in governance as exemplified by Diageo's priority basin working groups, which include farmers, NGOs and local governments (Diageo, 2025) and TNC's São Paulo Water Fund, which ensures equitable decision-making through rotating stakeholder committees (TNC, 2025). This practice of formalizing inclusive governance is further advanced in contemporary corporate guidance, which provides frameworks for establishing balanced, multi-stakeholder steering committees from the outset (Diageo, 2025).</li> <li>The engagement process should be designed to understand and respect local community values, traditions and knowledge, ensuring project goals are aligned with community-defined priorities and needs.</li> </ul>	The AWQS steering committee includes representatives from 18 partner organizations - farmers' cooperatives (40%), agribusinesses (30%), NGOs (15%), local government (10%) and research institutions (5%) - with equal voting rights on all decisions, as formalized in the project MOU.
<b>Partnership expansion</b>	Opportunities to engage additional partners are explored.	Foundational	Demonstrate active mechanisms for CA expansion - either by welcoming new partners through co-investment and resource-sharing opportunities or through multi-stakeholder partnerships. This dual-path approach ensures all included projects genuinely contribute to scalable solutions while maintaining flexibility for different collaboration models.	The AWQS project expanded its partnership to include a regional agricultural university after demonstrating its capacity to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Validate monitoring data through independent water quality testing and</li> <li>Train 150+ farmers annually on precision irrigation techniques - directly supporting the project's scaling goals.</li> </ul>

Subcategory	Criteria	Type	Elaboration	Example - Hypothetical AWQS Project
<b>Roles and accountability</b>	Clear project roles and responsibilities are articulated for all partners.	Foundational	Project roles and responsibilities are articulated and, in cases, may be formally captured in contracts, MOUs and other documents. These detail what each partner will commit to undertaking across different project phases or across the lifetime of the project. Review and adaptation opportunities are provided.	The AWQS project established binding MOUs specifying each partner's contributions: single examples from each organization include farmers' cooperatives implementing nature-based solutions, agribusinesses funding 60% of the contingency fund, researchers providing monitoring expertise and governments facilitating policy alignment. Each organization has multiple roles in this project.
<b>Awareness raising and behavior change</b>	Awareness campaigns, upskilling, knowledge transfers, capacity building and behavior change are integrated.	Enhanced	Often, real change requires a change of view, attitude and depth of insight. Especially in areas where water stewardship and CA are new concepts, an educational (awareness-raising campaign to all the water users or the project beneficiaries in the basin) component and training opportunities to the project are valuable.	The AWQS project allocates 15% of its annual budget to farmer training programs, delivered through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mobile demonstration units (managed by agribusiness partners)</li> <li>• Multilingual instruction manuals co-developed with farmers' cooperatives</li> <li>• Field days at pilot sites showing 20-30% nitrate reduction results.</li> </ul>
<b>Long-term ownership and capacity</b>	Plans for building local capacity and transferring long-term ownership are defined.	Enhanced	Projects should plan for the transition from implementation partners to long-term local ownership and operation. This includes role allocation and capacity building for operation and maintenance, clarifying responsibilities for ongoing costs and establishing clear ownership of assets. This mitigates the risk of project failure once initial funding or external support ends.	The AWQS project has trained a team of 10 local community members on sensor maintenance and data collection. A formal agreement with the farmers' cooperative outlines their responsibility for maintaining buffer zones post-project, with a micro-funding model established for ongoing upkeep costs.

## 2.2 Project Design

These criteria enable CMTs or similar governance structures to select high-potential CA projects by evaluating key elements: basin-level challenge alignment, clear baseline goals/key performance indicators (KPIs), modular scalability, standardized metrics, robust monitoring systems, technical, financial and legal feasibility and phased milestones with measurable targets. Enhanced strengths include sustainability plans for post-funding continuity, multiple ecological, social and economic benefits, emergency preparedness, education or skills development, behavior change components and embedded monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) frameworks. Projects meeting these criteria and proposals with concrete plans around these criteria ensure scientific rigor, adaptive management, systemic impact and long-term resilience, making them ideal for replicable, high-impact water stewardship initiatives.

<b>Subcategory</b>	<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>Elaboration</b>	<b>Example - Hypothetical AWQS Project</b>
<b>Data systems</b>	Data capturing, monitoring and reporting mechanisms are established.	Foundational	The project has established systems to track progress and share data transparently. These follow common reporting schedules and formats (e.g., remote sensing, community audits).	The project tracks water quality improvements at monthly intervals, using a best-practice sampling protocol ( <a href="#">Example</a> ) and a fully accredited laboratory for analyses. Results are recorded on a drive accessible to all partners, and progress is presented at the annual stakeholder feedback event in clear and inclusive language.
<b>Feasibility</b>	Opportunities to engage additional partners are explored.	Foundational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A feasibility assessment confirms that the project meets the required standards across a variety of elements.</li> <li>• Feasibility assessments can be conducted at multiple stages of the project. Ideally, an initial feasibility assessment is undertaken (or available if the project is existing) to ascertain what elements were assessed to ensure project success. It should also check barriers to long-term adoption and maintenance by the community including exit strategy of the project implementing partners.</li> <li>• The feasibility study reports are available to all project partners.</li> </ul>	<p>The AWQS project’s feasibility study confirmed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• \$2.1M secured funding (60% agribusiness, 30% government, 10% farmers),</li> <li>• Local availability of 85% of required equipment</li> <li>• Compliance with all regional water quality regulations</li> <li>• Risk mitigation through the drought-contingency fund.</li> </ul>
<b>Milestones and KPIs</b>	Milestones and KPIs	Foundational	Project implementation timelines and milestones are defined with corresponding KPIs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Output: Quarterly targets for changing 500 hectares of crop fields to the new fertilizer and irrigation protocol</li> <li>• Outcome: Timeline with measurable targets (e.g., “40% reduction in nitrate load, calculated as annual average, at the downstream monitoring points by the end of 2025”).</li> </ul>
<b>Policy and priority alignment</b>	Alignment with government-identified initiatives and goals.	Foundational	Project objectives should be designed to address the needs and interests already identified by relevant local communities and public sector authorities (e.g., in National Action Plans, public health policies, river basin management plans).	The AWQS project’s goal of reducing nutrient loads directly supports the national ministry of environment’s target for improving river water quality classified for agricultural use.

