

# Dutch partnership on Saline Water & Food Systems

*Outline for a partnership and input for the discussion meeting (10 March 2022) with interested stakeholders.*

## Introduction

The Netherlands has a solid and promising position in the field of salinity, with a focus on saline agriculture, growing of salt-tolerant crops, linkages with irrigation and drainage. The Netherlands is internationally also known for its integral and systems approach in tackling the mitigating and adaptation of salinity issues. The general picture is that better coordination and cooperation between Dutch organisations is needed to keep and strengthen that international position. More importantly, it will further strengthen the Netherlands contribution to tackling salinisation and thus contributing to SDG2 – Zero Hunger. For this reason, the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality invited Netherlands Food Partnership (NFP) and Netherlands Water Partnership (NWP) to explore the development of a new partnership or platform<sup>1</sup> on **'Saline Water & Food Systems'** (SW&FS).

End of 2021, NFP and NWP interviewed fourteen sector parties (knowledge institutes, companies, centres) working on salinisation on the usefulness and necessity of such a partnership and their views on the possible ambitions, agenda and format. On 3 November 2021, a [session on SW&FS](#) was organised at the Amsterdam International Water Week (AIWW) in collaboration with Wageningen Environmental Research. For that session a [background paper](#) was compiled. The initial outlines of a partnership described below are based on the outcomes of the explorative interviews and the AIWW-session.

## Overall goal - ambition

The overall goal of the partnership is to strengthen the cooperation of the Dutch SW&FS sector in the international context. The necessity and relevance of this goal is widely endorsed. The interviewed sector parties acknowledged that there is ample fragmentation regarding stakeholders, clusters of organisations, research, and financing(instruments), besides the challenge for the water management and agriculture/food-sectors to find each other on the nexus. Collaboration would also benefit from a more coherent Dutch government policy. The network dealing internationally with SW&FS is relatively compact, with an emphasis on knowledge parties, a large variation in the business community with proactive and innovative SMEs and larger businesses interested in mitigation and adaptation.

A strong and coherent vision is now missing. Such a joint vision and clear common approach on research, innovation, pilots and feasible scaling, would support the profiling and implementation of programs in emerging economies and developing countries. The need for an integrated or systems approach is widely acknowledged, which implicates additional challenges for collaboration. Before profiling abroad and becoming more successful, the collaboration in the Netherlands itself should be well organised. The partnership will not be a global partnership but will interact and collaborate with international partners as well as with centres in the Netherlands with a national focus.

Of course, questions arise regarding function, scope and approach. Even if "salinity" is the niche, it can still cover a variety of topics. It is also argued to focus on for example sustainable agriculture and water management as to emphasise the systems approach.

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<sup>1</sup> Whether 'partnership' or 'platform' is the best name for the type of collaboration remains to be seen. A partnership is seen as an arrangement in which parties agree to cooperate to advance their mutual interests. A platform for knowledge exchange and networking could be regarded as more noncommittal. Other options are e.g. network, cluster, alliance and coalition. All have different connotations and a decision on the name can only be taken after jointly exploring the role, ambitions, functions and organisational format.

## Potential functions – specific objectives

The following objectives have been proposed, indicating that they may be given greater or lesser priority, but should in any case be interrelated.

**a. Developing a shared vision and sharing knowledge and experience.**

A joint vision encourages collaboration within the partnership and helps the Dutch sector with a common unified voice which supports 'branding' and collaboration with international stakeholders. Presenting a vision and a regularly updated Dutch portfolio would be an option. Sharing of knowledge, experience and ideas for new initiatives will take place by sharing case-studies and organising events, on neutral ground. These activities should be a logical addition to what centres in the Netherlands do and what happens on knowledge exchange in international forums. Knowledge sharing in international meetings is not only about presenting Dutch knowledge and innovations, but explicitly also about learning what other countries have to offer.

**b. Linking networks, organisations, and persons.**

The partnership can act as liaison between Dutch stakeholders and international networks. Linking relevant stakeholders can be organised by exchange meetings, inviting international experts, and connecting Dutch experts to international organisations (like FAO) and meetings. Showing what organisations in the Netherlands have to offer and/or manage a pool of experts helps to collaborate at national and global level. A tool could be to have an e-connection point (online platform) and show 'who is doing what' since initiators often look for partners.

