

How to Scale a Project to a Program: The Expansion of Al Murunah

Al Murunah Project

Building Climate Resilience through Enhanced Water Security in MENA

- Led by the International Water Management Institute (IWMI)
- In partnership with the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)
- Supported financially and technically by UK International Development.
- In coordination with Ministries of Water, Environment, and Agriculture in project countries (Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine)



IWMI's new strategy

IWMI's 2024–2030 strategy commits to leveraging research and innovation to drive collective action for sustainable, just and climate-resilient water systems. The Strategy emphasizes the importance of building partnerships, broad-based national networks and co-designing water resilience solutions with the communities and institutions (including the private sector) that implement and scale them.

Why shift to a program-based approach?

Traditionally, IWMI has operated through a project-based approach with development aid donors, where each project has a clearly defined start and end point and budget. This is symptomatic of the traditional ODA funding model (and CGIAR funding modalities) which is constrained by short-term political cycles and budget allocations. While this model has resulted in valuable research and innovations, it has limitations, including fragmented efforts and siloed operations, which undermine long-term impact and sustainability.

Project planning within a programmatic framework, however, adds value by integrating efforts, facilitating coordination and leveraging synergies to achieve long-term, sustainable outcomes. Adopting such an approach will allow IWMI to create more lasting impact and develop deeper presence with long-term partnerships at the local, national and global levels. This shift can and will deliver more cohesive, integrated solutions for water resilience that are both scalable and enduring.

Moreover, a programmatic framework requires the following:

- **Positive project delivery** alongside careful stakeholder and donor relationship management to support that scaling from project to program;
- The need to create a **learning and knowledge sharing environment** amongst project leaders and IWMI management to scale individual project efforts into a wider program of work; and
- **Clear identification and articulation** of project to program synergies.

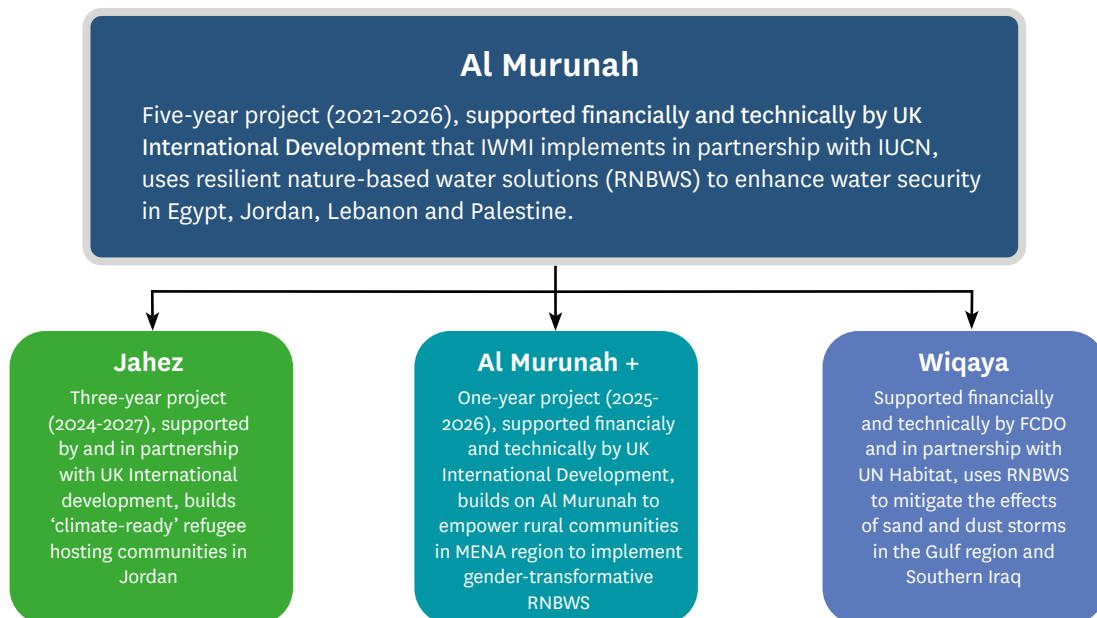


Figure 1. Overview of Al Murunah program-approach components.

Efforts to shift in this direction are in place, but they have not yet reached the scale and level of ambition required to realize IWMI’s strategy. Successful case studies foster efficient organizational learning and engage broader audiences in understanding IWMI’s work, enabling IWMI to leverage the connections and relationships built and attract new donors and partners.

Al Murunah, a case study of a program-based approach

A program-based approach is exemplified by the expansion of the Al Murunah project, which has evolved into a portfolio of interconnected projects, such as Al Murunah+ (which works alongside the initial project), Jahez and Wiqaya. These projects not only build on the core principles of Al Murunah but also address national and donor-specific objectives through a collaborative, co-design process. The transition to a program-based broader audiences in understanding IWMI’s work, enabling IWMI to leverage the connections and relationships built and attract new donors and partners.

Al Murunah is a five-year (2021–2026) initiative aimed at enhancing watersecurity in the MENA region through resilient nature-based water solutions (RNBWS). Delivered in partnership with IUCN, the project implements integrated, scalable interventions that empower communities and strengthen stakeholder capacity. Through community-led pilots, Al Murunah has engaged governments, communities, donors and the private sector in adopting and scaling RNBWS.