Subcategory	Criteria	Type	Elaboration	Example - Hypothetical AWQS Project
<b>Resilience planning</b>	Contingency planning is in place.	Foundational	The project considers key risks and contains contingency plans to safeguard against the risk of failures or underperformance.	<p>The AWQS project's risk register includes specific contingency plans for its core activities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Risk: A severe, early-season drought reduces streamflow, concentrating pollutant levels and negating the water quality benefits of reduced fertilizer use. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Contingency: The project's drought-contingency fund is activated to subsidize the installation of soil moisture sensors for a targeted group of farmers, enabling hyper-efficient irrigation to maintain dilution flows in critical tributaries.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Risk: A key cover crop species fails to establish due to unseasonal pests, leaving soil exposed and leading to nutrient runoff during winter rains. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Contingency: The project has vetted and secured a supply of an alternative, fast-establishing cover crop species to be used as an immediate replacement.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Risk: Key monitoring equipment is damaged by flooding or vandalism, creating data gaps. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Contingency: The project utilizes a tiered monitoring system, with a subset of robust, real-time sensors at priority locations backed by manual community-based water quality sampling, ensuring data collection continues.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>Shared water challenge identification</b>	Shared water challenges are identified for the project.	Foundational	<p>Projects should align on shared water challenges, (e.g., scarcity, pollution, access) through either:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Existing basin priorities (e.g., River Basin Management Plans, risk assessments)</li> <li>• Reviewing outputs from tools like Aqueduct or the Water Risk Filter</li> <li>• Local diagnostics, such as project and stakeholder mapping, water quality testing for smaller-scale initiatives, with a pathway to align with broader basin challenges through collaborative engagement</li> <li>• Basin modelling (e.g., TNC's Water Funds, which combine hydrological modelling with community engagement to align interventions with basin-scale challenges) (TNC, 2021).</li> </ul>	<p>The AWQS project identified maize production as the primary source of nutrient runoff through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Water Risk Filter analysis showing high nitrate vulnerability</li> <li>• Stakeholder consultations with 18 basin organizations</li> <li>• Water quality testing at 12 sub-catchment monitoring points.</li> </ul>

Subcategory	Criteria	Type	Elaboration	Example - Hypothetical AWQS Project
			Most CA projects will work on a smaller scale than the collaboratives, meaning that they might consider the challenges of a sub-basin instead of the larger basin.	
<b>Standardized metrics</b>	Metrics should be SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound) and capture co-benefits.	Foundational	As part of the project design, partners agree on all metrics used in the project. These should reflect performance indicators recommended in globally available frameworks, including Positive Water Impact (PWI), the AWS Standard, Volumetric Water Benefit Accounting (VWBA) and Water Quality Benefit Accounting (WQBA).	A standardized reporting protocol for reduced pollutant load for nitrates and phosphates in mass over time has been agreed upon. This aligns with PWI and WQBA, and the data is shared with the local authorities to augment their records.
<b>Strategic clarity</b>	Project goals, strategies and steps exist.	Foundational	The project has clear goals, strategies and steps to address identified challenges.	<p>Goal: Reduce basin-wide nutrient loads by 30% (from a baseline for nitrates of 12mg/L) within five years.</p> <p>Strategy: A three-tiered approach, including</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Agribusiness subsidies for precision equipment (years 1-2)</li> <li>• Government-backed insurance for yield protection (years 3-4)</li> <li>• Farmer-led training networks (year 5).</li> </ul>
<b>Sustainability</b>	Plans for financing throughout all project phases exist.	Foundational	The proposal/framework outlines potential avenues and options to ensure financial sustainability/continuity beyond the initial funding period.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Local government has a mandate to support emerging farmers and is interested in providing relevant extension services</li> <li>• Agribusinesses express interest in partnering by stocking the equipment needed to support the continued roll-out of the new fertilizer and irrigation routine to other customers.</li> </ul>
<b>Challenge intervention alignment</b>	Challenges addressed by the project align with the basin collaborative goals.	Enhanced	The challenges identified by the project align with the broader goals of the collaborative, which should themselves be an amalgamation of local community needs, government policies and basin-wide priorities (e.g., national water policies, specific basin management plans). This ensures the project supports a shared vision for the basin.	<p>The key basin challenge identified by both the desktop review and the stakeholder engagement process is water quality, specifically around eutrophication. The maize runoff project:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aligns with the collaborative's goal of 30% nutrient-load reduction by 2030</li> <li>• Implements monitored pilot interventions (cover crops, buffer zones)</li> <li>• Shares data with the collaborative to inform wider policy.</li> </ul>

