

## Understanding Barriers and Opportunities to Implement WEF Nexus:

### Mapping Key Stakeholders Across Scales

#### Key policy messages

- **Integrated WEF solutions require inclusive collaboration.** Implementing WEF Nexus strategies is contingent upon breaking sector silos and engaging diverse stakeholders across all levels – from local communities and NGOs to national authorities and private companies – in co-producing knowledge and solutions. This inclusive, bottom-up engagement strengthens policy coherence and accelerates adoption of nexus innovations.
- **Bottom-up approaches outperform top-down plans.** Stakeholder-led (bottom-up) solution development has proven more effective and context-appropriate than expert-driven, top-down planning. When local actors help define problems and craft solutions, the outcomes are better tailored, broadly accepted, and more likely to be implemented. Top-down policies alone often prove ineffective due to misalignment with on-the-ground realities and lack of stakeholder support.
- **Stakeholder engagement and knowledge co-production reinforce each other.** High stakeholder involvement in research and decision-making directly increases implementation success – studies show that nexus solutions co-created with stakeholders enjoy much higher uptake. This sets up a positive loop: when people are involved, they build trust and local knowledge, which leads to better solutions and more collaboration.
- **NGO–private sector partnerships catalyze implementation.** Collaboration between CSOs and businesses combines local trust and expertise with technical innovation and financing. Such partnerships help align profit incentives with public goods, scale up successful pilot projects, and deliver tangible outcomes faster than actors working in isolation. Harnessing the private sector's resources through multi-stakeholder partnerships is crucial for achieving WEF security at scale.
- **Empowering multi-scale governance.** Effective WEF Nexus implementation demands action and coordination across scales of governance, from community water user groups to transboundary commissions. Mapping the roles and interactions of stakeholders at local, national, and international levels reveals both critical gaps and opportunities to align efforts. Strengthening vertical (across levels) and horizontal (across sectors) integration is a key strategy to overcome barriers and leverage synergies in nexus management.

## Setting the scene

Water, energy, food, and ecosystems are deeply interdependent resources, a fact long recognized as the WEFE nexus. In recent years, rising resource demands, climate pressures, and geopolitical uncertainties have intensified these interlinkages, raising the cost of inaction and fragmented policies. Governments and researchers alike acknowledge that siloed management of water, energy, and food is unsustainable – security in one sector cannot be achieved at the expense of another. This recognition has spurred substantial research and numerous nexus initiatives worldwide.

However, a persistent implementation gap remains. Even in regions like Europe where over 99 nexus research projects have built a robust evidence base, translation of that knowledge into policy and practice has lagged. Natural resources continue to be managed in isolation, and governance structures at national and sub-national levels still operate in silos. Inappropriate incentives, rigid institutional mandates, and lack of cross-sector coordination have limited the uptake of integrated solutions. In short, knowing about the WEFE nexus is not the same as doing nexus-based management.

Bridging this gap from knowledge to action is now a pressing priority. Recent analyses point to several root causes behind stalled implementation: institutional fragmentation, misaligned policies, power asymmetries between sectors, and insufficient stakeholder engagement in planning. On the other hand, promising pathways to accelerate nexus implementation are emerging, centered on stakeholder collaboration and innovative partnerships. This brief examines the key barriers hindering WEFE nexus strategies on the ground, and highlights critical opportunities – from grass-roots co-production to public-private alliances – that can unlock more effective, inclusive, and scalable nexus solutions.

## Current panorama

### Stakeholders across scales in the WEFE Nexus

Actors involved in WEFE nexus implementation span multiple scales – local level stakeholders (communities, farmers, local NGOs, municipal authorities) who directly manage resources; national level stakeholders (government ministries, agencies, private companies, national NGOs, researchers) who create policies and invest in infrastructure; and regional/global stakeholders (transboundary basin organizations, regional bodies, international donors, global NGOs, multinational corporations) that provide frameworks, funding, and knowledge exchange across borders. Coordinating these actors is essential for an integrated nexus approach.

Successfully implementing nexus solutions requires understanding who the key players are at each governance level and how they interact. At the local level, stakeholders such as smallholder farmers, community water user associations, indigenous groups, and municipal authorities are on the front lines of water, energy, and food management. They possess close knowledge of local ecosystem dynamics and livelihood needs. Local NGOs and cooperatives often work closely with these communities, building trust and piloting innovative practices. However, local actors

typically have limited resources and depend on enabling policies and support from above.

