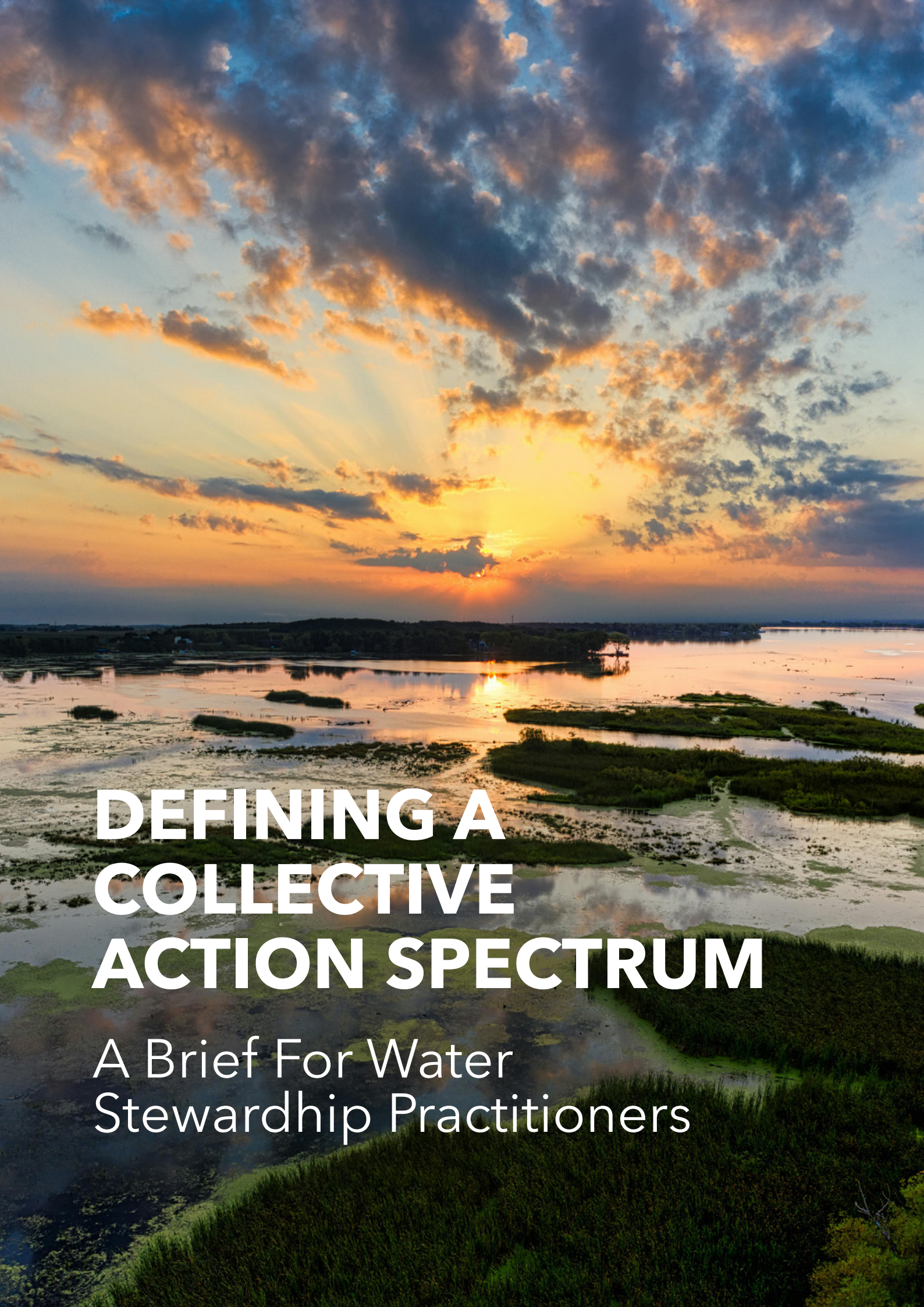

DEFINING A COLLECTIVE ACTION SPECTRUM

A Brief For Water Stewardhip Practitioners

CONTENTS

PURPOSE

This brief presents a practical framework to clarify and tease apart the term "collective action". More specifically, the brief unpacks how different forms of collaboration in water stewardship—bilateral projects, collective action projects, and collective action platforms—fit together and support impact at scale. Its primary purpose is to provide common terminology for partner coordination, helping organizations understand how their efforts connect within a broader collective action pathway.

