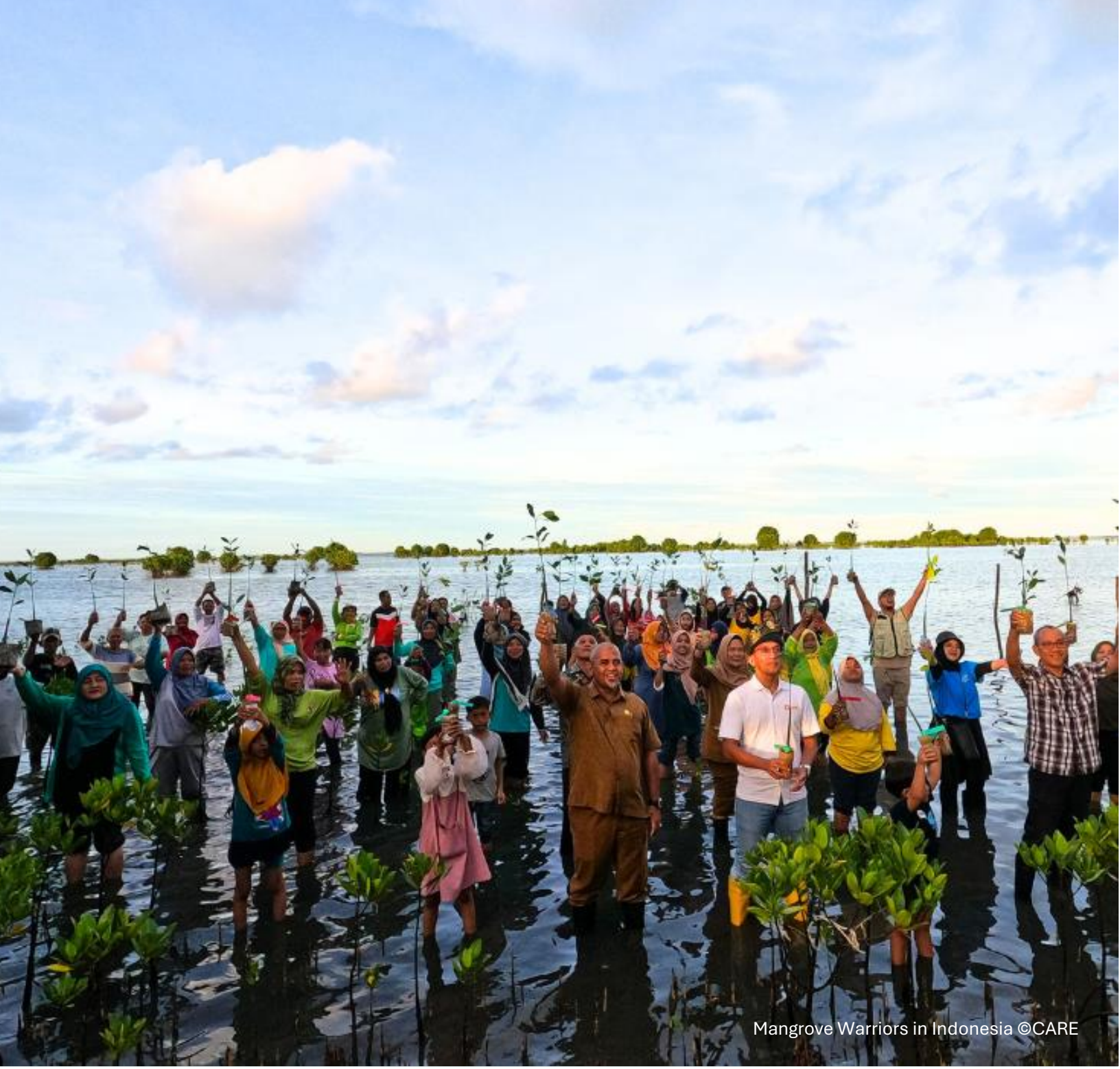


Mangrove Warriors in Indonesia ©CARE

2025 Water+ Retrospective Report

Table of contents

Acknowledgements

This report was written and consolidated by members of the CARE Water+ Team in collaboration with CARE country office teams. Authors include: Kelly Alexander, Rod Beadle, Clover DeMerritt, Sara Hoffman, and Avo Ratoarijaona with additional inputs from teams at CARE Cambodia, CARE Ecuador, CARE Egypt, CARE Ghana, CARE Indonesia, CARE Peru, CARE Vietnam, CARE Zambia, and colleagues at Emory University. We are grateful to the Osprey Foundation for continuing to encourage learning and sharing across our programs and across the WASH sector.

Introduction

This report presents a series of briefs highlighting key learning from CARE's Water+ portfolio in 2025. Each brief illustrates how CARE works with governments, communities, and service providers to improve systems and build skills. The overall goal is to support long-term, equal access to water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) and integrated water resource management (IWRM) services. Together, these examples show CARE's continued focus on **system strengthening, governance, accountability, financing, and learning** as the foundation for lasting outcomes.

The past year brought significant challenges for the Water+ team and the broader development and humanitarian sectors. Sudden changes in bilateral funding, shifting global priorities, and other shocks threatened to reverse progress for the communities we serve. In response, we intensified **engagement with corporate, foundation, and major gift donors** while maintaining a clear **commitment to private sector integration, innovative finance, locally led development, and advancing women's leadership** in WASH and IWRM.

