



Strategy 2026–2030

Strengthening Systems.
Transforming Lives.



riva



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"We are a transformational systems network. Our mission is to inform, influence and inspire decision makers to place lasting water, sanitation and hygiene services at the core of their priority commitments, policy and investment strategies."

Vida Dutu, CEO of Riva Ghana and Deputy Secretary General of the Riva Network speaking at the Sanitation and Water for All Sector Ministers' Meeting in Madrid (2025) presenting the Heads of State Initiative during the ministerial dialogue on high-level political prioritisation.
Credit: Natalia Ibarra



1. Who we are and what we've built

Our identity, our proof of concept, and our foundations

1.1 Reasonably unreasonable: 50 years of systems persistence

Riva is, in part, the product of an unreasonable conviction. For more than 50 years – and with particular force over the last decade – we have insisted that the way the world approaches water and sanitation is wrong: not in its intentions, but in its logic. The assumption – that you can solve a systems problem with project-based, hardware-focused, donor-driven interventions and that sustainability will somehow follow – was flawed.

For much of that time, the water and sanitation sector was organised around capital expenditure: building infrastructure, counting beneficiaries, closing projects. The language of system strengthening, of political economy, of institutional reform and evidence-based long-term investment was the language of a minority.

"The reasonable man adapts himself to the world: the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore, all progress depends on the unreasonable man."

– George Bernard Shaw

The case we were making through our thought leadership and wider work is gaining ground – in policy forums, in how donors frame their priorities, in the language governments now use. But winning arguments and winning resources are different



Jane Nabunnya Mulumba, CEO of Riva Uganda speaking at the All Systems Connect International Symposium 2023, in The Hague.

things – the shift is real and documented. The aid-dependent part of that sector had been operating in isolation from how public services are actually built and sustained. In countries that have achieved high coverage the answer has always been the same: political commitment, institutional investment and predictable domestic finance. Closing that gap is now the work the sector is organised around. The language of systems strengthening is now mainstreamed among the major multilaterals. Presidential compacts – head-of-state level commitments to water and sanitation – are being signed in Ghana and beyond. The Systems Academy has reached more than 8,000 professionals across 125 countries. And the global movement we have helped to build – through the One For All alliance with Water For People, through the Sanitation and Water for All partnership, through the Agenda for Change network – is accelerating the pace of change in ways that no single organisation could achieve alone.

Our Riva network is the organisational form that allows us to pursue this mission with greater legitimacy, greater reach and greater staying power.

1.2 From IRC to Riva: a strategic evolution

We are evolving – from a Dutch-based organisation with country offices to something genuinely new: a federation of independent national members. Riva is a federation – a step beyond a headquarters-and-country-offices structure; a distinction that matters because it determines where decisions are made, where talent is developed, and who we are accountable to. Stichting Riva (Riva Foundation), registered in the Netherlands, anchors the network's legal and governance framework. We're building towards at least five independent member organisations – in Ghana, the Sahel (including Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso), Uganda, Ethiopia, and the Netherlands. They will operate under a governance framework that sets out shared commitments, standards and the terms of membership.

So the transition from IRC to Riva is not simply a rebranding. It is the logical conclusion of a journey that began formally in 2017 when we adopted a

systems framework and committed to working in partner districts until universal access was achieved – not until the project ended. The pace of change accelerated in 2021 when our Supervisory Board agreed to pursue a networked, decentralised model with its centre of gravity in the Global South. And it reaches a new chapter in 2026 with the formal launch of Riva and our transformational systems approach.

The case for this evolution rests on evidence. An independent evaluation of IRC's work, completed in December 2025, found what the numbers support: a consistent record of systems change, at scale, in contexts where short-term project approaches had repeatedly failed.

69

district master plans completed

18,000+

Academy users in 120 countries

€10.3m

revenue in 2025

In districts, the evidence is concrete. In Asutifi North, Ghana, the ANAM initiative – launched in 2018 – has brought 90% of the population to at least basic water services, up from 82% in 2017, despite a 17% population increase; the district is on track to achieve its 2030 water target and has become a model being replicated across the Ahafo region, affecting over 550,000 people. In Kabarole, Uganda, safely managed water services have risen from 5% in 2017 to 15% in 2024 – against a national rural average of 9%. In Burkina Faso, the Banfora master planning approach has been scaled to 87 districts across three regions, covering a quarter of the country.