The national level includes central government ministries (e.g. for water, agriculture, energy, environment) and regulatory agencies that set policies, allocate budgets, and enforce rules. National research institutions and academia contribute scientific data and models to inform policy. The private sector is also pivotal at this scale – energy utilities, agribusiness firms, and water companies invest in technology and infrastructure. National civil society organizations (NGOs, advocacy networks) strengthen community voices and hold authorities accountable. Coordination among these domestic actors is often weak, as each pursues its own mandate. Strengthening horizontal integration (across ministries and sectors) and engaging non-governmental stakeholders can greatly improve policy coherence.

Beyond national borders, regional and global stakeholders influence nexus outcomes as well. In transboundary river basins, joint bodies and treaties (e.g. river basin organizations) help manage shared water and energy resources. Regional organizations (like the EU, African Union, or development banks) can provide common policy frameworks, funding programs, and platforms for exchange. International donors, UN agencies, and global NGOs bring financial support, technical expertise, and normative guidance (such as the SDGs). Meanwhile, multinational companies in food, energy, or mining sectors operate across countries, affecting resources at large scales. Aligning their practices with sustainability goals is crucial. These higher-level actors shape the context in which national and local stakeholders operate, but interventions designed at the global level must ultimately be grounded in community realities to succeed.

Mapping stakeholders across scales reveals that each level has unique roles and incentives. It also highlights the need for multi-level governance mechanisms that link local innovation upward and translate high-level policies downward. An integrated nexus approach therefore must engage actors at all scales and facilitate communication among them – creating feedback loops so that local experiences inform higher-level decisions, and vice versa. This multi-scale stakeholder engagement is both a major challenge and a key opportunity, discussed further below.

### **Key barriers to WEF Nexus implementation**

Despite widespread agreement on the WEF Nexus concept, several barriers impede its practical implementation:

- **Sectoral silos and institutional fragmentation.** Perhaps the most cited barrier is governance structures organized in silos. Ministries and agencies tend to focus narrowly on their sectoral responsibility (water, agriculture, energy, etc.) with little coordination. This results in policies or investments in one domain that ignore impacts on others – for instance, energy subsidies that encourage water-intensive biofuel crops, or agricultural policies that overlook downstream water pollution. Vertical fragmentation between levels of government exacerbates the problem: local authorities often lack influence over national plans, while national strategies may not trickle down to local action. Overcoming these silos requires deliberate institutional cooperation

mechanisms and incentive alignment.

- **Power asymmetries and competing interests.** In many contexts, certain sectors or stakeholder groups have more influence than others, shaping decisions to their advantage. For example, a powerful agribusiness lobby might resist water allocation reforms that favor ecosystems, or an energy utility might push for hydropower projects despite impacts on fisheries. Political economy factors, such as economic lobbies, long-standing interests, or rent-seeking behavior, can undermine integrated planning. When one sector's interests dominate, cross-sector collaboration becomes difficult and trust erodes among stakeholders. Addressing this barrier calls for transparent dialogue, mediation of conflicts, and policies that level the playing field.
- **Lack of stakeholder engagement.** Traditional top-down planning has often marginalized the very groups most affected by resource decisions, such as local communities or indigenous peoples. This leads to misaligned solutions and local opposition that disrupts implementation. Insufficient stakeholder engagement in problem-solving is thus a critical barrier. Without community support and local knowledge, even well-intentioned policies can fail. Many nexus initiatives report that initial plans had to be revisited once stakeholders were consulted. The absence of inclusive participation also means lost opportunities for innovation, as valuable on-the-ground ideas remain unexploited. This gap is increasingly recognized as experts now emphasize that early and continuous stakeholder involvement is not a luxury but a necessity for effective nexus projects.
- **Knowledge gaps and communication barriers.** Implementing the nexus approach demands integrating knowledge across disciplines and sectors – hydrology, agronomy, ecology, economics, etc. Yet, practitioners often struggle with data and knowledge silos. There may be insufficient tools to visualize trade-offs or a lack of common frameworks to evaluate cross-sector benefits. Moreover, research findings are frequently not communicated in user-friendly ways for policymakers or communities. As a result, decision-makers may not fully grasp nexus evidence, and local stakeholders may not trust external studies. Bridging these gaps entails better knowledge exchange platforms and capacity-building so that all actors can interpret and co-generate relevant information.
- **Financial and incentive misalignment.** Finally, budgeting and finance streams remain sector-specific in most governments, making it hard to fund cross-cutting projects. Each ministry defends its budget, and few incentives exist for joint investments or shared benefits. Similarly, donor funding and private investments may be tied to single-sector outcomes, neglecting systemic benefits (like watershed restoration that supports both water and food security). Overcoming this barrier may require innovative financing that values co-benefits, for instance, blended finance where public, private, and philanthropic funds pool together to support nexus interventions, or performance-based funding that rewards integrated outcomes.