The intended audience includes NGOs, project implementers, companies, funders, and coordination bodies that work together on shared freshwater outcomes. The note is designed to help these groups clearly identify their roles, select the appropriate form of collaboration for their objectives, and understand what is required to move from smaller, localized projects toward larger, catchment- or basin-level platforms.

To support decision-making, the document includes quick-reference tables and practical guidance that show how projects can progress from direct bilateral work to multi-stakeholder initiatives and ultimately to system-level platforms. The framework builds on existing definitions but provides a simplified, shared typology to reduce ambiguity, strengthen alignment, and support more intentional investment in collective action.

Ultimately, the framework is meant to help field implementers coordinate more effectively, and to guide funders and partners in structuring, sequencing, and resourcing collective action efforts so they remain impactful, scalable, and aligned with shared freshwater priorities.

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DEFINING COLLECTIVE ACTION

In the 2023 paper Unpacking Collective Action in Water Stewardship, the following definition was put forward for collective action:

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

This definition provides a sound conceptual foundation that we believe still stands. As organizations better understand their water dependencies and impacts, collaboration naturally expands from local to broader catchment and sector levels. While this definition provides a sound conceptual foundation, the term "collective action" remains used as a catch-all term, masking significant differences in scope, structure, and complexity of various collaborations. To design effective interventions and set realistic expectations, practitioners need clarity on the specific form of collective action they are engaging in or designing.

This brief builds upon the 2023 definition by introducing a practical spectrum. This spectrum clarifies how collective action manifests from simpler site-level cooperation to more complex, multi-stakeholder or basin-scale governance structures. This framework helps actors identify where they are on their journey, what capacities or partnerships are needed to advance, and which forms of collaboration best fit their ambition, resources, and the scale of the water challenges they face.

A SPECTRUM FOR COLLECTIVE ACTION

To construct this spectrum, it is helpful to distinguish between the core concept of collective action and the different forms it can take. This allows us to retain the foundational principle from 2023 while providing more precise language for its practical applications. We therefore propose a refined definition to focus on the essential process, which can then be expressed through different forms:

Collective action: A process to coordinate efforts among interested parties to work together as an ecosystem and aim to achieve one or more shared goals related to jointly identified shared water challenges. Collective action can take shape at both the project level and platform level, with the latter involving multiple projects, and typically undertaken at a broader spatial level.

Working from the refined definition, we can now describe the different forms of collective action can take along the spectrum. This practical and functional language helps set clear expectations about the characteristics and scale of a given initiative.

To provide this clarity, we outline different forms that initiatives along a spectrum that collective action can take. It is worth noting that there is the possibility of having bilateral projects that "contribute" to collective action through individual contributions, but this has been distinguished from a collective action project in that bilateral projects involve two actors directly collaborating in a project to primarily serve their own needs through unilateral action and without multi-stakeholder engagement or joint governance which is characteristic of collective action projects. The authors have included bilateral projects in this paper as a way to illustrate how these are related to collective action and the proposed spectrum of collective action.

Collective Action (CA) Projects: Multi-party efforts implementing on-the-ground activities to address shared freshwater challenges and that involve either a shared governance structure and multistakeholder engagement during implementation. Projects can be site level or at the catchment or even the basin scale. These projects, which generate on-ground outputs, outcomes and impacts, are the essential building blocks for larger-scale impact.

Collective Action Platforms: Coordination structures that govern multiple collective action projects, set shared goals, and ensure accountability across a geography (typically catchment to basin, but also potentially sub-national and national scales). Platforms function primarily as a coordination and/or governance body, rather than as a direct implementer.