Each year, in recognition of World Water Day, the Water+ team publishes this retrospective report. It provides a concise review of selected case studies and insights from the previous year. The 2025 edition features six case studies that explore:

- Improved irrigation methods for smallholder farmers in Egypt.
- A conservation fund model within Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs) in Ghana.
- Follow-up evaluations of the SABA model in Peru and the Water Fund model in Ecuador.
- Efforts to expand sanitation services through CARE's VSLA network in Zambia.
- Watershed restoration efforts in Vietnam, Indonesia, and Cambodia.
- Implementation Science innovations developed through CARE's partnership with Emory University.

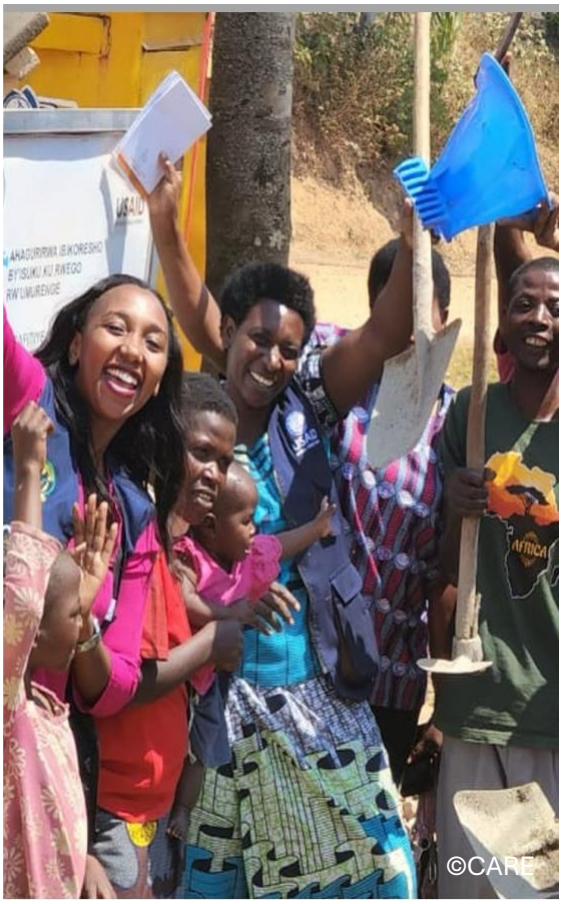
Together, these case studies show how different programs, designed with and for local communities, can support long-term resilience, environmental restoration, economic opportunity, while improving long-lasting WASH and IWRM services. While this report does not cover all Water+ programming, it offers a snapshot of how CARE teams and partners around the world are strengthening the conditions that protect health, dignity, and resilience for everyone.

Happy reading!

The Water+ Team

2025 Water+ Impact: What the numbers tell us

By 2030, CARE commits to work with partners around the world to support 75 million people, most of whom are women and girls, to access the food, water, and nutrition they need. In FY25, Water+ programming directly reached **5.3 million participants**, **57% of whom were women**, across 45 countries and 119 programs.



Results by indicators

Improving systems is an essential part of long-lasting WASH programming. This includes working with governments, communities, and the private sector to ensure services continue over time. It also includes maintaining infrastructure, improving access to finance, strengthening supply chains, and supporting planning and natural resources management.

In FY25, **68% of Water+ projects worked on improving systems or social accountability**, which is a **23% increase** from 45% in FY24. Advocacy also plays an important role. By supporting policy change, CARE helps ensure thjat WASH improvements last over time. **69% of Water+ projects integrated advocacy activities, up from 40% in FY24.**

Across CARE's global Water+ portfolio:

- 81% of projects provided technical assistance or support to local organizations, demonstrating an emphasis on localization and strengthening local partners. **This is a marked increase of 36% from 45% of projects in FY24.**
- 3.5 million people gained access to at least basic drinking water services.
- 1.8 million people gained access to at least basic sanitation services.
- 1.4 million people gained access water for agriculture.
- 84% of projects partially or fully implemented activities with partners.
- 80% of projects partially or fully addressed violence against women and girls.
- 38% of projects integrated more equal market-based approaches.
- 87% of projects either built environmental resilience or mainstreamed environmental resilience in program activities.
- 65% of projects work with women's groups or organizations.

Improved irrigation in Egypt: Water savings and increased income

Project Overview

In Egypt, irrigated agriculture uses most of the country's freshwater resources. From 2021 to 2024, PepsiCo Egypt launched the "She Feeds the World" (SFtW) and "Water is Life" programs to support smallholder farmers in using water more efficiently. These initiatives contribute to PepsiCo's ambition to return more water to the environment than it uses in creating its products. Through these programs, farmers received essential resources, training, and support to conserve water, increase crop yields, raise incomes, and strengthen their resilient farming practices.

Project Methods

PepsiCo Egypt funded CARE to help farmers move away from traditional flood irrigation to more efficient systems including drip and sprinkler irrigation. Farmers also received training in market engagement, nutrition, and equality for women and girls.

Project Results

Moving to improved irrigation methods saved more than **1.2 billion liters of water** in Minya Governorate in Egypt over 3 years. The program initially planned to upgrade irrigation on 75 feddans (about 75 acres) across 75 farms, landowners independently upgraded irrigation for an additional 50 feddans, reflecting the community's strong interest in and commitment to the program's objectives.