At the national level, the results have been at least as significant. Ethiopia's first national water and sanitation financing strategy, completed in 2025,



was developed with IRC as co-chair of the national financing working group. Ghana's Presidential Compact, signed in August 2024 – a framework for political prioritisation and mutual accountability for water and sanitation – is a commitment shaped in part by years of systems-strengthening work with sector ministries and the Ahafo region and by convening many people and organisations around government-led collective action. In Uganda, the National Planning Authority agreed in 2023 to integrate district master planning into its national development planning processes; in Ghana, the National Development Planning Commission reviewed its national planning guidelines in 2025, to integrate lessons from the district master planning process.

We are also clear about where progress has been slower. Sanitation consistently lags water in every context we work in. Hygiene improvement has not followed the handwashing momentum of COVID-19. Raising domestic finance remains genuinely difficult. And in the Sahel – where deteriorating

security and political instability have disrupted our work in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger – the gap between commitment and delivery has been acute. These are failures of context that require continued engagement, not withdrawal.

1.3 What a decade of learning tells us

Five years of systematic monitoring across our partner districts has sharpened our understanding of what produces durable change.

Political commitment at the highest level matters more than we initially expected. Progress is consistently faster where a mayor, a minister or a president has genuinely committed. The Heads of State Initiatives – which Riva supports alongside Sanitation and Water for All and other partners – exist precisely to create that condition at national scale.

Professionalisation of services is essential, and indispensable. Community management cannot deliver safely managed services at scale.

The consistent lesson from Uganda, Ghana and Burkina Faso is that the shift from community management toward professional operators – utilities and formal service providers – is the path to durability. This ‘utilitisation’ agenda has moved from provocative terminology to an increasingly accepted direction of travel – albeit at a pace that reflects how politically difficult the transition is, and how real the consequences are for communities, workers and local institutions.

Systems transformation is non-linear and takes time. Viewed through the lenses of our nine-building-block framework, planning and infrastructure consistently improve faster than regulation, finance and water resource management. However, the slower-moving building blocks are often the most critical – and they cannot be addressed through project-based interventions. They need sustained partnerships across a full planning cycle.

The finance gap is structural and must be addressed structurally. Closing it requires both greater domestic public investment and better-prepared, more investable proposals that can attract repayable finance from development banks and climate funds. This sits at the heart of our strategy for the years ahead.

Underpinning all of this is a body of thought leadership that has consistently shaped how the sector understands its own challenges – from the peer-reviewed case for a service delivery approach in the early 2000s, to our building block framework, to the systems leadership essay that has reached practitioners in more than one hundred countries. This body of knowledge is not Riva’s alone – it has been built with partners, tested in the field, and debated in the open. But we have been at the centre of it, and we remain committed to being so.

2. The world we're responding to

A shifting landscape that's both challenging and hospitable to our approach

2.1 A contracting aid architecture

The traditional architecture of international development assistance is under severe and probably irreversible pressure. The UK's FCDO withdrew from bilateral water and sanitation programming in 2026, part of a reduction of UK aid to 0.3% of GNI. USAID was abolished in 2025, costing us over € 1 million in that year alone from a multi-annual programme in Ethiopia with an intended total value of more than € 4 million. The Netherlands remains a committed partner, but dependence on any single bilateral funder is a vulnerability we are actively reducing.

Our revenue has fallen from a record € 12.5 million in 2023 to € 10.3 million in 2025, and we face continued pressure in 2026–27. But the contraction of the North-to-South aid model is not simply a threat. That model has, over decades, created dependency, distorted incentives and often substituted for the national investment that is the only truly sustainable source of water and sanitation financing. The case for a different model – one in which Riva is commissioned by the governments and institutions we serve, and accountable to them and the citizens they serve – has never been stronger.

In this strategy period, we are building the capacity to be funded directly by governments in the countries where we work. We do not have substantial experience of this yet, and we know it will take time. But we will not achieve genuine sustainability without it.