These barriers are substantial, but not impossible to overcome. Importantly, many correspond to opportunities for transformative change: by addressing each barrier

through new approaches, we can advance nexus implementation. The next sections explore how stakeholder engagement and knowledge co-production, bottom-up participatory approaches, and cross-sector partnerships (especially NGO–private alliances) serve as key strategies to break through the barriers identified.

### **Stakeholder engagement and knowledge co-production: a virtuous cycle**

One of the clearest insights from recent nexus efforts is that the degree of stakeholder engagement in crafting solutions directly determines success in implementation. In other words, *how* solutions are developed, and *with whom*, matters as much as *what* the solutions are. This has brought the concepts of knowledge co-production and transdisciplinary collaboration to the forefront of nexus strategy.

Knowledge co-production means that stakeholders (such as community members, farmers, industry, NGOs) work together with scientists and policymakers to jointly define problems, generate knowledge, and develop solutions. It is a departure from the old model where experts would analyze and hand down recommendations to passive “beneficiaries”. Instead, all parties become co-creators of knowledge, blending scientific research with practical local insights. This approach acknowledges that complex nexus issues span scientific and social dimensions that no single expert or stakeholder group fully understands in isolation.

Crucially, stakeholder engagement and knowledge co-production reinforce each other in a feedback loop. As stakeholders engage in the process, they contribute their knowledge and also build capacity by learning from others. The resulting co-produced knowledge (be it a climate-resilient farming plan or an integrated river basin model) is more legitimate, trusted, and tailored to real needs. This in turn leads to greater willingness among stakeholders to implement the agreed solutions, since they see their input reflected and have ownership of the outcome. Early evidence from case studies confirms that when stakeholders help identify challenges and co-design interventions, the adoption rate of those interventions is significantly higher. Implementation is no longer a top-down obligation but a natural next step by the same actors who shaped the decisions.

The virtuous cycle between stakeholder engagement and knowledge co-production in the WEFE nexus can be illustrated as follows. Stakeholder engagement (participatory workshops, community consultations, multi-actor working groups) leads to joint learning and knowledge co-production. That co-produced knowledge yields more context-relevant solutions and effective implementation on the ground, which builds trust, ownership, and capacity among stakeholders. In turn, this empowerment fosters even deeper stakeholder engagement in an ongoing cycle of improvement.

The stakeholder engagement–knowledge co-production cycle creates a self-reinforcing momentum. Trust and social capital increase with each iteration, as stakeholders see tangible results and develop long-term relationships. In essence, stakeholders move from being recipients of knowledge to partners in generating and applying knowledge, blurring the line between “experts” and “the general public”. Over time, this flattens traditional hierarchies in decision-making: a water user association or a farmer cooperative can have as much voice in a nexus solution as a



government engineer, each bringing unique expertise.

Implementing this co-production approach does require effort and new skills. Facilitation is critical, for instance, convening neutral forums where farmers, companies, and officials feel safe to share perspectives. Power imbalances must be managed so that louder voices (or those with technical jargon) do not silence other perspectives. In some projects, professional facilitators or “knowledge brokers” are engaged to bridge gaps between science and local knowledge. The process needs to be structured yet adaptive: structured enough to guide diverse stakeholders through complex analysis (scenario modeling exercises), but adaptive to local context and feedback.

Another success factor is engaging stakeholders at the right scale and time. For example, a transboundary water nexus assessment might start with national officials, but must eventually include local community representatives where impacts will be felt. Timing engagement early, co-defining research questions and project goals with stakeholders, is far more effective than asking for feedback on a fully formed plan.