BOX A: COLLECTIVE ACTION PLATFORMS AT BROADER SCALES

Collective action platforms operate at a variety of scales, and in this paper we focus on how place-based projects can link with other place-based platforms across scales. However, collective action platforms also exist at national, international, and sectoral levels. In these platforms, aims often include aligning actors around shared thinking, terminology, metrics, approaches, and commitments. While we recognize the importance of such actor-based platforms, we deliberately maintain a focus on place-based collective action projects and platforms for the purposes of this paper

Describing these different forms of collective action enables a clearer understanding of the different roles actors can play. In the **Unpacking Collective Action in Water Stewardship paper** (Various Organizations (2023), a model of these roles was presented (Figure 1), based on the understanding that any actor can assume one or more functional roles in collective action, and these roles may shift over time and across contexts. While certain types of organizations often gravitate toward specific roles—for example, civil society organizations frequently act as conveners due to their perceived neutrality; others can also take on different functions. For instance, in the **Charco Bendito** collective action project (located near Guadalajara, Mexico), beverage companies collectively hired a convener, while Red Bio Terra S.C supported implementation/ delivery of four restoration efforts in the catchment, and WaterPlan leads the monitoring and evaluation. The roles needed, and who fills them, depend on context; some may overlap, others remain distinct, and not all are always necessary. There is no single "right" configuration or need for all these roles, but effective collective action requires clarity about who plays which roles and the expectations involved.

FIGURE 1: CATCHMENT LEVEL COLLECTIVE ACTION ROLES

Using Figure 1 above we can outline some of the key characteristics of the different forms of collective action (Table 1). Note that many of the descriptive attributes are more illustrative rather than an accurate or rigid framework – they are provided to help illustrate a graduation in complexity, financing and scale between the different forms.

Collective action is often undertaken at the scale of how water operates – that is, at the catchment, watershed or basin scale. While these terms are often employed interchangeably (along with other nonEnglish terms) and are frequently nested (catchments and sub-catchments, basins and sub-basins, etc.), it is worth noting a few points in the context of collective action as the global water stewardship community has started to employ them. First, a "catchment" tends to be smaller than a "basin". Second, as a community we are increasingly rallying around the HydroSHEDS Level 6 level as a general "catchment scale", while HydroSHEDS Level 4 tends to be the "basin scale". These correspond with "minor basins" and "major basins" respectively. These can be seen in the context of central Mexico in Figure 4 below. For more details on HydroSHEDS, please visit www.hydrosheds.org.