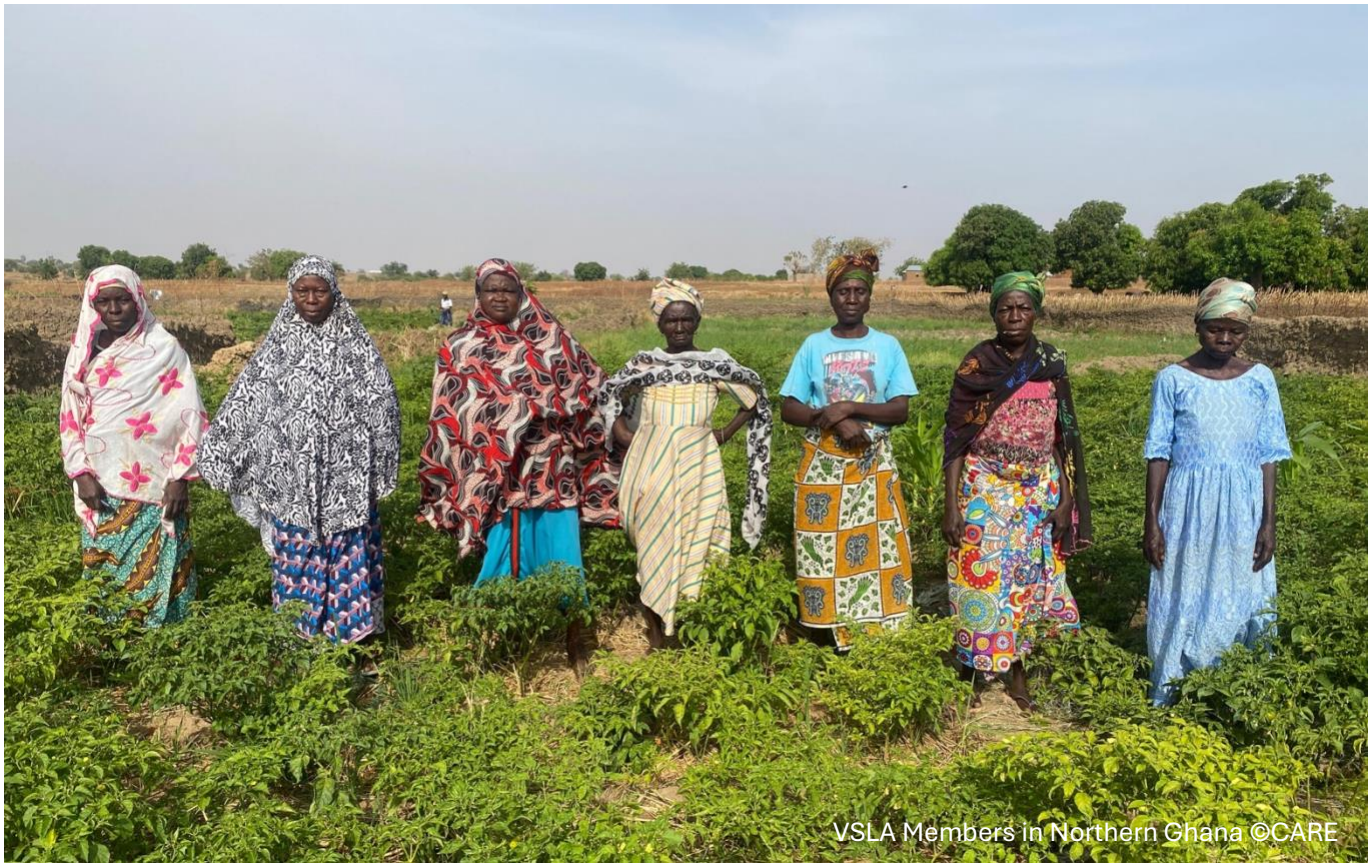
Assessments revealed that farmers adopting improved irrigation saw an average 18% increase in crop yields and a 30% decrease in irrigation costs.

Project Limitations

Some farmers did not adopt or utilize the improved irrigation systems. Key challenges included high maintenance costs, limited technical knowledge for repairs, and limited access to spare parts. Other issues, such as inconsistencies in water pressure, theft, and equipment breakdowns led some farmers to return to traditional irrigation methods.

Beyond the Project

As farmers witnessed the benefits of improved irrigation methods, others in the community began adopting these methods on their own. Farmers outside the project upgraded irrigation across an additional 47 feddans. These areas are projected to save approximately 400 million liters of water each season moving forward, around 800 million liters per year.



VSLA Members in Northern Ghana ©CARE

Conservation funds in Village Savings and Loan Associations

Overview

In northern Ghana's semi-arid regions, smallholder farmers face significant barriers to adopting Water Smart Agriculture (WaSA) practices, despite their proven benefits for soil health, water retention, and crop yields. The primary obstacles are the high upfront costs of labor and inputs needed for improved practices like intercropping, proper planting distances, and compost.

What is Water Smart Agriculture? (WaSA)

WaSA is an approach to **efficiently harvest, store, access, and use/reuse water**. WaSA focuses on **water as a key agricultural constraint**, and uniquely **emphasizes soil as a centerpiece** to a and recognizing the soil system as the ultimate water delivery vehicle.

To address these challenges, CARE has tested a new financing mechanism since December 2020. The model introduces conservation funds within Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs). Ten VSLAs across three communities (Boko, Songo, and Kongo) each received seed funding of GHS

8,300 ($770). These funds act as separate loan pools for conservation agriculture investments, distinct from regular VSLA savings used primarily for household expenses.