**c. Informing/influencing policy and research agendas.**

With a shared vision and knowledge sharing activities, the partnership is able to inform and advise research and policy actors on their agendas. For example, feeding ministries on the water-food nexus related to salinity at international fora (e.g. UN COP en UN Water 2023). It would be more valuable for all parties to intensify collaboration and develop policy and research agendas by co-creation. To put salinity on the agenda and have influence in international forums it is crucial to be timely in the driving seat.

**d. 'Branding' the Netherlands knowledge and experience.**

Participating in international forums, sharing knowledge and expertise are in fact contributing to showcasing NL-expertise in the Netherlands and abroad, i.e. the 'branding' of the Netherlands and the awareness of what the Dutch sector has to offer. Communication tools, an online portfolio, brochures, a video, and contributing to trade missions are optional tools. A common voice based on a shared vision helps to effectively present the portfolio. The partnership offers a stage for policy makers, business, knowledge institutes and (I)NGOs.

**e. Initiation of implementing projects.**

All the above functions will help generate new initiatives at field level. Knowledge exchange, etcetera is important, but projects that contribute to SDGs, a stronger position of the sector, and 'business' for all stakeholders is at the end of the day the main goal. The partnership can identify problems or increase awareness and formulate possible solutions in a participative way as problems and solutions are very location specific. The partnership can facilitate connections between NL and local parties, support co-creation of new projects, and look for possible funding opportunities. The secretariat may have a seed-money budget to do the above and as such help the sector to quickly formulate new project proposals that will be submitted in relevant calls.

The trend in the interviews was to have a mix of all: developing a joint vision; sharing knowledge and experience; as such indirectly branding the NL-expertise; informing/influencing policy and research agendas and initiation of implementing projects. However, striking the right balance is important.

## Agenda of the partnership

In addition to the objectives, the actual scope or agenda of the partnership must also be decided upon. There is a plea for a reduction of that scope, while maintaining an integrated approach. Technical i.e. practical solutions, as well as managerial and policy level should be included. The question is whether the partnership should focus on the specific issues and solutions that are typical for the Netherlands or the full range of salinization topics at the global level. Research institutes in the Netherlands have a much broader scope than subjects of importance in the Netherlands. This means that both mitigation as well as adaptation are included, both deltas and arid areas, and so on. But also the consequences of salinization for user groups (drinking water, industry) other than farmers?

In addition to an overall partnership agenda, consensus is needed on which initiatives for projects could be supported. Some of the options as mentioned during the interviews: testing intervention packages in practice; bringing information/technology to farmers/markets (as quite a lot of information/technologies are already available); stimulating knowledge exchange between farmer groups; develop business cases for farmers dealing with salinity (LMICs require robust and low-cost technology and integrated farming practises); develop business cases for saline crops and products; linking national level policies to local level action.

It was also suggested to always adopt a regional approach to tackle the often-complex local challenges more effectively. Such as freshwater management to prevent salinization and about salinity-based agriculture where soil management is crucial and the use of the right crops. This requires a regional organisation of adequate governance and practical implementation.

## Interaction within the Netherlands and internationally

Obviously, the partnership should be complementary to existing centres, platforms, programs and other initiatives and connect where possible. Dutch (knowledge)centres such as [Zoet Zout Knooppunt](#), Kenniscluster Verzilting, [Waddenacademie](#), are primarily focused on national topics, but coordination is necessary since the centres have much to offer internationally. The role of linking and knowledge sharing within the Netherlands is with the Dutch based centres.<sup>2 3 4</sup> The [Saline Farm Foundation](#) has the goal to share Dutch knowledge with international partners. The SW&FS partnership could be an intermediary between Dutch organisations and international stakeholders and institutions. Saline soils may also emerge in the explorations on soil health in Ghana and Ethiopia, which are currently underway in the NFP convened [Soil health coalition](#).