Subcategory	Criteria	Type	Elaboration	Example - Hypothetical AWQS Project
<b>MEL* integration</b>	MEL is embedded in the project design.	Enhanced	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The project design allows for a MEL component from the outset. This allows for clearly defined social learning opportunities and feedback loops for adaptive management and sound measurement processes for outputs, outcomes and impacts.*</li> <li>MEL systems should include adaptive learning mechanisms (e.g., annual health checks or pivot logs) to enable continuous improvement.</li> </ul>	10% of the project budget is set aside to allow for a MEL program that helps to monitor and evaluate the project's progress and learning. A third party is engaged for this task, tailoring the MEL process by following the <a href="#">UNDP MEL guidelines</a> .
<b>Multiple benefits</b>	Project delivers identified co-benefits.	Enhanced	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Project outputs deliver stacked ecological, social and/or economic benefits to maximize project outcomes and impact and attract diverse funders.</li> <li>Co-benefits should be explicitly identified, measured and reported (e.g., via theories of change or adaptive MEL frameworks) to ensure alignment with shared basin-scale goals.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The reduced nutrient flow into the downstream river and wetland systems starts to show an improvement in aquatic invertebrate health and overall freshwater biodiversity</li> <li>The nearest water treatment works needs to invest in lower treatment costs to reduce nitrate levels in drinking water</li> <li>Downstream farmers experience less algal growth at their water intake points, reducing labor costs to keep pump equipment clean and maintained.</li> </ul>
<b>Scalability</b>	Scalable design with clear expansion pathways is demonstrated.	Enhanced	<p>Projects can be designed with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Modular components that can be independently adapted (e.g., specific practices, technologies) either by expanding the size (impact or scope) or replicating the project in several locations</li> <li>The scaling pathways could include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Technical transfer (e.g., toolkits, training)</li> <li>- Governance alignment (e.g., policy hooks, institutional partnerships)</li> <li>- Financial models (e.g., cost-sharing frameworks).</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<p>The AWQS project's modular approach allows stand-alone or combined implementation of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Precision irrigation (scalable to 500+ farms)</li> <li>Optimized fertilizer protocols (adaptable to different soil types)</li> <li>Buffer zones (customizable to field sizes), with training programs for each module.</li> </ul>
<b>Systemic integration</b>	Project strengthens public water governance and service-delivery systems.	Enhanced	The project is designed to actively reinforce and improve existing public sector systems rather than create parallel structures.	The AWQS project shares its water quality monitoring data directly with the regional water authority via a compatible data platform. It also co-funds training for government extension officers on the agricultural best practices it promotes, thereby strengthening public advisory services.

\*Note: Traditionally, an M&E process lacks the social learning component and looks at measurable data only. M&E is covered under Data Systems as it is considered a foundational criterion, whereas MEL integration is an enhanced criterion.

## 2.3 Co-Investment and Resource Sharing

These criteria enable CMTs or similar governance structures to assess projects through financial requirements, covering funding models that can ensure equitable partner contributions (monetary, in-kind, technical, etc.) coupled with robust transparency mechanisms. The presence of dedicated partnership management support serves as an enhanced criterion. These elements collectively establish balanced commitments, verifiable accountability and effective governance - fundamental requirements for impactful CA initiatives.

Subcategory	Criteria	Type	Elaboration	Example - Hypothetical AWQS Project
<b>Funding models</b>	Clear partner contribution models are established across all phases.	Foundational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Follows a defined model, framework or set of principles that outline contributions (financial, in-kind or technical) from diverse funding partners. Contributions should have clear guidelines on fund disbursement across different project phases (e.g., design, implementation, scaling), responsibilities for short-term or sustained funding, etc.</li> <li>Funding models should account for the full cost of project development. This includes upfront costs borne by delivery partners for feasibility studies, stakeholder engagement and proposal development. Funding models could include financial and resource contributions from early adopters as well as from those project partners that join after project inception. This allows for flexibility in current and future funding and resource models and will require detailed descriptions of benefit attribution, roles and responsibilities based on the timing and amount of resource allocation*</li> <li>Models should explicitly include capital expenditure and operational expenditure, ensuring a plan for funding not just construction but also long-term operation, maintenance, replacement and major repairs</li> <li>The model should clearly identify who is responsible for ongoing operational costs after the initial implementation phase to ensure financial sustainability and avoid project abandonment.</li> </ul>	The AWQS project's drought-contingency fund follows a proportional model: agribusinesses (60%), government (30%) and farmers (10%). Contributions are tied to benefits - agribusinesses reduce operational risks, governments meet water quality targets and farmers gain irrigation security.

Subcategory	Criteria	Type	Elaboration	Example - Hypothetical AWQS Project
<b>Partnership management</b>	Funding for partnership management functions is secured.	Foundational	A budget was allocated for a secretariat/PMO to manage the CA project effectively.	The AWQS project allocates 6% of its \$2.1M budget to a rotating secretariat (hosted annually by a different partner organization) that: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coordinates quarterly progress reviews against PWI targets</li> <li>• Maintains the blockchain transaction ledger</li> <li>• Facilitates the conflict resolution protocol - with costs split 60/30/10 per the funding model.</li> </ul>
<b>Transparency</b>	Transparent, auditable resource tracking and accounting mechanisms are established.	Foundational	Clear documentation and processes for receiving, storing and disbursing financial and in-kind contributions across partners (financial integrity) build trust and transparency. These documents and processes could be audited at regular intervals to ensure funds and other resources are being used appropriately.	All AWQS project financial transactions (contingency fund disbursements, equipment purchases) and water quality data are recorded in a blockchain-based system accessible to partners, with quarterly audits by an independent third party.

