

# Connecting donors and governments to achieve research for development

## 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 (Figure 1: Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine)



Figure 1. Map of Al Murunah implementation countries  
Source: Authors (2025)

## 1. Introduction

This Project Insight Note (PIN) is the first of two that communicate learnings about the International Water Management Institute (IWMI)'s role bridging various actors and navigating key relationships in applied research for development (R4D) projects. They are based on experiences in the development and implementation of the FCDO-funded PHENOMENAL portfolio, especially the Al Murunah project (2021 – 2026), and lessons here bear strong relevance to other IWMI projects under design and implementation

This PIN explores how IWMI prioritizes the needs of project donors (particularly bilateral overseas development assistance, or ODA donors), and national governments — IWMI's clients — by understanding their priorities and delivering on their desired outcomes. The second PIN focuses on relationships with implementation partners and project beneficiaries, and synthesizes across all levels in this actor-network. Together, they also demonstrate how IWMI can be more effective in managing these diverse relationships.

We are writing this 'client orientation' PIN to help IWMI deliver its growth and partnership strategies, especially given increasing emphasis on projects with physical implementation components. It aims to support IWMI management, project leaders and researchers at large to consider and navigate:

- typical challenges with client relationship and project management;
- expectations of R4D organizations held by various stakeholders;
- their contributions at each stage of the project cycle in connection to relationship management with various stakeholders; and
- the value addition IWMI has in shaping and influencing policy positions from government and donors, and the science and evidence that informs them.

## 2. Client Orientation

Bilateral donor agencies fund projects through overseas development assistance (ODA) to ‘promote and specifically target the economic development and welfare of developing countries.’ Each ODA agency has specific thematic and geographical priorities and objectives.

Government agencies in all countries have legally mandated objectives and methods to achieve them, as well as informal systems of working amongst themselves (intra-government) and with others. Researchers must develop understanding of these dynamics to navigate them effectively.

IWMI researchers deliver tangible support and expertise to both sets of actors (ODA and other government agencies). Researchers also act as knowledge brokers to build common understanding and articulation of their needs and impact

pathways. With this in mind, we turn to a few key lessons and associated examples (Examples 2.1.1–2.4.2).

### 2.1 Responsiveness and leading by listening

Client orientation means that researchers must understand and respond effectively to the needs of donors and government agencies. This requires careful listening, learning who makes decisions and understanding what brings value to their organizations and them as individuals. In many cases, this requires IWMI to help donor agencies and government articulate their respective needs — individually and independently — and how to achieve them effectively and efficiently. In this way, IWMI ‘threads the needle’ to develop clear descriptions of donor and government needs, demand-driven activities to meet them and the scientific and evidence-based engagement processes to deliver them rigorously (Examples 2.1.1–2.1.3).

#### Example 2.1.1: Using a listening-led approach for project development

Early in Al Murunah implementation, the project donor (FCDO) requested IWMI to provide concepts for wider application in Jordan. IWMI’s initial concept built heavily and directly on an earlier successful project (MENAdrought); however, it was not effectively tailored to the donor’s “ask” in terms of priority impacts sought, or — we learned later — reflective of government need given a new and high-profile Climate Refugee Nexus Initiative. When this mismatch became apparent — after significant IWMI effort — we pivoted to an approach, whereby we co-developed the project concept with the donor and government. This was a ‘listening-led’ approach where we guided both donor and government to articulate their needs clearly and collaborated in a manner that supported mutual understanding of needs and possible approaches to meet them through what became the Jahez project. Later, we replicated this process to develop the Wiqaya project. This replication, and focused FCDO-led engagement with government and other actors, led to a much smoother project concept development and approval process with FCDO and Government of Iraq.

#### Example 2.1.2: Benefits of using a listening-led approach: trust and elevated policy influence

A brief project implementation example is useful to illustrate this critical aspect further. Al Murunah includes an objective to improve the policy environment for scaling of Resilient Nature-Based Water Solutions (RNBWS). In years 1–3 of the project, government focal points were evasive about direct policy-related “asks” from IWMI (i.e., when we asked them what policy development or implementation process they would like us to support through the project). However, during and following pilot implementation (late in Y3) - once there were early indicators of demonstrable success — FCDO helped IWMI to elevate policy influence and support themes during engagements with government agencies as well as convene a series of policy dialogues (see [here](#) for example output from Egypt). Further, in most cases unprompted, government officials requested support from the project to draft / contribute to ongoing policy development processes such as the water sector NDC update in Jordan and agriculture strategy implementation in Egypt. This reflects government agencies’ 1.) increasing trust of IWMI built over time, and 2.) buy-in to project approaches, because they were responsive to agencies’ needs and objectives.

#### Example 2.1.3: Benefits of using a listening-led approach: trust and differentiation of work

Another portfolio development example is illustrative. Before the Wiqaya project, IWMI had not previously worked on sand and dust storm modelling or mitigation, nor did it have substantial on-ground or implementation-oriented projects in Iraq. However, FCDO saw promise in the RNBWS co-development approach tested in Al Murunah and opportunities for its expansion. Furthermore, FCDO:

1. trusted IWMI’s rigour in related technical modelling areas,
2. valued IWMI’s systems thinking on water, land, governance and livelihood inter-connections, and
3. recognized IWMI’s implementation and partner relationship competencies, including in fragile and conflict-affected settings, as evidenced in Al Murunah and Jahez delivery.