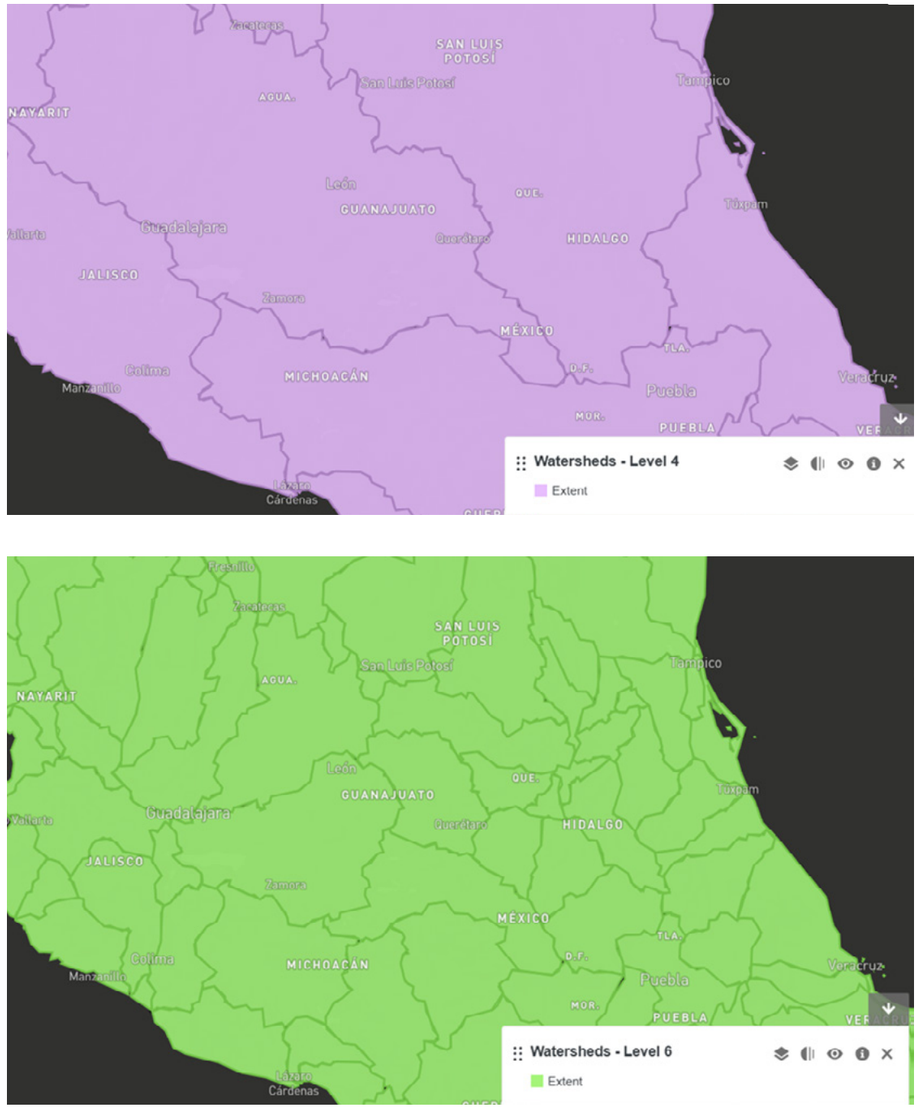


FIGURE 2: SCALE OF HYDROSHED 4 BASINS (PURPLE) AND HYDROSHED 6 CATCHMENTS (GREEN)