2.2 Rising government ambition and the nation-building opportunity

The most effective governments in our focus countries are increasingly capable, increasingly ambitious, and increasingly willing to invest in systems rather than wait for external help. Ghana's Presidential Compact. Ethiopia's national financing strategy. Uganda's integration of master planning

into national development processes. The people involved represent a growing cohort of system champions: ministers, mayors, planners and regulators who understand that water and sanitation are foundational to every development priority.

The direction of travel is captured in the words of Ghana's President Mahama:

"The world does not need more charity; it needs a fundamental reset. We are calling for an international system that recognises Africa not as a problem to be solved, but as a primary architect of the global future."

– President John Dramani Mahama,
80th UN General Assembly, September 2025

Riva's role is to be the partner that system champions reach for. The organisation that can translate political will into operational systems that last, that can make the financial case to ministries of finance, and that can connect a district mayor's experience to a global evidence base. This is the nation-building agenda that drives our work.

2.3 Water as the foundation of climate resilience

The dominant frame in global climate discussions has been mitigation – reducing emissions and ensuring that the transition to a climate-neutral economy happens fairly. That agenda, important as it is, has marginalised water and sanitation: less than 0.3% of global climate finance flows to water supply and

sanitation. Now, as governments and funders reckon with the reality that global warming is already here and communities must be helped to survive it – the adaptation agenda is gaining traction.

Water and sanitation services are not simply vulnerable to climate change. Resilient water and sanitation systems are foundational to climate-resilient communities. A community without reliable clean water cannot adapt to drought. A district without functioning sanitation cannot survive a flood. The investments that build strong water systems – professionalised utilities, costed long-term plans, functioning governance – are simultaneously investments in climate adaptation. Making this case effectively, and connecting it to the adaptation funding the sector needs, is central to how Riva will position itself over this strategy period.

We're already at work. Our climate-resilient water and sanitation Systems Academy course, co-developed with Water For People and WaterAid; the Rwanda climate-resilient financing

strategy developed with WASAC and UNICEF; our engagement with the African Development Bank around climate finance for water; our work on climate-resilient services in Ethiopia and Bangladesh – one of the most climate-vulnerable countries in the world and a long-standing Riva focus country. These are the beginning of a sustained effort to connect water systems with adaptation funding.

2.4 The case for going beyond water and sanitation

Water and sanitation do not exist in isolation. They are entangled with climate systems, health systems, financial systems, governance systems and the political economy of national development. Acting as though they do not is not about knowing our limits – it's a choice, and one that produces worse outcomes.

Water and sanitation is our foundation – our history, our heritage and our proof of concept. But in an interconnected world, lasting water and sanitation services cannot be achieved within a sectoral silo.



Image credit: Riva

Water connects to climate, health, finance, governance and economic development whether we choose it or not. Engaging those systems is how change actually works.

The evidence is in our work. We've identified concrete entry points at the intersection of water and public health. We've found that climate resilience requires engagement with water resource management, agriculture and urban planning. Presidential Compacts require engagement with finance ministries and concerted co-ordination across multiple sectors. And at our All Systems Connect symposium we brought together water and sanitation professionals with leaders in health, climate, finance and social justice – and watched them find immediate, practical common ground.

We use water and sanitation as the lens through which we engage. We follow the evidence, and the evidence consistently leads us beyond the boundary of the sector.

What this does not mean is becoming a technical expert in public health, climate science or education. Our comparative advantage is in systems leadership, governance and integrated planning – and that is where we deepen. Going beyond water and sanitation means applying those capabilities where systems intersect, and working with organisations whose expertise in health, climate, finance and other fields we actively seek out and learn from. The ambition is collaboration, not substitution.

Riva at a Glance

Vision	Destination 2030 aims to achieve universal water and sanitation services by strengthening systems locally to reach 20 million people, scaling nationally to improve services for 200 million people across at least 20 countries, and driving global transformational change to benefit over 2 billion people still without access.
Mission	To inform, influence and inspire decision makers to place lasting water, sanitation and hygiene services at the core of their priority commitments, policy and investment strategies. We are a trusted adviser, knowledge broker and convener.
Purpose	To transform the lives of people – for the better, for all of us.
What we do	Systems leadership · Strategic advisory services · Institutional reform and strengthening · Innovation, research and knowledge
How we work	A federation of independent national members operating as the Riva network.
Where we work	Primary: The largest part of our work happens in the following countries: Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Ghana, India, Mali, Niger, Rwanda and Uganda. Influencing: The Netherlands and global. Through the One For All Alliance we also contribute to impact in Bolivia, Cambodia, Central African Republic, Guatemala, Honduras, India, Malawi, Peru, and Tanzania.
Strategic goals	Systems transformation · Institutional influence and scale · Financial sustainability · Organisational health
Priority instruments	Presidential Compacts · National financing strategies · District master plans at scale · The Systems Academy