Investing in stakeholder engagement and knowledge co-production is not just about inclusivity, it directly pays off in better outcomes. It addresses key barriers: breaking knowledge silos (through shared learning), reducing resistance (through shared ownership), and bridging the science-policy divide. As nexus initiatives proliferate, those that embed co-production in their core practices are likely to deliver more lasting, scalable impacts than those that do not. Policymakers and funders should therefore view stakeholder engagement not as a box-ticking exercise, but as a core design principle for any nexus program.

### **Bottom-up vs. top-down: why stakeholder-led solutions win**

Closely related to co-production is the contrast between bottom-up and top-down approaches to developing solutions. This speaks to *who* drives the process of defining problems and priorities in WEFE Nexus governance. The prevailing wisdom, backed by numerous project lessons, is that bottom-up, stakeholder-led approaches tend to outperform top-down, expert-driven ones in achieving sustainable implementation.

Top-down approaches are characterized by decisions made at higher levels of authority or expertise and then passed down for execution. In a nexus context, this could be a national government crafting an integrated water-energy plan with minimal local input, or a team of scientists designing an optimal solution using models and then presenting it to “stakeholders” after the fact. Top-down methods have some advantages: they can draw on broad system overviews, deploy technical expertise, and (in theory) implement changes uniformly. However, they often struggle with local relevance and acceptance. A one-size-fits-all policy may ignore local heterogeneity, for instance, mandating a particular irrigation technology nationwide when only certain regions have the capacity to maintain it. Furthermore, stakeholders who are asked to implement a pre-made solution may feel little commitment to its success, or even distrust it, especially if it conflicts with their experience.

Bottom-up approaches, by contrast, start from the grassroots: local stakeholders

identify needs and potential solutions, which then inform higher-level support or scaling up. In these approaches, communities and front-line resource users are empowered to take the lead in experimentation and planning. External experts or authorities play a facilitating and supporting role rather than a directing one. For example, a bottom-up nexus initiative might involve a village collectively developing a water–food plan (such as crop diversification to reduce water use) and then linking with regional authorities for technical advice or funding. By rooting action in local initiative, bottom-up approaches ensure solutions are grounded in reality and owned by those who must implement them. This typically leads to greater enthusiasm, creativity, and resilience of outcomes. Indeed, many successful nexus interventions have started as local pilots or community-driven projects, later adopted into policy once proven effective.

It is important to note that bottom-up does not mean “bottom-only”. The most effective efforts often blend bottom-up and top-down elements, creating an iterative dialogue between levels. For instance, a collaborative modeling study may combine top-down insights (global climate models, national statistics) with bottom-up inputs (local observations, stakeholder objectives). The key is that the bottom-up portion actively shapes the problem framing and choice of solutions. Programs like the FAO’s local-level nexus demonstrations have found that at sub-national levels, where committed local stakeholders led scenario generation, progress was faster and easier compared to purely top-down processes. Conversely, top-down directives are more likely to succeed when they incorporate feedback channels and flexibility for local adaptation.

Why argue in favor of bottom-up? Simply put, because complex nexus challenges are context-specific and human-centric. They cannot be solved by universal blueprints or by experts alone. Local stakeholders possess tacit knowledge of environmental nuances and social dynamics that outsiders often miss. Moreover, many nexus solutions require behavior change, which cannot be dictated from above, they must be motivated from within communities. Participation breeds commitment: people are far more likely to support what they have helped create. There is also a justice dimension: bottom-up approaches give a voice to marginalized groups in resource decisions that affect their livelihoods, aligning with principles of inclusive development.

That said, bottom-up approaches face challenges too, they can be time-consuming, and local groups might initially lack technical expertise or confidence to engage. This is where the role of facilitators, NGOs, or extension services becomes vital to build capacity. When done right, however, bottom-up collaboration has repeatedly proven its value through more innovative, accepted, and enduring solutions. A systematic review of community-based resource management found stronger environmental outcomes at local levels with authentic participation than with remote governance, as local stakeholders could contribute detailed knowledge and were invested in long-term stewardship.