Importance of co-design and collaboration

The success of the project has been driven by close collaboration with local partners and strong donor engagement, particularly with FCDO, which enabled the project to expand beyond its original scope. FCDO’s PHENOMENAL program facilitated IWMI’s shift to a program-based approach for scaling RNBWS in the MENA region, providing vital support for the Al Murunah portfolio.

Ongoing engagement with FCDO highlighted their interest in IWMI’s ability to design pilot projects that could scale into larger programs. IWMI’s technical expertise and presence in the region were key to this success, with FCDO recognizing IWMI’s adaptability in challenging environments, making the

organization an ideal partner for scaling impactful work aligned with FCDO’s humanitarian-to-development goals.

This collaboration led to the co-design of follow-up projects, including Al Murunah+ and Jahez, and the expansion of Al Murunah from an initial grant of over \$6 million to approximately \$18.2 million. The emphasis on co-designing and developing investable projects has been crucial in unlocking further climate finance and ensuring projects are both locally relevant and financially sustainable. Additionally, Al Murunah deliverables have unlocked the opportunity to leverage climate funding beyond FCDO through the design of bankable projects.

Co-designing and scaling GESI within climate adaptation strategies

Co-design not only led to more funding opportunities for projects but also facilitated the creation of iterative, impactful and scalable solutions that are critical to climate adaptation. FCDO and IWMI co-designed Al Murunah+ to address the intertwined challenges of gender-based violence and climate change adaptation in the MENA region. Expanding on the Al Murunah project, Al Murunah+ tackles systemic barriers to implementing nature-based water solutions (RNBWS) inclusively, with a strong focus on gender social norms. This success stemmed from IWMI’s growing expertise in integrating gender and social norms into climate adaptation, along with a track record of co-designing solutions with local communities and interdisciplinary teams.

Despite challenges, like coordinating between FCDO’s social development and climate departments and aligning with partners’ strategic goals, Al Murunah+ demonstrates the power of integrating gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) into climate adaptation strategies. It highlights the importance of collaborative, iterative processes to create impactful, scalable solutions, offering a model for future integration of GESI in climate adaptation globally.

What Al Murunah indicates for IWMI’s applied research for development approach

IWMI’s success leveraging the Al Murunah project to create a program highlights the importance of responding to emerging needs and adapting to new challenges—an important shift from



Izbat Al-Hamra, Beheira Governorate, June 22, 2025 (photo: Mohamed Mamdouh/The Marketer).

IWMI's traditional technical research to a more development-focused approach. It also highlights that FCDO, along with local stakeholders, responded positively to hands-on, applied research rather than isolated or theoretical approaches.

How expanding to program enables more comprehensive support for RNBWS scaling

The expanded program also enables IWMI to make a more comprehensive and compelling case for the use and expansion of RNBWS. This is especially important in the MENA region where there is limited data on effectiveness and financial viability.

Through Al Murunah, IWMI expanded the problem definition of barriers to implementation of RNBWS. Now, through Al Murunah's long-term relationships, IWMI has a unique opportunity to generate robust evidence on the effectiveness, costs and benefits for implementation and operation of RNBWS. This is crucial to secure further funding and scale implementation.

Program delivery and partnerships

The program-based approach provides greater flexibility and enables more holistic implementation. It is designed to grow in response to donor and community needs, becoming broader, deeper and more developed over time.

Al Murunah's success as a gateway to scaling IWMI's RNBWS work in the MENA region demonstrates the value of fostering long-term partnerships, ensuring community involvement and securing financial mechanisms for sustainable impact. It exemplifies IWMI's ability to conceptualize, pilot and scale promising models across multiple locations with suitable thematic variations.

A program-based approach delivers results through long-term partnerships, with both donors and stakeholders, and enables pilot projects to be tested for long-term scaling and expansion opportunities. The program-based approach also enables networking with IFIs and others, ensuring IWMI can sustain and grow the program's success, while also embracing the possibility of transfer of technologies and innovations to different regions.

While IWMI's traditional project-based model typically does not involve managing large grants, such as \$50 million projects managed by organizations like FAO or the UN, the program-based approach enables IWMI to manage larger funding volumes as its portfolio grows. Rather than solely laying groundwork for others to build upon, a program-based approach enables IWMI to drive the expansion of successful initiatives and pilots for global water solutions.

Key Takeaways:

Importance of Co-Designing: Successful scaling depends on strong, responsive relationships with donors, like FCDO, as well as local communities and governments. Through co-design and iterative planning, IWMI can adapt and expand pilot projects, attracting additional funding and support and creating evidence-based solutions.

From Project to Program: Expanding to a program-based approach allows IWMI to integrate efforts across multiple projects, creating scalable and sustainable water resilience solutions, rather than operating in project silos.

Driving Impact at Scale: The shift towards program-based planning aligns with IWMI's 2024-2030 strategy, enabling deeper partnerships and long-term collaboration with governments, donors, and communities for more effective interventions.

Unlocking Long-Term Funding: By adopting a program-based approach, IWMI can manage larger-scale funding and demonstrate the long-term value of its work, such as RNBWS solutions. This facilitates the transfer of innovative approaches to other regions, creating broader impact and further funding opportunities.

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Project

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