*\* Benefit or credit attribution will need to be considered when developing funding models. Early investors may be offered greater incentives to join/fund the project from the beginning, while those who join the collaborative later may have a different return on investment or outcomes. Additionally, consideration should be given to how different resources are considered as part of the funding model. Some project partners may contribute non-financial resources, such as the use of their geospatial software, the use of sensors or other technology, practical expertise, etc. These resources can be allocated a financial value, or models can incorporate the value of these goods and services in non-monetary models and mechanisms. The development of these funding models is at the discretion of the project partners. Wherever possible, financial, and non-financial contributions should be equally weighted.*

## 2.4 Governance

These criteria help CMTs or similar governance structures select projects with legitimacy, equity and institutional sustainability. Foundational criteria include formal commitments (signed agreements), policy alignment, equitable risk/responsibility sharing and transparent credit attribution. Enhanced criteria feature inclusive participation, policy advocacy pathways, dedicated governance bodies, conflict resolution systems and open communication channels. Together, these ensure balanced power dynamics, stakeholder trust and enduring collaborative frameworks, transforming projects into sustainable, scalable solutions.

Subcategory	Criteria	Type	Elaboration	Example - Hypothetical AWQS Project
<b>Communication</b>	Transparent reporting systems established to ensure real-time partner access to critical data.	Foundational	These systems prevent distrust and inefficiency by ensuring all partners have access to relevant information when needed.	The AWQS project ensures transparency through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Real-time monitoring dashboards displaying nitrate/phosphate levels (updated hourly from 12 sensor stations),</li> <li>• Bimonthly technical working groups (rotating hosting among partner facilities to review data trends) and</li> <li>• Annual public reports and verifying results against both: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- PWI targets for nutrient load reduction and</li> <li>- Water Quality Benefit Accounting (WQBA) methodology.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>Credit attribution</b>	Formal attribution protocols exist for partner contributions to project outcomes.	Foundational	Clear attribution protocols prevent partner disengagement by ensuring all contributions are visibly recognized, which sustains collaboration and trust in CA initiatives.  Note: This criterion is directly linked to the criterion on funding models.	The partnership agreement ensures fair recognition through structured protocols: all communications visibly acknowledge partner roles, annual reports detail measurable contributions by each organization and interactive dashboards demonstrate how combined efforts achieve shared goals. This systematic approach prevents disproportionate credit claims while validating every partner's impact.
<b>Formal commitments</b>	There are signed agreements on governance, roles and responsibilities.	Foundational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Formal agreements (e.g., contracts, MOUs, governance charters) establish equitable decision-making structures as seen in Diageo's binding MOUs with basin stakeholders to allocate roles (e.g., farmers implementing nature-based solutions, agribusinesses funding contingency plans) and TNC's Water Fund governance charters that mandate conflict mediation (TNC, 2025). Recent corporate implementation guides continue to emphasize the critical role of MOUs for defining roles, financial commitments and data-sharing agreements, providing templates for structuring these formal partnerships (Diageo, 2025).</li> <li>• Legal documentation such as MOUs, terms of reference or contracts ensures accountability by binding partners to shared goals, roles and responsibilities.</li> </ul>	The AWQS project's MOU includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Binding commitments for nutrient load reductions (30% in five years),</li> <li>• Proportional funding of the drought-contingency fund and</li> <li>• Data-sharing agreements with regulatory bodies.</li> </ul>

<b>Subcategory</b>	<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>Elaboration</b>	<b>Example - Hypothetical AWQS Project</b>
<b>Governance body</b>	A dedicated coordination body exists.	Foundational	Projects should establish a dedicated coordination body (e.g., steering committee) when they involve multiple stakeholder groups or span several sites or years. This project-specific body can help align implementation, monitor progress, allow for joint decision making and mediate conflicts.	The project has established a permanent steering committee with equal representation from businesses, public-sector agencies, local communities and environmental groups. This governance body meets quarterly to coordinate all restoration projects, share progress and budget reports, develop standards or practices and resolve any disputes through mediation.
<b>Trust-building</b>	Mechanisms exist for building and maintaining trust among project partners.	Foundational	Projects should foster trust through documented processes for addressing power imbalances, dissent and grievances. This includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Safe spaces for dialogue (e.g., anonymous feedback channels),</li> <li>• Neutral mediation roles (e.g., ombudsman or rotating facilitators) and</li> <li>• Cultural/political context sensitivity in stakeholder engagement.</li> </ul>	The AWQS project has appointed an independent mediator to address tensions between farmers and industry. Meetings include confidential feedback surveys and annual “trust audits” to assess stakeholder satisfaction. Dispute resolutions are documented in public dashboards.
<b>Advocacy and policy influence</b>	Structured policy engagement with clear advocacy pathways exists.	Enhanced	The project has defined pathways for policy influence, documented stakeholder engagement mechanisms with decision-makers and capacity for collective advocacy to advance legal or policy changes.	The project has established formal advocacy channels, including annual policy white books featuring ecological impact data and quarterly government roundtables. The multi-stakeholder coalition successfully lobbied for revised water recharge standards, securing permanent seats for community representatives on regional water governance boards. This demonstrates direct policy influence, unlike conventional CSR projects that lack structured engagement with regulators.
<b>Conflict management and resolution</b>	A mechanism for formalized conflict mediation protocols with independent arbitration is established.	Enhanced	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There are clear processes to resolve arising conflicts. Part of this process may include the establishment or inclusion of independent mediation and an arbitration process</li> <li>• The project has adopted neutral facilitation and conflict resolution roles to ensure equitable decision-making.</li> </ul>	The AWQS project’s conflict resolution protocol includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Monthly mediation sessions chaired by a rotating neutral party (university researcher),</li> <li>• 60-day arbitration deadlines for unresolved disputes and</li> <li>• Documentation of all cases in annual transparency reports.</li> </ul>