The lesson for nexus policymakers is clear: shift the default from “decide-announce-defend” to “engage-deliberate-co-create”. Top-down planning can provide strategic vision and resources, but the heart of solution development should beat from the bottom up. By institutionalizing participatory planning processes, such as multi-

stakeholder workshops, community advisory panels, or participatory modeling, governments and development agencies can ensure that nexus policies are not only technically sound but also socially robust and implementable.

### **The role of NGO–private sector partnerships in implementation**

Moving beyond government and community roles, another critical piece of the puzzle is the collaboration between non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the private sector. These two groups bring complementary strengths to WEFE nexus initiatives, and their effective partnership can significantly improve the success and scale of implementation.

NGOs and civil society organizations often have deep local presence, development expertise, and a mission-driven focus on social and environmental outcomes. They excel at community engagement, needs assessment, and ensuring that projects benefit vulnerable groups. NGOs can facilitate participatory processes, provide education and training, and help voice community concerns in policy arenas. However, NGOs typically have limited financial resources and technical capacity for large infrastructure or technology deployment.

Private sector companies, on the other hand, control substantial capital, technical know-how, and management efficiency. In the nexus context, think of energy companies developing renewables, agritech firms innovating irrigation systems, or water utilities improving supply infrastructure. The private sector's profit motive drives it to seek cost-effective, scalable solutions and to deliver results on time. Yet, left to itself, the private sector may under-prioritize social equity or ecosystem health, focusing instead on narrow financial returns. This is where partnership with NGOs can align business acumen with sustainability and community needs.

When NGOs and private firms collaborate, they can achieve “win-win” outcomes that neither could alone. NGOs provide legitimacy, community trust, and on-ground insights that help businesses tailor their innovations to real needs and avoid social pitfalls. Meanwhile, private partners bring innovation, investment, and scalability, helping to turn a small pilot run by an NGO into a large-scale program or business model. For example, an NGO might pilot solar-powered irrigation with a handful of farmers. With private sector partnership, this solution could be turned into a viable product and distributed widely, with the NGO ensuring adoption by training farmers and the company ensuring maintenance and supply chains. Studies have found that measurable results (like improved water access or efficiency) can often be achieved faster through such NGO-business partnerships than by NGOs or companies working alone.

A successful NGO-private collaboration often takes the form of a public-private partnership (PPP) or a multi-stakeholder consortium. These partnerships can be supported by government or operate independently. The World Economic Forum, for instance, has championed multi-stakeholder partnerships for water and energy, noting that mobilizing resources for a sustainable water future requires partnerships between government, business, and civil society. In these models, each partner has defined roles: the private sector provides technical solutions, efficiency, and funding; the NGO ensures community engagement, equity considerations, and sometimes long-term stewardship; the public sector provides enabling policy and oversight.



These partnerships are not without challenges. Trust between NGOs and businesses needs to be built, as historically their perspectives could differ. Clear agreements on goals, roles, and benefit-sharing are essential. There is also the risk of “greenwashing”, a company might partner with an NGO for public image without genuine commitment. To mitigate this, partnerships should be transparent and outcomes-based, with progress measured in social/environmental impact as well as business metrics. Successful collaborations often arise when both sides see a clear mutual interest: for instance, an energy company wanting to expand off-grid renewables finds value in an NGO’s community networks to ensure local uptake, while the NGO sees the partnership as a way to rapidly provide clean energy access.

From a policy perspective, facilitating NGO-private sector collaboration can be a powerful lever to implement nexus solutions at scale. Governments and international donors can incentivize such partnerships through challenge funds, blended finance mechanisms, or recognition programs. They can also create multi-actor platforms where NGOs, companies, and others regularly meet to share knowledge and co-design initiatives. The WEFE nexus inherently spans public goods and market opportunities – water and food security have social value, while energy and agriculture involve commercial value chains. Bridging these through partnerships ensures that neither societal needs nor business efficiency are neglected.

The nexus community should view NGOs and private companies not as odd bedfellows, but as natural allies in delivering sustainable solutions. By leveraging NGOs’ on-the-ground credibility and companies’ ability to invest and innovate, we can accelerate implementation, reach more people, and embed projects in self-sustaining business models. Ultimately, achieving WEFE security will require harnessing all sectors of society, and NGO-business partnerships are a key part of that collective effort.