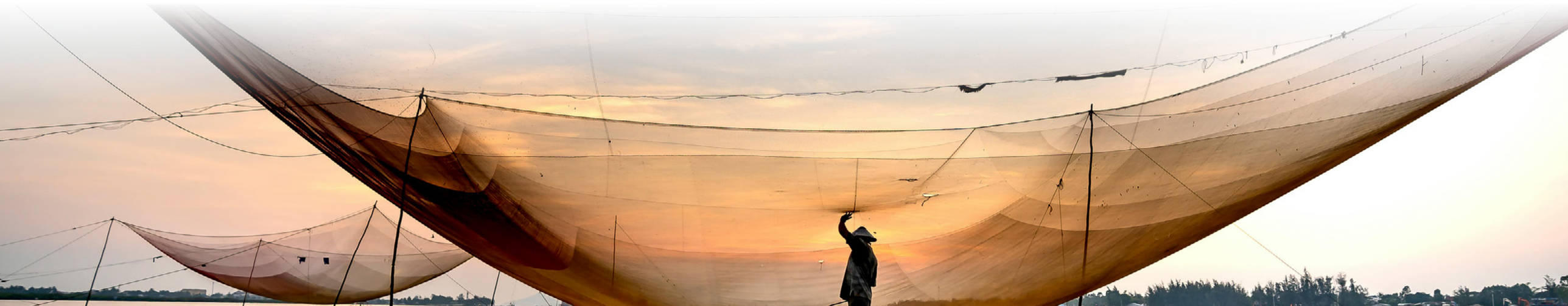
TABLE 1: COMPARATIVE SPECTRUM OF COLLECTIVE ACTION

COLLECTIVE ACTION

	Bilateral project	Collective action project		Collective action platform		
		SMALL	LARGE	CATCHMENT	BASIN	SUB-NATIONAL/NATIONAL
Framing	"We are working on our project, to serve our needs."	"We are working on our project to contribute to catchment needs"	"We are working with many stakeholders on a shared large-scale project to deliver on shared catchment / basin needs"	"We're coordinating our collective action projects in alignment with public policy to deliver on our shared catchment goals"	"We're coordinating our collective action projects and/or our catchment collective action platforms in alignment with public policy and regional shared basin goals"	"We're coordinating collective action projects and/or our catchment/basin collective action platforms in alignment with national and transboundary shared water goals"
Primary purpose	Two actors collaborating on a project that primarily serves their individual site or field-level targets.	Two or more actors working together to implement and manage one project that serves shared catchment or basin needs / targets.		Multiple actors working to coordinate multiple projects that serve shared catchment needs/targets with shared decision making	Multiple actors coordinating multiple catchment platforms that serve shared basin needs/targets with shared decision making	Multiple actors coordinating at the sub-national or national scale to serve shared sub-/national needs/targets with shared governance
Collective action roles	N/A (but still requires similar roles of financing, delivery & monitoring)	Financing, supporting delivery, monitoring	Convening, financing, supporting delivery, training, stakeholder outreach, monitoring	Convening, training, stakeholder outreach, monitoring, modelling, supporting delivery, financing, policy & regulatory engagement, watchdog	Convening across catchment initiatives, training, stakeholder outreach, monitoring, modelling, supporting delivery, financing, policy & regulatory engagement, watchdog	Convening across basin initiatives, training, stakeholder outreach, monitoring, modelling, supporting delivery, financing, policy & regulatory engagement, watchdog
Rough funding amount in USD)	Variable	Moderate (~100-250K)	Large (~250-1M)	Large (~1M+)	Large (~1M+)* covering coordination not implementation	Large (~1M+)* covering coordination not implementation
Size	Variable	Cluster/Community (Small-Moderate): 100 – 1,000 hectares and/or 1,000 – 10,000 people reached	Sub-catchment/small town (Moderate): 1,000 – 10,000 hectares and/or 10,000 – 100,000 people reached	Catchment/District-level (Large): 10,000 – 100,000 hectares and/or 100,000 – 500,000 people reached	River basin/Multi-District (Very large): 100,000 – 1 million hectares and/or 500,000 – 2 million people reached	Sub-national/National (Extremely large): > 1 million hectares and/or > 2 million people reached
Hydrological scale (approx.) (Appendix 1)	HydroSHEDS 10-12	HydroSHEDS 10-12	HydroSHEDS 8-12	HydroSHEDS 6-8	HydroSHEDS 3-4	N/A (HydroSHEDS 3-5)

COLLECTIVE ACTION

	Bilateral project	Collective action project		Collective action platform		
		SMALL	**LARGE**	**CATCHMENT**	**BASIN**	**SUB-NATIONAL/NATIONAL**
Scope and timeline of impact	Typically input/output-oriented (6-24 months)	Typically input/output-oriented (12-24 months)	Typically input-outcome oriented (12-36 months)	Typically input-to-impact oriented (12+ months)	Typically input-to-impact oriented (12+ months)	Typically input-output oriented (12+ months)
Policy and public sector involvement	None or very limited	Limited (alignment, possibly municipal engagement)	Limited to significant (municipal, state and federal engagement)	Moderate to significant (agency involvement at municipal to state levels)	Significant (agency involvement at municipal, state or federal levels)	Significant (agency involvement at state or federal levels)
Decision making	At least 2	At least 2	2+	Many	Many	Many
Number of implementers	1	1 (maybe be more)	Many	Many	Many	Many
Number of funders	Typically 1	Typically 1-5	Typically 1-5	Typically 5+	Typically 5+	Typically 5+
Coordination	1-to-1	1-to-many	Many-to-many	Many-to-many	Many-to-many	Many-to-many



This spectrum creates a more practical and functional language to help set expectations regarding the characteristics and scale of the collaboration being described. As illustrated in Table 1, the differentiation between bilateral projects (which are not collective action), collective action projects and collective action platforms (of varying scales) lies not only in the number of projects, but also in their fundamental purpose, management structure, and roles. Specifically, the differentiation between Collective Action Projects and Collective Action Platforms lies primarily in their nature: implementation versus coordination, respectively. They also differ in the scope of their convening (one project vs. multiple projects) and the breadth of their governance (narrower vs. broader).

Collective action projects are focused on implementing work on the ground across multiple SDG6 outcome areas and ideally other SDG areas. These projects typically undertake one or two key collective action roles (see Fig. 1) and may even include convening actors within the project. However, critically, they are not designed to coordinate between projects. Their scope is generally narrower, both in terms of convening (often a single project) and governance.