<b>Subcategory</b>	<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>Elaboration</b>	<b>Example - Hypothetical AWQS Project</b>
<b>Inclusive participation in decision-making</b>	Governance with inclusive decision-making is safeguarded.	Enhanced	Governance structures ensure inclusive decision-making, with formal mechanisms for multi-stakeholder participation and mitigation of power imbalances. (e.g., quotas for marginalized groups).	The AWQS steering committee uses a hybrid model: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One vote per partner organization (18 total)</li> <li>• Supermajority (2/3) required for financial decisions</li> <li>• Veto power for farmers' cooperatives on implementation timelines - ensuring equitable influence despite unequal funding contributions.</li> </ul>
<b>Policy alignment/engagement</b>	Coherent integration or engagement with water policies and regulations exists.	Enhanced	Projects should demonstrate engagement with relevant national/regional or local water policies and regulatory frameworks. Alignment with policies should be sought but may not be possible where policy gaps exist.	Project partners are collaborating with other stakeholders, such as farmers and water authorities in the basin, to deploy smart irrigation systems, cutting agricultural water use by 30%. This initiative aligns with the national water policy and Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6.4, complies with regional regulations and shares progress data quarterly with water authorities.
<b>Representation in policy</b>	Partner representation in policy-making platforms is assured.	Enhanced	Ensures multi-stakeholder input in policy development and top-down decision-making. Policies to be generated based on practical considerations and multiple viewpoints.	The project includes water authorities in decision-making, integrates project data into regional water policies and secures seats for partners on policy task forces, leading to updated groundwater guidelines.
<b>Risk and responsibility sharing</b>	Shared partner accountability with risk distribution mechanisms exists.	Enhanced	Partners share accountability for any potential or existing failures. The project has formal mechanisms to distribute risks, costs and responsibilities equitably among partners, ensuring no single entity bears a disproportionate burden.	The project has established three enforceable risk-sharing mechanisms: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shared cost of pollution clean-up between project partners (50%) and municipalities (50%)</li> <li>• A drought insurance pool funded by agribusinesses (60%), government (30%) and farmers (10%) and</li> <li>• A jointly capitalized contingency fund.</li> </ul>

## 3 EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

This proposed evaluation framework outlines a standardized approach to assess whether a CA project meets the minimum eligibility criteria for inclusion in a basin collaborative. While some subjectivity exists in scoring, the framework provides a structured approach to support CMTs or similar governance structures to facilitate dialogue with project proponents, identify strengths and gaps and collaboratively develop pathways for alignment and integration. Projects undergo a two-phase assessment process, with evaluation outcomes determined by their performance against the criteria outlined in Section 2.

### 3.1 Phase 1: Foundational Criteria Screening

This step ensures that CA projects meeting foundational criteria are considered for inclusion, serving as a strict gatekeeping mechanism.

#### Decision Process

#### 1. Fully Aligned Projects (all foundational criteria satisfied) | Green list projects

- Explanation: The project meets most of the foundational criteria identified as important for consideration by the CMT or similar governance structures.
- Outcome: The project qualifies for inclusion in the collaborative.
- Next Step: Consider for immediate inclusion or proceed to Phase 2 for ranking against enhanced criteria – if needed.

#### 2. Partially Aligned Projects (Foundational criteria partially satisfied) | Amber list projects

- Explanation: The project does not fully meet some of the foundational criteria but demonstrates significant potential for current or future inclusion.
- Outcome: The project may not be ready for inclusion but shows potential. The project may be reconsidered for inclusion once amendments are made.
- Next Steps:
  - Advance to Phase 2 for the gap analysis and weighted assessment to determine eligibility for inclusion in the basin collaborative.
  - Based on the local context, the CMT or similar governance structures may alternatively decide to include the project without a formal weighted assessment.

#### 3. Not Aligned Projects (Foundational criteria not satisfied) | Red list projects

- Explanation: The project fails to meet most foundational criteria entirely.
- Outcome: The project is rejected for inclusion.
- Next Step: No further evaluation unless resubmitted with significant changes

### 3.2 Phase 2: Enhanced Criteria Ranking

This phase serves two key functions:

1. **Prioritization of projects:** Ranks “green list” projects through a weighted scoring. Amber-list projects are also assessed to inform the final selection.
2. **Gap analysis for amber-list projects:** Evaluates projects that partially meet foundational criteria to identify specific deficiencies and develop targeted recommendations.

Prioritization is only necessary in scenarios where funding or capacity is limited. Not all green-list projects can be supported simultaneously. The weighted scoring offers a decision-making approach. Before final ranking, the CMT or similar governance structures should conduct direct consultations with project implementers. These discussions serve to:

- Transparently communicate evaluation results,
- Collaboratively review identified gaps for amber-listed projects and
- Co-develop actionable alignment plans with clear timelines. This ensures implementers understand prioritization decisions and can meaningfully address deficiencies.

Figure 1 presents the two-phased approach proposed in this framework. This framework suggests multiple pathways to considering projects for inclusion in basin collaboratives, where improvements may be needed and where CA projects should not be considered for inclusion in a collaborative.