The model builds on the strong structure and trust already within VSLAs. It gives farmers — most of whom (80%) are women — access to funds at the right time during the agricultural season. Members can get loans to hire labor, rent bullocks for plowing, purchase certified seeds, and adopt recommended WaSA practices. Loans are conditional on the adoption of WaSA practices and then repaid with interest after harvest, allowing the loan pool to grow and serve more members over time. CARE also leverages existing relationships with agricultural extension services to provide trainings and linkages to formal financial services.

In late 2025, CARE conducted a series of key informant interviews and focus group discussions to understand how the fund is performing in its 5th year, including its benefits, challenges, and potential to expand.

Key findings

Adoption and repayment
All farmers interviewed reported taking and repaying loans. Loan amounts varied from GHS 100–500 ($9-46 USD), with most borrowing GHS 150–300 ($13-27) over 3-month terms. **Repayment rates were high**. One group reported an 80% repayment rate, with remaining members requesting short extensions.

Agricultural practices enabled
Farmers used loans primarily to hire labor, rent equipment (including bullocks and donkeys), and buying certified drought-tolerant seeds. The most common WaSA practices adopted included intercropping maize with legumes, planting at proper distances, applying compost, utilizing minimum tillage, and contour plowing.

Benefits realized
Every respondent reported higher yields after adopting WaSA pratices, which led to increased income. VSLAs also saw **weekly savings grow by 33% to 100%** due to higher farm incomes.

Farmers also reported observing environmental benefits, including improved soil fertility, reduced erosion, and better moisture retention. As one farmer noted: **"The use of leguminous crops has fixed nitrogen into the soil which improves soil fertility and makes the environment better."**

Decision-making patterns
Decision-making varied within households. Men often made decisions and then informed their wives. Women showed more varied patterns. Many made decisions jointly with their spouses, particularly where men officially owned the land they farmed. Others made independent decisions. In some cases, women involved their sons in decision-making. All of these patterns reflect complex household dynamics around land access.

Women's participation
The conservation fund was especially helpful for women farmers. Women often face delays when trying to rent bullocks for plowing because men typically plow their fields first. With immediate access to funds, women could hire bullocks earlier and plant on time.


VSLA Members in Northern Ghana ©CARE

A respondent from Pusiga explained: **"Women members have been able to access loans to start soil conservation activities and small irrigation gardens. This has increased their income levels and given them more confidence and decision-making power at home since they can now contribute to household needs."**

Persistent challenges
Despite strong results, several challenges remained, including:

- Loan amounts were sometimes insufficient to support larger investments or to reach the desired scale of practice adoption.
- Even with available, funds, certified seeds were difficult to access.
- Infrastructure limitations hindered dry season farming as farmers lacked pumping machines and irrigation equipment.
- Rainwater harvesting remained infeasible due to cost and technology gaps.
- Some women lacked access to land near water sources for gardening.

Demand and spillover
All farmers expressed strong interest in continuing to use the fund. Many planned to expand irrigation sites, invest in rearing livestock, and/or grow their farms.

Farmers strongly recommended the model to others. **Neighboring groups were reportedly already planning to establish their own conservation funds after observing the model's success**.

Recommendations

1. **Increase seed funding**
    a. Raise from GHS 8,300 to GHS 10,000–12,000 per VSLA to meet demand, as the original amount proved insufficient for groups with 20–30+ members.
2. **Strengthen input access and infrastructure**
    a. Strengthen links with agricultural extension services and input dealers.
    b. Support community-managed equipment sharing and irrigation infrastructure to complement the financial mechanism.
3. **Expand with peer learning**
    a. Scale to new communities by connecting experienced and new VSLAs.
4. **Enhance training and monitoring**
    a. Provide more frequent training on WaSA practices, including irrigation techniques and hired labor supervision.
    b. Implement long-term monitoring to assess sustainability.
5. **Test in diverse contexts**
    a. Adapt the model for different locations, market conditions, VSLA maturity levels, and land systems.

Looking ahead

The conservation fund shows strong potential to help farmers adopt WaSA practices. At the same time, it highlights the need to improve systems to support long-term growth and success. Many VSLA members valued the WaSA training and want more support, particularly dry season agriculture and rainwater harvesting. Strong links with agricultural extension services will be key in expanding what farmers can do with available conservation funds. Support from local government can also increase access to certified seeds, improved farming equipment, and irrigation technologies. While community finance can help remove barriers to WaSA adoption, long-term success depends on working across WASH and agricultural systems.

Ex-post evaluation spotlight in Latin America

In 2025, the Water Team conducted ex-post evaluations in Peru and Ecuador to critically assess two flagship programs and understand whether results have lasted over time. The evaluations looked at the factors and conditions that enabled or hindered long-term success and how each program contributed to broader systems change. The findings provide practical recommendations to improve future program design and implementation.

Peru: SABA+ (1996-2018)
The SABA model (Modelo de Saneamiento Básico Rural) was developed over 22 years through programs funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), beginning in 1996. At a time when most rural WASH programs focused on building infrastructure, SABA took a different approach. It focused on governance, designing a community-based management model (*gestión social*) grounded in participation, strengthening local institutions, and respect for cultural diversity.

The project brought together regional governments, municipalities, communities, private companies, and civil society organizations. Rather than focusing only on service delivery, it worked across different groups and levels of government. The SABA model was eventually adopted across 20 regions in Peru and reached 2M+ people with WASH services. Later phases focused on policy change to expand the model nationally and internationally.