Conversely, collective action platforms (which the Water Resilience Coalition refers to as "Basin Collaboratives") are the systems that organize, align, and scale these individual projects to deliver coordinated, catchment- and/or basin-level outcomes. Their core function is coordination and governance, not typically implementation. This includes joint decision-making, project coordination, shared challenge identification and agreement, the establishment of shared targets, and systems for aggregated impact tracking. In essence, they serve as the mechanism that connects, coordinates, and reports across multiple projects. Their scope of convening and governance is therefore broader, supporting collaboration at a larger scale, and they strive toward catchment- and/or basin-level outcomes. At times, collective action platforms can be nested: for example, a basin-level collective action platform convening multiple sub-basin/catchment-level collective platforms. In the case of the Santiago Basin in Mexico – which is a Level 4 HydroBASIN, there could be separate catchment-level collective action platforms for the Lerma and Chapala catchments – both Level 6 HydroSHEDS. Figure 3 outlines how collective action projects can feed into a collective action platform.

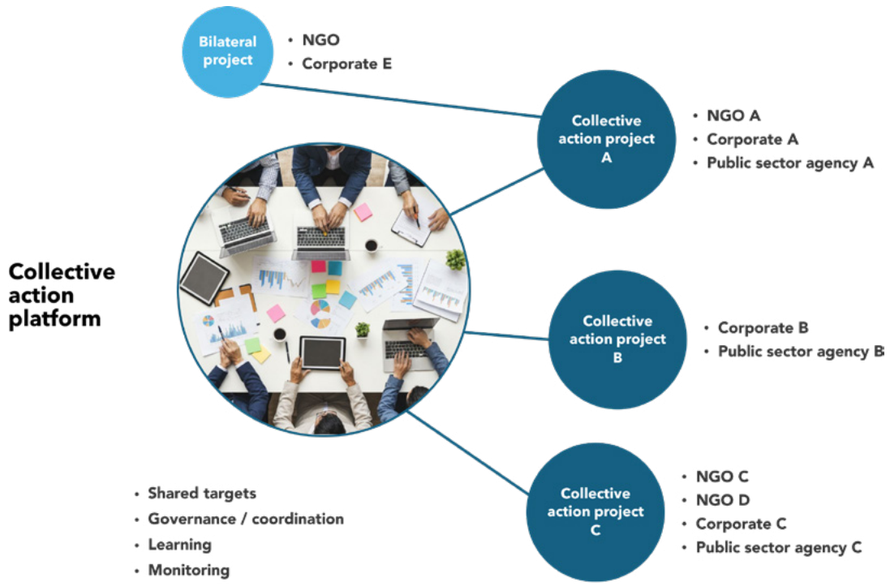


FIGURE 3: HOW COLLECTIVE ACTION PROJECTS FEED INTO A COLLECTIVE ACTION PLATFORM

"A well-designed collective action project can itself serve as the catalyst for forming a collaborative, using the stakeholder engagement and governance foundations built during the project's development as the core of a future, broader basin-wide platform."

TRANSITIONING ACROSS THE SPECTRUM

The spectrum for collective action is dynamic. Projects may, over time and if appropriate, expand into collective action through growing partnerships and scope, then formalize governance structures to create true collaboratives. Key steps along the pathway include:

- **Bilateral Project → Collective action project:** Addition of/coordination with partners, expansion of funding, and adoption of shared objectives relating to shared water challenges.
- **Collective action project → Collective action platform:** Project linking up with others and establishing a formal governance body (or engaging and empowering an existing one with new roles) that organizes multiple related projects for broader-scale results.
- **Collective action platform (catchment-level) → Collective action platform (basin/administrative-level):** Multiple collective action platforms coordinating at a broader spatial scale with a basin- or administrativelevel mechanism to align efforts and track outcomes across all water-related activities—including bilateral projects—within the defined hydrogeographic or administrative boundaries (e.g., national, state/provincial, etc.).

A well-designed project may serve as the seed for a much larger platform, leveraging early stakeholder engagement and governance to transition toward coordinated basin-wide stewardship. This can be visualized in Figure 3 below.

A bilateral project can evolve into a collective action project by expanding its partnership base. As it begins to meet its objectives, it may attract new funding and engage additional stakeholders. From there, the scope and complexity can grow further, often by introducing a governance structure to coordinate multiple related projects within the same catchment transitioning collaborative action projects into a collective action platform. This pathway (Figure 4) allows efforts to systematically scale their ambition from site-specific interventions to transformative, broader-scale impact. A well-designed collective action project can itself serve as the catalyst for forming a collaborative, using the stakeholder engagement and governance foundations built during the project's development as the core of a future, broader basin-wide platform. This is not always as linear (Figure 4) as some projects may start out as collective action platforms from the outset.