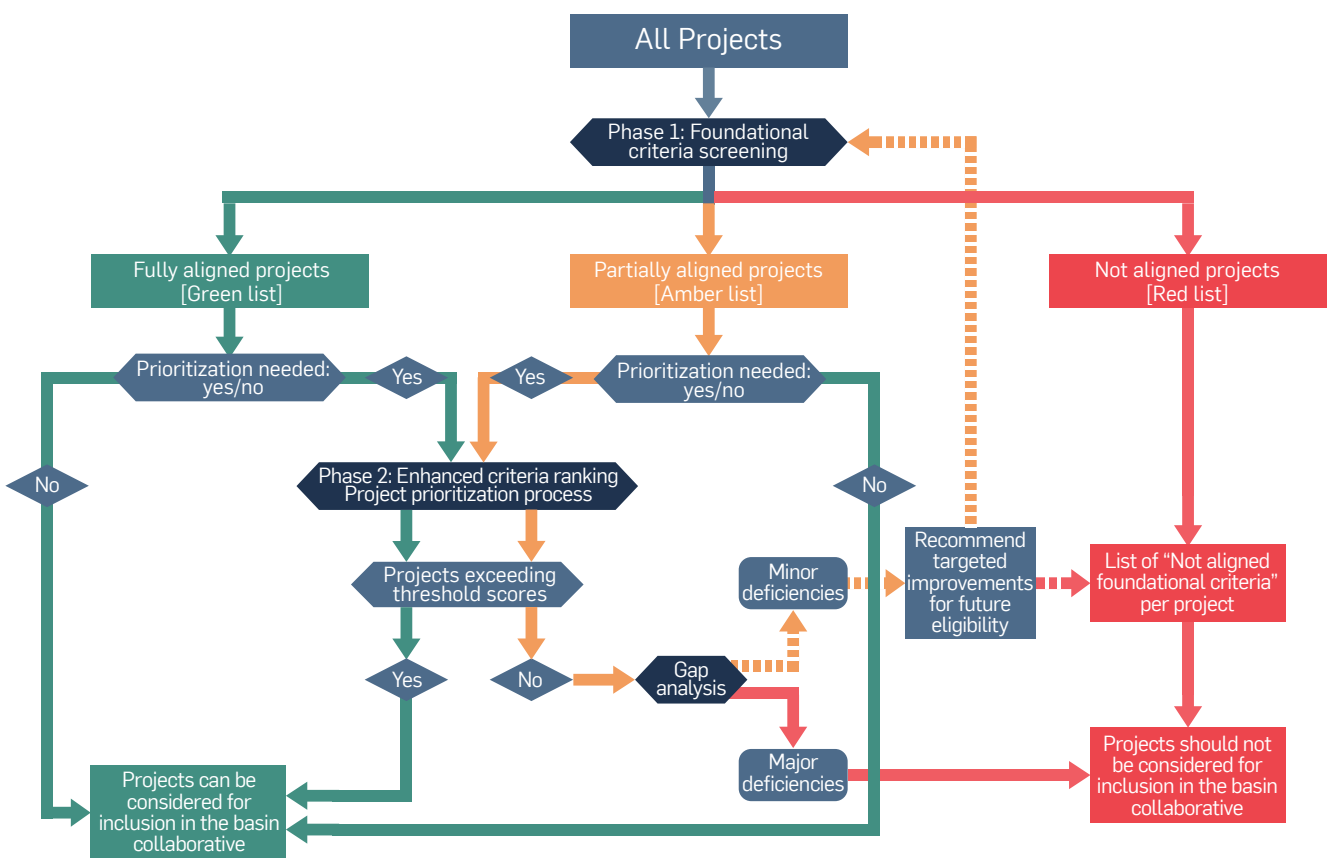


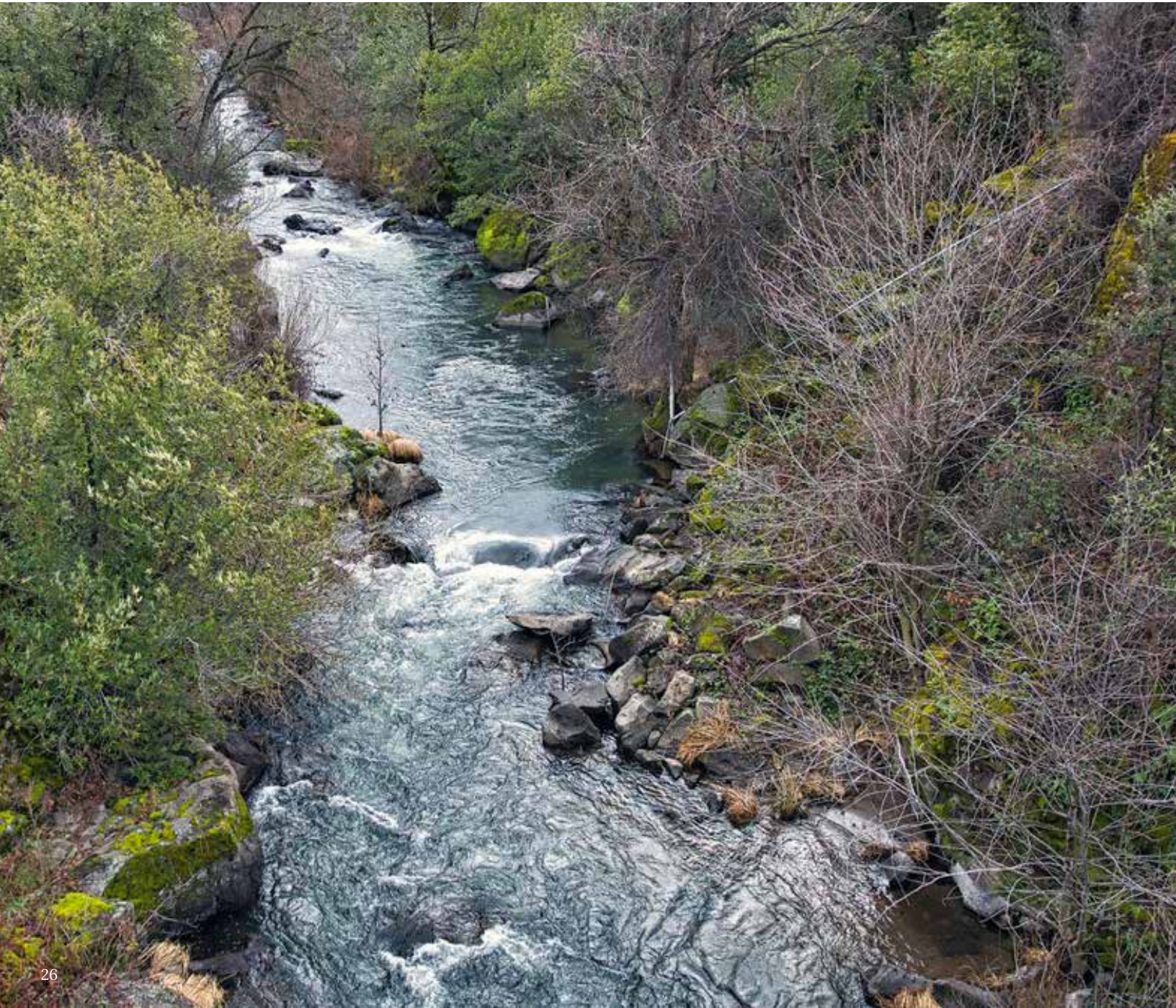
Figure 1. Schematics for selection and prioritization of CA projects for potential inclusion in a basin collaborative