Seven years after the program ended, a follow-up assessment was conducted to understand what has lasted and what has changed. The evaluation looked at policy, institutions, community engagement, technical systems, and financing with a focus on the decentralized governance of rural WASH services and the social processes that shape and influence results.

Overall, SABA continues to be used in public policy and practice in Peru. However, its long-term success depends on strong coordination across government levels, continued institutional support, consistent centering of women and girls, shared financial responsibility supported by realistic tariff structures; and flexible approaches to scaling rather than rigid duplication.

Several insights emerged from the findings:

- **Local committees remain the backbone of rural service delivery, but they need more support.**
    - The **JASS (*Juntas Administradoras de Servicios de Saneamiento*)** – formalized Administrative Boards that operate and maintain rural water systems – continue to serve as the *eje organizativo* (organizational backbone) for service delivery in communities. However, many operate with little support. Challenges include operational isolation and aging leadership. Limited access to ongoing technical assistance, financial management support, and capacity-building opportunities are also notable.
    - While many JASS demonstrate strong community commitment, their effectiveness is constrained by gaps in sustained institutional support.
        - Local governments, through **ATMs (*Área Técnicas*)** — municipal technical WASH units established to support and supervise JASS (created and established by SABA+) — are meant to support these committees. ATMs, however, also face systemic challenges, including limited budgets, high staff turnover, and inconsistent technical capabilities. As a result, the support they can offer to the committees is not always consistent.
    - Strengthening rural water service delivery will require expanded reliable funding for technical assistance, ongoing training, and opportunities for peer learning.

- **Formal systems matter more than individual support.**
    - Coordination between government levels and partners cannot depend on individual commitment or temporary leadership. Long-lasting WASH systems require predictable budget allocations, institutional mandates, and stable financing mechanisms. They also require formalized roles and institutionalized relationships. Resiliency and success depend on embedding collaboration, supervision, and mutual accountability.

- **Institutionalize inclusion.**
    - Community participation remains a key strength of the model. Trust, collective action, and social capital strengthen local governance. However, equality and intercultural approaches (which are central to SABA's original vision) are not always fully built into formal systems. In many cases, they depend on committed individuals rather than official policies, budgets, performance indicators, or monitoring frameworks. For long-term success, these approaches need to be formally included in how programs are designed and implemented.

These findings raise important questions about the future of community-led water management in Peru. Changes such as migration, environmental shocks, and the Peruvian government's efforts to centralize service delivery are shifting how systems operate.

A key question is how to strengthen the role of a municipal "central manager" utility without losing the trust, accountability, and local knowledge that community-managed systems provide.

Ecuador: Pedro Moncayo Water Fund (2019-present)
In 2019, with funding from the L'Oreal Foundation, CARE established the Pedro Moncayo Water Fund. This **conservation financing mechanism** protects, conserves, and restores freshwater and grassland ecosystems that support 200,000 people with drinking water and livelihoods. A critical dimension is the protection of páramos—highland grassland ecosystems that function as natural sponges, storing and slowly releasing water, helping to maintain stable water supplies downstream.

This ex-post evaluation examined how the fund has performed over time, what challenges it faces, and how it can be improved. It also found practical lessons to strengthen CARE's broader approach to improving systems for conservation and water security. It reviewed the fund's design, governance, and operational model, and identified challenges, good practices, and context-specific solutions from implementation in Pedro Moncayo.

Key findings
CARE's water fund model offers a flexible approach tailored to small and medium-sized municipalities. It links rural communities, water utilities, and local governments to improve coordination and shared responsibility to deliver locally owned, cost-effective, and scalable water security solutions.

The fund has mobilized nearly **300,000 USD** and contributes to a broader legal and financial framework aimed at protecting 6,000 hectares of vital ecosystems. However, the evaluation identified a major challenge. A lack of formalized agreements governing bank accounts and financial management between the municipality and the public utility has limited how funds can be managed and used.

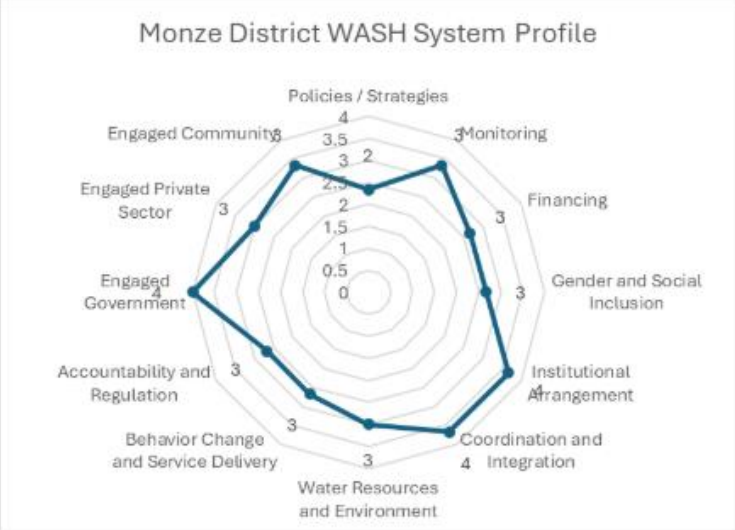
Importantly, the evaluation also helped catalyze corrective action. In November 2025, the Water Team secured donor funding to support the development of a municipal legal ordinance required to unblock the funds that was recently signed into law. **This shows how ex-post learning from evaluations can lead to real changes and stronger system performance over time.**

A key lesson is the need to explicitly plan and budget for legal expertise, including lawyers, as part of program design. Legal support is often overlooked, but it can be an essential enabler in programs that involve financing, regulation, and government systems.