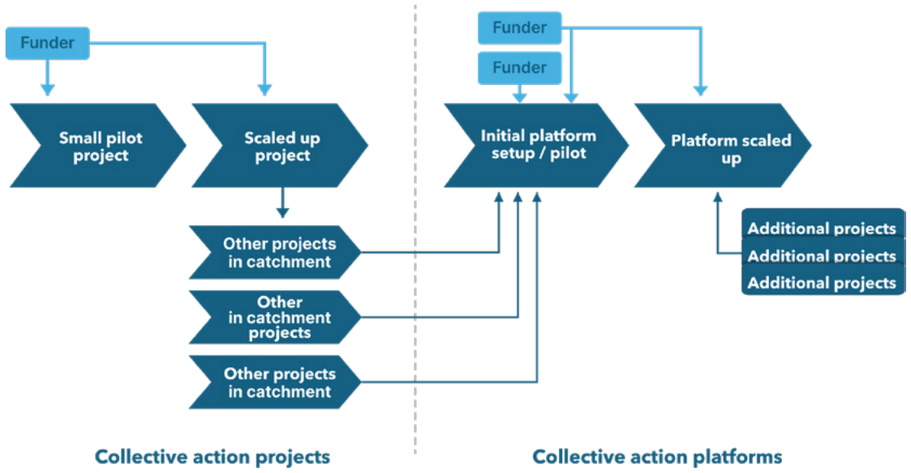


FIGURE 4: TRANSITION PATHWAY ACROSS THE COLLECTIVE ACTION SPECTRUM

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Understanding this spectrum, and the different typologies, has direct, practical implications for different actors. This includes:

- **Funders:** It clarifies what is being funded - a single project or a systemic coordinating body (i.e., a collective action platform) - enabling more strategic investment and realistic expectations for the scale of impact and governance needs.
- **Project managers and implementers:** It provides a roadmap for growth, showing how to design and implement projects with the potential to scale and integrate into larger platforms to achieve greater scale.
- **Policy makers:** It prevents the common pitfall of mislabeling a bilateral or standalone project as a catchment or basin-scale solution, ensuring efforts are structured appropriately for their intended level of ambition. It also offers a linguistic framing to clarify how such efforts can fit into existing public sector efforts under integrated water resources management structures.

A clear typology better equips the water stewardship community to design, implement, and evaluate water stewardship interventions with greater precision, ensuring resources and ambition align with the appropriate scale. It can help actors clearly articulate and understand the nature of a proposed "collective action" effort, while also managing expectations about its scope of impact and governance requirements. As the desired scale of impact increases, the need for stronger governance grows accordingly. Similarly, describing a linked systemic transition between these typologies offers a clear pathway for well-designed projects to grow and scale. This can help plant the seeds of transformative change in any project, no matter how small at the outset.

APPENDIX 1 – HYDROSHEDS DESCRIPTIVE SCALE

HydroSHEDS Level	Scale	Typical Size / Analogy	Practical Use Case
Levels 1–3	Continental Basins (Very Large)	Entire river systems spanning countries (e.g., Amazon, Nile, Mississippi)	Multinational coordination, global water risk assessment, high-level policy
Levels 4–5	Major Sub-Basins (Large)	Large river branches; similar to a state/province (e.g., Upper Mekong)	Basin-wide planning, large-scale collective action platforms
Levels 6–7	Regional Catchments (Moderate)	Tributary catchments; similar to a district or county	Regional partnerships, water stewardship coordination
Levels 8–9	Sub-Catchments (Small–Moderate)	Smaller tributaries or defined valley systems	Field interventions, restoration activities, targeted water quality efforts
Levels 10–11	Local Drainage Units (Small)	Small community-level catchments; cluster of villages	Local collective action projects, site–community WASH connections
Level 12	Micro-Catchments (Very Small)	Very small headwater areas; single hillside or site drainage	Bilateral projects, site-level mitigation, nature-based solutions