## Outlook

Implementing the WEFE nexus is undoubtedly challenging, it demands breaking deep-rooted silos, negotiating among diverse interests, and operating across multiple scales. Yet, there are clear opportunities to overcome these barriers by transforming how we approach nexus governance:

- **Empower stakeholders and embrace co-production.** Making stakeholders co-authors of solutions rather than passive recipients is perhaps the most powerful catalyst for change. When scientists, policymakers, communities, and businesses jointly frame problems and co-create knowledge, the resulting solutions carry broad legitimacy and momentum for implementation. The way forward is to institutionalize such participatory processes, through permanent multi-stakeholder nexus forums at local and national levels, or requirements for stakeholder input in project design. Investment in capacity-building will amplify the voices of underrepresented groups so that co-production truly reflects all perspectives.
- **Prioritize bottom-up innovation.** Top-down vision and coordination have their place, but practical innovation often emerges from the bottom up. Governments and donors should support community-led pilots and scalable local solutions as starting points for nexus interventions. Policies can then scale

up successful bottom-up models by providing funding, technical support, or formal recognition. In planning processes, begin at the smallest effective scale and build upward, rather than imposing a full blueprint from the top. A policy environment that encourages decentralization, stakeholder-led budgeting, and feedback loops from local to national will harness grassroots energy and knowledge.

- **Strengthen multi-scale linkages.** Mapping stakeholders across scales (local, national, regional, global) is not just an academic exercise, it should inform the design of governance mechanisms. Each nexus strategy should ask: have we connected the dots vertically and horizontally? For instance, ensure that a national nexus committee includes local community representatives and that local project committees include cross-sector officials. Transboundary or regional institutions should coordinate national policies, and vice versa, to avoid cross-border externalities. Bridging these scales through communication platforms and aligned incentives is critical for a coherent nexus approach.
- **Foster cross-sector partnerships.** Breaking silos is as much about people as about policies. Encouraging partnerships, whether between ministries, between an NGO and a company, or between a research institute and a community cooperative, creates networks of trust and shared purpose. As noted, NGO-private sector partnerships can unlock resources and speed, PPPs can finance major infrastructure with social safeguards, and science-policy interfaces can turn research into action. Governments should act as enablers for these partnerships by providing legal frameworks, seed funding, or simply convening power to bring parties together.
- **Realign incentives and financing.** Finally, closing the implementation gap may require realigning incentives at multiple levels. Within academia, reward transdisciplinary, problem-solving research (career credit for policy engagement and co-authored outputs with practitioners). Within public administration, adjust budget processes and performance metrics to favor collaborative projects and long-term nexus outcomes over narrow short-term targets. International donors and banks could condition funding on integrated approaches or offer bonus financing for multi-benefit projects. Innovative funding models like environmental impact bonds or blended finance facilities for nexus investments can also drive the message that working across sectors is worth the effort.

In moving forward, policymakers and practitioners must champion a culture shift: from siloed problem-solving to systemic thinking, from excluding stakeholders to empowering them, and from unilateral action to partnership. The WEF nexus is ultimately about recognizing interdependence, not only of resources, but of people and institutions. Each stakeholder brings a piece of the puzzle, and only by working together can we craft solutions corresponding with the interconnected challenges we face. By mapping out the barriers and strategically seizing these opportunities, we can make the WEF nexus a practical reality, ensuring water, energy, food, and ecosystem security for generations to come.

### About the project

This policy brief is part of the portfolio of activities developed by Working Group 5 “Organization and monitoring of events” and Working Group 6 “Stakeholder Coordination” of COST Action NEXUSNET - Network on water-energy-food nexus for a low-carbon economy in Europe and beyond (CA 20138). The purpose of these Working Groups is to foster capacity building, knowledge exchange, and networking, while engaging key stakeholders from policy, business and civil society so that nexus research becomes accessible, meaningful and actionable for improved WEFE governance across Europe. This policy brief was written by Tamara Rađenović (University of Niš), Giannis Adamos (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki), Serena Caucci (UNU-FLORES), Chrysi Laspidou (University of Thessaly) with supported contribution from WG5 member Vladimir Radivojević (University of Priština in Kosovska Mitrovica), an intern sponsored through Cost Action NEXUSNET short-term scientific mission (STSM) grant.

More information on the COST Action NEXUSNET can be found at: <https://nexusnet-cost.com/>

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