Overall, the evaluation provided a valuable reference point for understanding how more equal governance, temperature adaptation, and ecosystem protection can be operationalized and financed at the local level. Building on these insights, CARE Ecuador is now using these lessons to adapt and expand the model in two additional municipalities.

Systems strengthening to enable market-based sanitation (MBS) in Zambia

In Zambia, CARE is partnering with iDE and IDInsight to test and refine a **market-based sanitation (MBS) approach** focused on improving WASH systems. Because this work is in an early learning phase, the goal is not yet to demonstrate results, but to understand whether and how stronger systems (institutions, financing mechanisms, community structures, and markets) can support long-lasting sanitation over time. This includes looking at how institutions, financing, community structures, and markets work together.



WASH System Assessment Scores for Monze District

In 2025, a participatory WASH systems assessment was conducted in Kalomo and Monze districts with local government, private sector partners, and community members. The assessment helped develop a shared understanding of how the sanitation system works and where the main challenges are. The discussions highlighted relatively strong government engagement and existing institutional structures. However, key gaps remain, including limited access to financing for households, weak accountability and regulation, and gaps between behavior change efforts and actual service delivery.

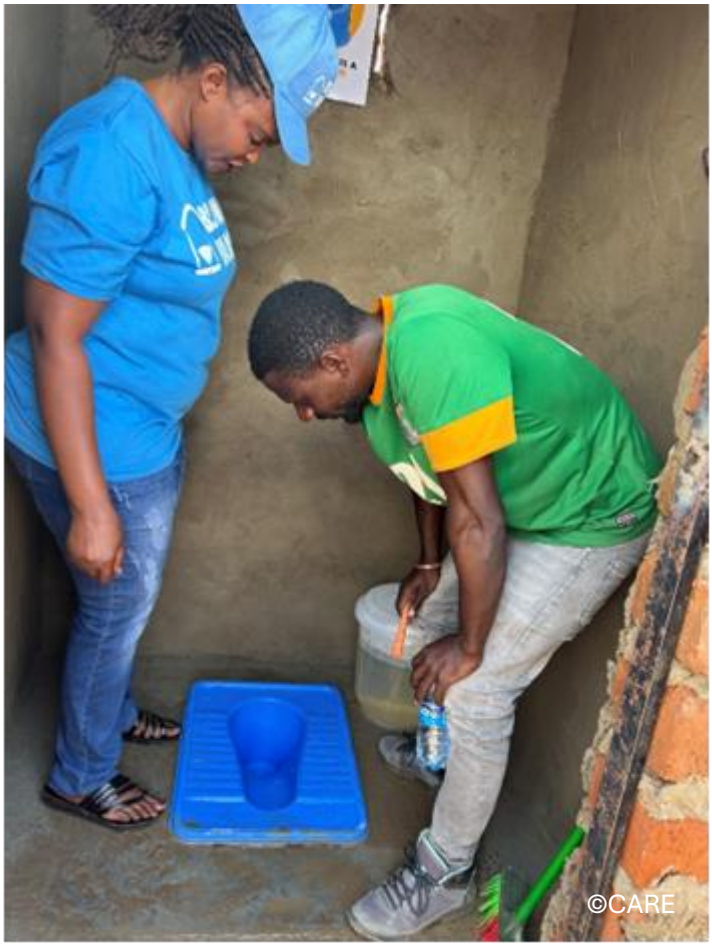
Rather than proposing immediate solutions, the team is using this assessment to guide testing and learning. To explore solutions for financing and community engagement, CARE mapped savings groups in both districts. Many groups were well-established with strong leadership, high repayment rates, and experience using loans for income-generating activities.

These savings groups are being explored as a possible entry point, not yet a confirmed solution. They may help households invest in sanitation over time, create space for discussion and peer learning, and strengthen links between communities, sanitation entrepreneurs, and local governments. A small internal “WASH Fund” is currently being piloted within selected groups.

At the same time, iDE led human-centered design research to co-develop sanitation products and service models tailored to local preferences and constraints. In February 2026, a demonstration event brought together community members, government representatives, and private sector partners to test early prototypes. The focus was on gathering feedback, including on affordability, usability, accessibility, marketing, and institutional roles, rather than finalizing product design.

Overall, this work illustrates how improving systems can be used deliberately as a learning process. It helps partners test ideas, align eforts, and avoid scaling solutions before systems are ready.

At this stage, the Zambia experience is best understood as laying the foundation for future MBS expansion.



Early market interaction between a woman sanitation sales agent and a potential user during the Zambia demo event

Women planting mangroves in Indonesia ©CARE

Watershed restoration in Southeast Asia

Watersheds around the world are under growing pressure. Changes in weather patterns, rising temperatures, and more frequent extreme weather events are affecting water availability, agriculture, and ecosystems.

In recent decades, global freshwater ecosystems have declined significantly, while floods and drought-related disasters are becoming more common. Agriculture accounts for approximately 70% of global freshwater withdrawals (2024 UN World Water Development Report). It is both at risk to water scarcity and is a key factor for watershed restoration. Watershed challenges are particularly acute in Asia-Pacific regions, where environmental shifts threaten both food security for billions and degrade the natural systems that regulate water flow, filter pollutants, and protect coastal communities from storms.