As a result, FCDO requested IWMI to develop the proposal and associated plan for technical and implementation partnerships to fill specific gaps in expertise, experience, and capacity to work on the ground.

In this project development process, and as the portfolio matures, we are developing a nascent value proposition for bilateral and multilateral actors around climate resilience systems thinking that a.) leverages IWMI’s core competencies, including in partnerships, b.) is underpinned by trialing of nature-based solutions, and c.) reflects effective ways of working in fragile and conflict-affected settings. For more on this topic, see the ‘project to programme’ and Al Murunah in Palestine PINS.



FCDO field visit to Izbat Al-Hamra, Beheira Governorate on June 22, 2025 (photo credits: Mohamed Mamdouh/The Marketer)



Egypt Policy Dialog - Scaling RNBWS - June 24, 2025 (photo credits: Abdelrahman Khaled)



British Ambassador to Jordan, Philip Hall OBE visit to the pilot site in Wadi Seer, on February 8, 2026 (photo credits: Maha Al-Zu'bi/IWMI)

## 2.2 Responsiveness – underlining and highlighting the “development” side of IWMI’s R4D

A second lesson is how IWMI can position its research and innovation effectively for donors, financiers and government officials. These stakeholders are wary of proposals being too ‘researchy’. In their view, we can and must build on the enormous body of pre-existing knowledge, and they take it for granted that we do so in a rigorous manner; we do not need to itemize literature review and related interim background

research steps.

Likewise, we need to communicate clearly a.) what process, decision or action our technical and research work will inform and b.) our associated recommendations. To do this, we must understand their decision-making context (especially what they value, their constraints and how they can effectively access and understand information) and present our output evidence and information accordingly (Examples 2.2.1–2.2.2).

### Example 2.2.1: Applying research application within intervention processes

During Al Murunah, FCDO on several occasions asked why we undertook climate change downscaling. At the time, there was not a regionally consistent or robust dataset available, and our pilot interventions were intended to support climate change adaptation. Ultimately, it was easy to describe why we did it, and how it was being used – for example, the downscaling supported crop variety recommendations in Jordan and Egypt as well as anticipated flood characteristics in Lebanon, which has a direct line of sight to flood management interventions and planning processes. We learned how to communicate the application of research through the process; now we ‘front-foot’ this communication with FCDO and other donors to focus on the applied research use, and link to impacts the donors (and national agencies) care about most.

### Example 2.2.2: Using research to inform long-term guidance on topical needs

National government agencies and other stakeholders have requested guidance to support planning and implementation of nature-based solutions (NbS). However, they emphasize the desire for ‘practical’ and ‘pragmatic’ guidance that is geared towards people in specific functions and roles. We are developing a series of very short guidance pieces based on noted topical needs – these are ~20-25 slides or 5-10 page documents on various themes such as a.) pre-cultivation actions to support application of NbS to address salinity in Egypt; b.) overview of NbS of relevance for household water and smallholder farmer resilience in Jordan; c.) aid for financiers to understand the role of and opportunities presented by NDCs and NAPs.

## 2.3 Expectations management and adaptive management

Expectations management is relevant for all actors (including internally within IWMI hierarchies!) throughout the project lifecycle: from project conception, design, co-creation, inception, delivery (including as delivery approach adapts), and closure. Further, each stage of the project cycle creates opportunities for IWMI if progress and impact can be communicated with relevant narratives.

At the outset, donors have incentives to maximize delivery for their spend, governments have priorities on direction of ODA spend, and IWMI researchers want to secure project

approval and maximize impact. This can contribute to poor estimation of what’s realistically possible in projects that will be delivered over a period of years in dynamic settings. Therefore, throughout project it is critical to ensure clear, ongoing, and open communication on expectations to enable adaptive implementation. Further, intentional project stage-gates and reviews (e.g., inception period and mid-line) should be used effectively to add detail to project scope and amend as needed. If undertaken effectively – and with donors and government onboard – they enable PLs to amend project scope pragmatically (Example 2.3.1).

### Example 2.3.1: Realistic expectations create flexibility to achieve goals in turbulent environments

A severe and protracted regional conflict emerged during the second year of Al Murunah. This led to major changes in the delivery context in two project countries (Palestine and Lebanon). With clear internal consideration of what would be possible, and subsequently through clear and in some case formal communication and decision-making processes with the governments and donor, we got approval to shift implementation approaches in Lebanon given the context at hand. This underscores our ability to maintain delivery with managed expectations (and risks) in challenging contexts, which has led to praise from both the donor and government agencies.