Some Dutch actors already interact with and contribute to international institutions. It is not only about exporting Dutch knowledge and skills but definitely also about learning from international and local networks. Important international institutions to liaison with are for example: International Network of Salt-Affected Soils ([INSAS](#)); Global Framework on Water Scarcity in Agriculture ([WASAG](#)); International Center for Biosaline Agriculture ([ICBA](#)) present in South Asia and Africa, International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas ([ICARDA](#)), Saline Agriculture for Adaptation ([SALAD](#)), International Commission on Irrigation & Drainage ([ICID](#)), International Water Management Institute ([IWMI](#)), the Interreg project [SalFar](#). There are obviously ample companies, knowledge institutes and foundations in e.g. Australia and the US which have knowledge and expertise to offer.

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<sup>2</sup> An upcoming PPS-call will also include the objective to enhance national collaboration on tackling the salinity challenges in the Netherlands.

<sup>3</sup> The Wadden Academy will shortly publish a report (executed by Deltares) with the state of affairs regarding knowledge and techniques for working with the fresh/salt problem in coastal areas such as Zeeland and the Wadden area. Part of this study is also the mapping of existing information and the (future) knowledge needs.

<sup>4</sup> List of organisations in publication: Saline Food Systems. Reflecting on capacity and knowledge within the Netherlands. Judit Snethlage, Gert-Jan Wilbers & Angel de Miguel-Garcia.

## Organisation of the partnership

The partnership will start at a modest level and will follow a growth scenario to become a well-known actor with added value in two years' time. It will show its legitimacy by doing. Resources are yet limited and building trust and developing a strong network takes time.

Based on lessons learned in other partnerships important **success factors** which were mentioned:

(1) be as inclusive as possible, i.e. all stakeholders should be on board and involved, (2) work with a focused set of activities and deliverables (KPIs), (3) define clearly what is in it for the members, and ask their commitment and what they will contribute, (4) have a clearly defined audience (soil/water; farmers/companies/policy), (5) deal honestly with cross cultural challenges.

It should be avoided that the partnership becomes a 'coffee club' or focuses on the next pilot and not thinks about the big picture (focus more strategically). The partnership should not radiate that it is asking for money since it will hinder the alliance if that is the primary goal. Naturally the interests of stakeholders differ, for example: technology companies want to implement their solutions; breeders want their varieties to be tested and grown; consultancies want to advice, facilitate pilots, conduct trainings; education wants cases and other input for their curriculum; researchers want contacts and projects to generate or validate new insights; policy makers want input for agenda setting and programme development.

In the Netherlands there are about 60 organisations (knowledge, business, NGOs, government) which can contribute to SW&FS solutions in LMICs. The core of the partnership will most likely be formed by organisations that are very active at international level. For achieving impact, it is important to include medium size businesses next to multinationals (large food producers) and involve impact investors and policymakers. Aligned support and resources of MinAgri, MinFA, including Embassies, RVO-instruments are in many cases needed to enable local or regional initiatives. Which actors become '**active members**' of the partnership and which actors will be interacting with the partnership as a '**target group**', will have to turn out.

The partnership will be dynamic with life and online meetings and regular activities. To make this happen a '**secretariat**' is needed certainly in the start-up phase. NFP and NWP will develop the partnership in 2022 and - if partners agree and resources allow – continue convening for a longer period. Facilitation of the partnership in the start-up phase is essential but for the continuity it is more important that partners are highly involved and invest time. The options of a Steering Committee which keeps track of KPIs and an evaluation of the partnership after 2 or 3 years are proposed.

NFP and NWP will look for resources for a small fund to initiate new activities and share Dutch expertise. Such a **project facility** will be managed by the secretariat; selection criteria and procedures to allocate seed money then need to be developed.

Initial activities in the **2022 work plan** can be: develop a draft vision; a meeting to discuss and finalise a vision paper; make an overview of the Dutch portfolio and communicate this with brochure and/or a video; a knowledge sharing and business-partner meeting preferably with international participation and input; prepare the sector for Dutch input in international meetings (e.g. UN Water Conference 2023). The work plan must of course be aligned with activities of Dutch centres/networks.

## Next steps

The results of the discussion meeting on the proposed SW&FS partnership on March 10 will be used to further define the partnership's shared objectives, agenda and approach. Also the next steps proposed by the participants will be used by NFP and NWP to develop the 2022 work plan of the partnership and start implementing priority activities in collaboration with interested partners.