When done well, water management interventions can bring powerful benefits. For example:

- Precision irrigation systems can save water while reducing emissions from fertilizer runoff
- Mangrove restoration can trap carbon while protecting shorelines and supporting fisheries.
- Community-led watershed stewardship can improve water quality, local livelihoods, and food security.

The three case studies featured in this chapter show how context-appropriate water management strategies can improve water systems, support local economies, and strengthen resilience. There is no off-the-shelf solution to effective water stewardship. Instead, it requires tailored interventions for local conditions that can be implemented at various scales and are rooted in the knowledge and interests of communities.

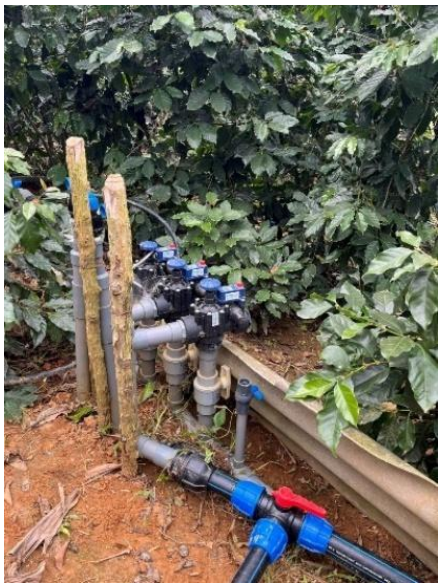
Water-smart irrigation solutions for coffee in Northwest Vietnam

In Son La province, Vietnam's largest Arabica growing region, CARE tested two irrigation systems to address water shortages. Coffee farming in this region traditionally depends on rainfall, but demand for water spikes six to seven times during flowering season. Rainfall has become less predictable over the past decades, and the steep terrain in this area has made investing in irrigation systems less attractive to farmers. From June to November 2024, CARE tested subsurface drip irrigation and under-canopy mist irrigation on 200 m^2 to reduce water usage.

Early results are promising, despite the short implementation period. **Subsurface drip irrigation cut total labor time by nearly threefold** when compared to traditional methods, primarily because it limits weed growth and reduces the need for manually spread fertilizer.

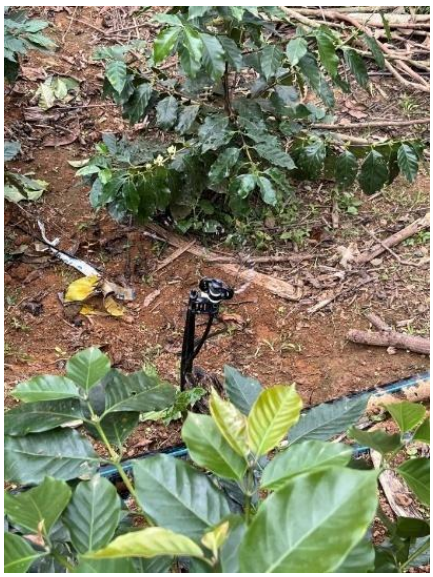
Overall, fertilizer use dropped by 30% with drip and 15% with mist irrigation. Yields increased significantly as drip irrigation produced 7.2 tons/ha and mist irrigation 13.5 tons/ha, compared to 5.4 tons/ha without irrigation. **Both irrigated systems at least doubled profits over traditional farming, with mist irrigation tripling them.**

Alternative irrigation systems in Northwest Vietnam



Automatic control valve

Subsurface drip irrigation



Under-canopy mist irrigation

An unexpected bonus came in January 2025, when farmers adapted the system to protect approximately 3,000 m^2 of coffee from a severe frost that damaged 96 hectares across the province. This pilot shows that irrigation can help make coffee farming in this region more reliable, resilient, and efficient. These systems offer farmers ways to optimize water usage, reducing both costs and the environmental impact of coffee production. As CARE looks to expand the approach, evidence suggests that pairing smart water management with accessible technology could help thousands of smallholder coffee growers in Northwest Vietnam build lasting resilience.

Adapting to water insecurity: Resilient WASH and agriculture in Cambodia
Communities along the Sre Pok River in Cambodia's Ratanakiri Province face a dual water crisis. Seasonal flooding contaminates water sources and destroys crops. Prolonged dry seasons leave households without reliable access to water for drinking or farming.

A technical assessment of over 212 households found that:

- Approximately one-third still rely on unsafe water sources like rivers, streams, or ponds,
- 93% of water storage tanks lacked covers and 71% were not elevated above flood level, leaving families acutely at risk to waterborne disease during floods.

CARE Cambodia implemented the CARRC project from April to December 2025, combining integrated WASH infrastructure and resilient agriculture techniques.

The project:

- Constructed five solar-powered tube wells and repaired one existing well across six villages. Additionally, trained Water Management Committees in each area (71% women) to conduct routine maintenance and basic troubleshooting.
    - Each well was equipped with concrete slabs, water tanks, and accessibility features for persons with disabilities.
    - These resilient water points now serve 1,017 users, including 551 women, 620 indigenous people, and 89 persons with disabilities.
    - During dry seasons and flood periods, when safe water is harder to find, this number is expected to increase to 1,800 users.
- Trained 128 farmers (63% women) in resilient, improved agriculture practices.
    - Within a few months, 66% of those trained adopted FAO-aligned agroecology practices.
- Established five Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs) with 141 members (60% women)
    - Built collective capital of approximately USD 200–500 per group.
    - Three of these groups are now formally recognized as Agricultural Cooperatives and linked to government support systems, ensuring sustainability beyond the project.