## 2.4 Leveraging respective strengths

Donors and government agencies have major strengths that complement IWMI’s. In particular, their relationship networks, convening power, and agenda-setting authority – with different types of stakeholders – mean IWMI is reliant on them for core

aspects of project delivery and impact. This is especially the case when project objectives include scaling of approaches and/or additional resource mobilization – an increasingly prominent focus and KPI for our projects. Also, donors and government agencies have specific experience and expertise that IWMI staff typically lack – for example, exposure to

ministerial or other executive decision-making processes, as well as investment planning and bundling of financial options. When we act as our clients' delivery partners - we must wear

many hats in our humble 'research' roles – we can leverage these strengths to great effect (Examples 2.4.1–2.4.2).

### Example 2.4.1: Leveraging strengths throughout project implementation

Development of Al-Murunah+ required strong coordination between donor and national governments, and their own stakeholders (internal and external). In short, FCDO and IWMI collaborated to design a concept for work that would meet community demand and government agency need while also providing strong evidence of great interest to FCDO and IWMI. IWMI, delivery partners (more on this in the second PIN) and government agencies collaborated to design clear messaging and implementation approaches that national government agencies could 'cascade' through their own hierarchies and internal systems.

### Example 2.4.2: Leveraging donor/ national government relationships for investment prioritization

Within Wiqaya, IWMI will leverage donor and national government relationships and processes to undertake an investment prioritization process. For this, IWMI will develop modelling outputs and guide donors and government stakeholders through analysis of scenario options to mitigate sand and dust storms, and ultimately decide on priority implementation pathways. In this way, we are providing a strong biophysical and modelling evidence base for institutional prioritization and decision-making processes that we co-develop using our understanding of those enabling environments in the Iraqi context. Further, through involvement in this process, we hope to open doors for future technical assistance and R4D opportunities for IWMI.

## Conclusion

Working with donors and government officials requires IWMI to act as a knowledge broker and partner to: a) identify the needs of these stakeholder groups, b) develop a strategy with the stakeholders that explicitly positions our R4D work to meet the stated goals in a feasible manner, and c.) leverage respective

strengths to deliver and meet goals. As shown in the illustrative Figure 2 below, IWMI intermediates and interfaces between donors and national governments to signal and meet demand for support to achieve policy objectives. This includes various types of discrete interactions with donors or government, as well as facilitative interactions between them.

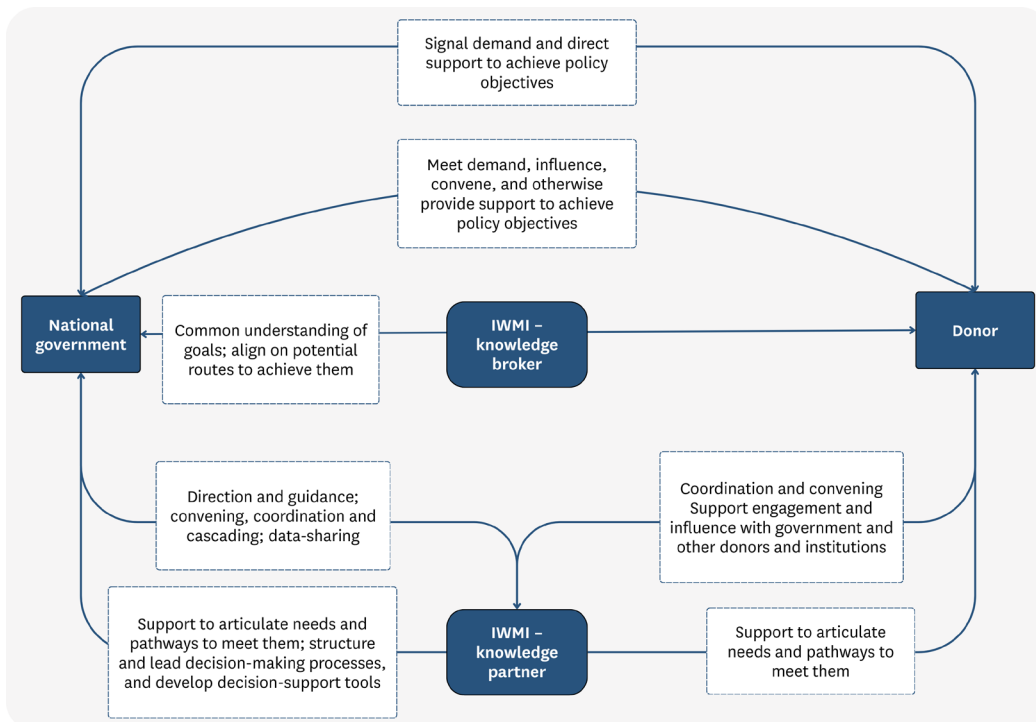


Figure 2. How IWMI intermediates and interfaces between donors and national governments to signal and meet demand for support to achieve policy objectives

Source: Authors (2025)

Of course, IWMI also plays a vital role bringing ideas from conception to implementation in an effective, evidence-driven manner with project implementation partners and project

beneficiaries. The next PIN, then, focuses on alignment of donor and government requirements and objectives with the activities and roles of implementation partners and project beneficiaries.

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## Project

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