3. Our strategic choices 2026–2030

What we will and won't do, and where our advantage is strongest

3.1 What we will do

Prioritise systems leadership over project implementation. Riva's primary role is as a trusted adviser, knowledge broker, convener. We implement where that is the necessary vehicle for learning or demonstration, not for its own sake. Projects remain a core delivery mechanism – but they serve the strategy, not the other way around. We will not pursue implementation as an end in itself, or maintain partnerships that have become delivery vehicles without systemic purpose.

Deepen before expanding. Long-term partnerships with a smaller number of governments and districts produce more durable change than shallow engagement with many. Our 13 current partner districts represent a considered commitment. We will not expand that set without the political traction, funding and capacity to do it properly.

Focus on a small number of high-leverage tools and approaches. Presidential Compacts. National water and sanitation financing strategies. District master plans taken to national scale. The Systems Academy. We know these work. We will invest in them deliberately rather than dispersing effort across a long menu of activities.

Build the federated model as both strategy and delivery mechanism. Locally led, nationally rooted organisations have greater legitimacy, greater staying power, and greater ability to be funded by the governments they serve than a Netherlands-headquartered international NGO. Our Riva network is how we increase our impact – and how we model the decentralisation we advocate.

Use evidence and intellectual rigour as competitive advantages. We publish what we find, including when it challenges our own assumptions. The credibility that comes from

this cannot be replicated quickly. It is a genuine advantage and we will invest in it.

Foreground inclusion and equity as measures of systems quality. A water and sanitation system that doesn't reach the poorest, the most marginalised, and those most affected by gender inequality has not succeeded – regardless of what the figures show. Riva's systems approach explicitly includes civil society organisations' (CSO) voice, community accountability, and equity analysis as components of strong systems, not optional additions.

3.2 What we won't do

- **Deliver infrastructure as a primary activity.** Where infrastructure is needed to demonstrate a service model or enable our systems work, we will commission or co-invest in it. We are not a construction organisation.
- **Expand into areas where no meaningful water and sanitation entry point exists.** Going beyond the sector means following the interconnections that water systems already have, not acquiring new mandates where we have no foothold.
- **Maintain district partnerships where there is no credible path to national learning or scale.** Districts are proof-of-concept platforms. Where a partnership has become project delivery without systemic impact, we will say so, and act.
- **Pursue geographic expansion without the demand, political traction and funding to do it properly.** We will say no to opportunities that don't meet that test.
- **Substitute for the responsibilities of government.** Our role is to strengthen the systems through which governments fulfil their obligations to citizens. Substituting for those systems – however well-intentioned – undermines the sustainability we are trying to build.

3.3 Our comparative advantage

The part of the water and sanitation sector that relies on shrinking philanthropic and bilateral development funding is growing ever more crowded. The success of the systems strengthening argument means that more organisations now claim to work in this space. In such a rapidly changing environment, any landscape analysis is partial.

Riva's distinctive combination is: deep systems knowledge built over five decades; local legitimacy through a federated network of national organisations; multi-level integration from partner district to global policy; and a track record of generating independent evidence and thought leadership that shapes the sector's direction. No single element is unique. Together, they are.

We occupy the space between the research institute and the implementer – credible enough to influence policy, grounded enough to prove it in practice. We lead where systems strengthening and transformation and national-level institutional reform are the primary need. We partner where niche technical or financial expertise is required.

3.4 2026 as a transition year

2026 is a transition year. Riva is simultaneously managing the financial pressures described above, completing the transition to a federation, and launching this strategic framework. It is a year of foundation-building: consolidating federation governance; developing the individual and network-wide business plans that turns this strategy into action; mapping the gap between current and required capabilities; and securing the partnerships and pipeline that make the 2027–2030 ambition achievable. From 2027, we expect to be operating at full strategic pace.