The CARRC example shows that improving livelihoods and water security requires action across multiple areas, including safe water infrastructure, improved farming practices, and community-owned financial mechanisms.

Restoring community and coastlines in Indonesia

In Berakit Village, Indonesia, years of mangrove loss left the coastal areas at risk to rising tides, storm surges, and the sea-level rise that threatens coastal communities. Without mangroves, sediment flowed freely into nearshore areas, smothering seagrass beds and degrading the quality of the shallow waters where marine life once flourished.


A mangrove warrior in Indonesia ©CARE

Yet beneath the surface, Bintan's seas still held extraordinary biodiversity: thousands of hectares of seagrass and coral reefs supporting over 200 species of reef fish and invertebrates. Local fisherfolk had depended on this delicate aquatic web for generations, and the aquatic web depended on the mangroves. In 2024, CARE Indonesia worked alongside local communities and the online travel platform Traveloka to plant 50,000 *Rhizophora stylosa* seedlings across degraded coastline within the Bintan marine protected area.

As the young mangroves took root in the tidal mud, they began restoring the water system from the ground up. They:

- Trapped sediment in their dense root networks before it could cloud coastal waters
- Filtered runoff that would otherwise carry pollutants into the sea
- Slowed tidal flows to create sheltered lagoons that quickly became nursery habitats for aquatic life.
- Are projected to absorb nearly 4,700 tons of CO_2 over five years.

Communities have already reported improvements, including better fishing conditions and stronger fish and crab populations in replanted areas. Perhaps most importantly, the restoration was built to outlast the project itself. Twenty-six community-run nurseries now dot the village, each managed by local women's groups trained in propagation, planting, and geotagged monitoring of both plant health and the surrounding water environment. These women — known as Mangrove Warriors — have become stewards not just of trees but of an entire coastal water system, tracking how the ecosystem recovers and the quality of nearshore waters improves. What began as a planting initiative has grown into something more enduring: a living infrastructure of roots and community knowledge that filters the water, buffers the storms, and sustains the marine life that keeps Berakit's fishing families fed and thriving.

Bridging the gap between research and real-world results

Implementation science helps answer a critical question for organizations working on strengthening systems: not just *what* works, but *how and why* it works in different contexts. For CARE, this distinction is important. Programs to strengthen systems are dynamic, politically influenced, and change over time. Similar approaches may produce different results across contexts.

Traditional monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and learning (MEAL) systems often track results but provide limited insight into the processes, contextual drivers, and implementation decisions that shape those outcomes. Without this understanding, organizations like CARE may repeat approaches without knowing why they worked, or didn't.

This is why CARE partnered with Emory University on the Implementation Science Partnership grant (2022-2026). Together, we designed, piloted, and refined a practical suite of tools (including process evaluations, adaptation tracking using the Model for Adaptation Design and Impact [MADI] framework, factor mapping, and qualitative network modeling) to help teams document implementation, understand system dynamics, strengthen institutional memory, and inform decision making.

The Water Team, along with CARE teams and projects in Mozambique, Ethiopia, Rwanda, South Sudan, Kenya, Madagascar, Peru, and Ecuador, worked together to develop an IS toolbox that includes:

- An **implementation reporting checklist**
  - This structured tool provides a system (and place) to house institutional memory on how programs were delivered and not just what outcomes were achieved.
- A **step-by-step guide to use the MADI framework**
  - This framework allows users to systematically document, analyze, and learn from program adaptations: why they were made, how they were implemented, and what effects they produced.
- **Process Evaluation handbook**
  - This offers guidance on how to assess the quality and delivery of intervention, ensuring programs are implemented as intended while remaining responsive to real-world settings.
- **Factor mapping and qualitative network modeling tools and guidance**
  - Developed in collaboration with the University of Washington-Tacoma, these tools use software to generate influence maps and network diagrams for systems-level insight on relationships, leverage points and pathways of change.

These tools help our work to strengthen essential systems in a variety of ways. They help teams:

- Better understand how change unfolds in complex systems

- Identify leverage points and influential people and partners within networks
- Distinguish between implementation challenges and theory failures
- Make informed decisions about when to strengthen, redesign, or discontinue approaches, and/or build transferrable evidence across contexts

As the project moves forward, the focus has shifted to ensuring these tools are used more widely across CARE. We've learned that implementation science is not just about frameworks and methods but about embedding these within CARE's MEAL priorities, systems, work planning processes, and learning cycles.

We've also learned approaches such as factor mapping and qualitative network modeling can complement or even replace conventional baseline studies. These approaches help teams design stronger activities and better shape priorities based on system dynamics. At the same time, this effort also brings up important organizational questions around how to avoid overburdening teams and MEAL systems and reflect on the incentives and motivations around true organizational change.

The CARE–Emory University Implementation Partnership will help the Water Team map and respond to evolving trajectories of systems change, improving how we decide, design, and course-correct to achieve long-term results. It also contributes to strengthening CARE's institutional learning by documenting how systems change happens across contexts and informing future program design.

To learn more, please visit: https://www.freemanresearchgroup.org/care-emory-implementationscience

Thank you for reading!

The Water+ Team

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For more information, visit: www.care.org/our-work/food-and-nutrition/water/