Note: The dotted yellow line indicates projects that partially meet the foundational criteria and score below the threshold in the weighted assessment. While these projects do not currently qualify for inclusion in the basin collaborative, partners may use the evaluation recommendations to guide alignment for future consideration.

### **3.3 Weighted Scoring Guidance for Collaborative Management Team**

To ensure strategic and transparent prioritization, CMTs or similar governance structures could implement a weighted scoring system that reflects basin-specific priorities. Begin by assigning a standard weight of 1 to all criteria if they hold equal importance. For strategic emphasis, increase weights proportionally (e.g., 1.5 or 2) for high-priority criteria - such as weighting “scalability” higher in basins needing rapid intervention expansion or prioritizing “regulatory compliance” in politically sensitive regions.

Engage stakeholders to validate weight assignments, document the rationale for any weighted criteria and recalibrate annually to reflect evolving basin needs. This approach maintains objectivity while aligning project selection with measurable impact goals.



## 4 CONCLUSION

This guidance provides a structured framework to assess, classify, prioritize and integrate high-impact CA projects into basin collaboratives, ensuring alignment with systemic water resilience goals. These criteria can directly support the implementation efforts of CA projects, enabling organizations to evaluate projects based on their alignment with foundational and enhanced criteria across four key dimensions: multi-stakeholder engagement, project design, co-investment and governance to be included in basin collaboratives.

The framework recommends a two-phase assessment process: screening for foundational criteria followed by prioritization based on enhanced criteria, which provides a structured approach for decision-makers. Foundational criteria serve as critical starting points for consideration and, where projects fail to fully meet these foundational requirements, this will require targeted alignment before being integrated into collaboratives. Enhanced criteria bolster the foundational elements and can help identify projects with the highest potential for transformative change.

For practitioners, this framework offers actionable guidance. Funders and policymakers should prioritize investments in projects that meet all foundational criteria while encouraging enhancements in areas like scalability and policy alignment. Project developers can use the framework as a diagnostic tool to identify and address gaps in project design or governance before seeking inclusion into basin collaboratives. CMTs or similar governance structures play a critical role in ensuring projects remain integrated with broader water governance systems, preventing isolated efforts that may deliver short-term gains but fail to drive systemic reform towards long-term basin resilience.

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## 6 APPENDIX

The conceptualization of water-related collective action has evolved through thought leadership and practical application. The conceptual development of CA in water stewardship reveals a clear trajectory from foundational principles to operational frameworks. Early definitions, exemplified by the CEO Water Mandate (2013), established the core concept of coordinated multi-stakeholder engagement. This foundation has been progressively refined through subsequent initiatives, with later iterations introducing critical specifications around geographic scope, operational requirements and measurable outcomes. Notably, contemporary works/initiatives now explicitly emphasize basin-scale solutions, resource pooling mechanisms and the need for complementary stakeholder roles, reflecting an evolution from abstract principles to actionable methodologies.

Efforts from the 2010s primarily focused on conceptual framing, as seen in the process-oriented definitions of early guidance. In contrast, recent initiatives demonstrate a marked shift toward implementation, manifested through certification requirements, integrated water resource management approaches and quantitative accounting methods. This transition mirrors the field’s maturation from theoretical discussion to practical application. Where initial frameworks lacked specificity regarding success metrics, contemporary systems now provide detailed impact measurement methodologies. Similarly, the challenge of institutionalizing CA has been addressed through certification schemes and standardized implementation protocols. This progression reflects the water stewardship community’s collective learning, demonstrating how conceptual foundations have been operationalized into practical basin management tools.

This progression reflects the water stewardship community’s collective learning, demonstrating how conceptual foundations have been operationalized into practical basin management tools. The most recent developments, such as the creation of standardized corporate implementation guides (e.g., Diageo, 2025), signify a pivotal shift from defining principles to providing actionable, process-oriented frameworks for companies to execute collective action effectively.

These observations provide valuable context for interpreting the definitional evolution documented in Table 1, while offering guidance for designing next-generation successful CA projects.

Table A1: Sample publications detailing the evolution of CA definitions and guidance in water stewardship, presented in order of publication dates.

Organization	Reference	Core definition	Conceptual advancement
CEO Water Mandate (2013)	<a href="#">Guide to Water-Related Collective Action</a>	“Coordinated engagement among interested parties within an agreed-upon process in support of common objectives.” Positions CA as multi-party collaboration ranging from informal dialogue to structured decision-making.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Foundational definition</li> <li>• Qualitative (emphasizes process flexibility)</li> <li>• Broad “interested parties”</li> <li>• Project-level focus.</li> </ul>
Alliance for Water Stewardship (2019)	<a href="#">Collective action</a>	“Coordinated efforts across catchments, sectors, and borders to manage water resources sustainably and equitably.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• From voluntary to certified action</li> <li>• Quantitative rigor (mandates data-driven proof)</li> <li>• Catchment scale coordination</li> </ul>

Organization	Reference	Core definition	Conceptual advancement
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inclusive stakeholder engagement (requires equitable participation and transparent disclosure)</li> <li>• Embeds CA in climate resilience, policy alignment and collective impact reporting.</li> </ul>
UNEP (2021)	<a href="#">Integrated Water Resources Management</a>	Positions CA as critical to IWRM, requiring multi-stakeholder participation in policy/ implementation to achieve SDG 6.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Governance integration</li> <li>• Policy linkage</li> <li>• SDG alignment.</li> </ul>
Various Organizations (2024)	<a href="#">Unpacking collective action in water stewardship: shared solutions for shared water challenges</a>	“A coordinated set of engagements among interested parties playing complementary roles, which pools together knowledge, resources, and/or expertise to jointly identify and implement solutions at various geographic scales.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Role complementarity</li> <li>• Geographic scalability</li> <li>• Solution co-creation.</li> </ul>
Pacific Institute (2024)	<a href="#">Positive Water Impact Guidance</a>	Builds upon CEO Water Mandate definition with added emphasis on basin-scale outcomes and measurable impact.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Outcome-oriented</li> <li>• Explicit basin focus</li> <li>• Impact measurement framework.</li> </ul>
World Resources Institute, LimnoTech, BlueRisk, Bonneville Environmental Foundation (2025)	<a href="#">Volumetric Water Benefit Accounting 2.0</a>	Also uses the same definition from CEO WM (2013) with a focus on specific efforts to advance sustainable water management.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quantitative focus</li> <li>• Links CA to measurable benefits</li> <li>• Maintains the core 2013 definition.</li> </ul>
TNC (2025)	<a href="#">The Nature Conservancy and Diageo’s Collective Action Journey</a>	Outlines why CA for corporate water users is key to addressing water risk. Defines CA as a “multi-stakeholder approach to addressing shared water risks.” It highlights the collaboration between a corporation (Diageo) and an NGO (TNC) to address systemic water risks in priority basins.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Presents a real-world corporate-NGO partnership case study</li> <li>• Shifts focus from ‘net zero’ to ‘positive’ water impact</li> <li>• Underscores the importance of long-term partnerships and shared goals</li> <li>• Demonstrates addressing basin-level issues beyond a company’s boundaries.</li> </ul>
Diageo (2025)	<a href="#">Diageo Water Collective Action Implementation Guide</a>	“Collective action encompasses multi-stakeholder water management initiatives or projects that involve interaction with government entities, local communities, and/or civil society organisations that ultimately benefit all actors in the basin by addressing shared water challenges.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A practical, step-by-step process for sites</li> <li>• Explicit roles (funding, advocacy, in-kind)</li> <li>• Links to water targets, certification and risk</li> <li>• Introduces formalized internal governance and accountability mechanisms, including a dedicated Collective Action Program (CAP) management tool for tracking and reporting.</li> </ul>

Organization	Reference	Core definition	Conceptual advancement
Alliance for Water Stewardship & WWF (2025)	<a href="#">Edinburgh WaterLogues Summary Report</a>	Multi-stakeholder initiatives delivering shared value for people, nature and basin health through inclusive governance, measurable outcomes and adaptive learning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Operationalize “credible” CA through eight assessable principles (e.g., governance charters, role maps, trust indicators)</li> <li>Explicitly bridges project-level interventions with basin-scale governance</li> <li>Power equity (addresses historical gaps by mandating conflict mediation and marginalized-group representation).</li> </ul>
WWF (n.d.)	<a href="#">Website How We Work with Business</a>	“A coordinated set of engagements among interested parties aimed at pooling resources to address shared freshwater challenges within a basin.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Explicit basin boundary</li> <li>Resource pooling emphasis</li> <li>Practical implementation focus.</li> </ul>
WWF, CEO Water Mandate, Global Water Challenge, & WaterAid. (2026)	Defining a collective action spectrum: A brief for water stewardship practitioners	“A process to coordinate efforts among interested parties to work together as an ecosystem and aim to achieve one or more shared goals related to jointly identified shared water challenges. Collective action can take shape at both the project level and platform level, with the latter involving multiple projects, and typically undertaken at a broader spatial level.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Introduces a formal CA spectrum/typology: Bilateral Projects → CA Projects → CA Platforms.</li> <li>Distinguishes implementation (projects) from coordination &amp; governance (platforms).</li> <li>Maps explicit transition pathways for scaling impact</li> <li>Links CA forms to standardized hydrological scales (e.g., HydroSHEDS)</li> <li>Provides a practical, comparative framework for alignment and investment</li> </ul>



# The CEO Water Mandate's six core elements:

## **DIRECT OPERATIONS**

Mandate endorsers measure and reduce their water use and wastewater discharge and develop strategies for eliminating their impacts on communities and ecosystems.

## **SUPPLY CHAIN AND WATERSHED MANAGEMENT**

Mandate endorsers seek avenues through which to encourage improved water management among their suppliers and public water managers alike.

## **COLLECTIVE ACTION**

Mandate endorsers look to participate in collective efforts with civil society, intergovernmental organizations, affected communities, and other businesses to advance water sustainability.

## **PUBLIC POLICY**

Mandate endorsers seek ways to facilitate the development and implementation of sustainable, equitable, and coherent water policy and regulatory frameworks.

## **COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

Mandate endorsers seek ways to improve community water efficiency, protect watersheds, and increase access to water services as a way of promoting sustainable water management and reducing risks.

## **TRANSPARENCY**

Mandate endorsers are committed to transparency and disclosure in order to hold themselves accountable and meet the expectations of their stakeholders.