An aerial photograph of a river delta, showing a complex network of blue water channels branching out from a larger body of water into a brown, textured landscape of land and sediment. The text is overlaid on the upper portion of the image.

Riva is unique because it combines long-term country presence, trusted government relationships, systems expertise, and implementation experience to move countries from policy commitments to sustained institutional performance.



4. Our capability areas

What Riva does, who with, and what makes each area distinctive

Riva's work is organised around four interconnected capability areas. They are not separate services: for example, Presidential Compact work draws on all four simultaneously. The integration is the point. These areas also reflect and contribute to the sector's evolving understanding of what systems transformation requires.

4.1 Systems leadership

The most intractable barrier to universal water and sanitation services is political, not technical. Where heads of state, ministers, mayors and senior officials genuinely commit – and back that commitment with budget and institutional reform – progress follows. Systems leadership is the work of making that commitment happen, sustaining it across budget cycles and changes of government, and translating it into the institutional change that makes services last. In practice, this means working at multiple levels simultaneously: building the evidence base that makes the case compelling; creating the peer

networks that make commitment feel less lonely; advising senior leaders on sequencing and political strategy; and convening the alliances – across sectors, countries and levels of government – through which isolated decisions become a movement. It means working alongside decision makers as they build the habits, structures and accountability mechanisms that systems transformation requires – not just advocating for systems approaches from the outside, but helping governments actually adopt them.

Our instruments span every level of governance. At district level, a master plan is not a wish list: it is a government-owned, multi-stakeholder commitment to a shared vision for universal services, with targets, costs and accountability mechanisms attached. Riva has been developing them for more than a decade – there are now 69 across seven countries. At national level, costed financing strategies translate that district-level ambition into the language of development banks and climate



High-level event at the All Systems Connect International Symposium 2023 an event convened by the One For All Alliance – IRC, Water For People and Water for Good – with partners. Image credit: Robert Tjalondo

Political will drives systems change

In August 2024, Ghana's President signed a compact committing USD 1.7 billion annually until 2030 to water and sanitation. It was a momentous occasion – and the result of years of deliberate groundwork: building coalitions, shaping global frameworks, and connecting country-level ambition to a movement that makes each government's commitment stronger because of all the others.

We have been at the heart of that work. Through Sanitation and Water for All, we helped develop the country briefs that first ignited government interest in several cases. At the 2023 All Systems Connect symposium in The Hague, we convened the high-level breakfast where Malawi's Minister met her Ghanaian counterpart for the first time – a peer connection that would accelerate Malawi's entire compact process. We contributed to shaping the TIDE framework – Triggering, Incubation, Delivery, Evaluation – that now guides national processes globally.

Signing is the start. Implementation – sustained across budget cycles and changes of government – is the harder challenge. Over this strategy period, we will deepen our support in Ghana, Ethiopia and Uganda, and grow the global movement to 25 governments. We measure success not by the number of compacts signed, but by whether they deliver changed financing and better services.

finance mechanisms. And at head-of-state level, Presidential Compacts – formal commitments backed by budget allocations and institutional reform programmes – create the political anchor that holds the whole system together. Alongside these, we work through direct advisory relationships with senior officials, coaching and mentoring for system champions, participation in the Heads of State Initiatives alongside Sanitation and Water for All, WaterAid, UNICEF, and the governments of the Netherlands and the UK, and convening through the All Systems Connect and All Systems Go Africa symposia series.

We measure success at each level not by the number of instruments signed or adopted, but by whether they translate into changed financing, institutional reform and better services.

A significant development in 2026 is the launch of Water Forward by the World Bank, regional development banks and other partners – a global initiative to deliver water services to at least one billion people by 2030, built on the same government-led compact model. This is a potentially important inflection point for the sector and for Riva. We will support and encourage Water Forward in all the countries where we work.

What is a Presidential Compact?

A Presidential Compact is a formal, public commitment by a head of state to prioritise water and sanitation as a national development priority – backed by specific budget allocations, institutional reform commitments, and accountability mechanisms. Compacts are developed through a structured process involving government, Civil Society Organisations and development partners, and are designed to attract additional investment by demonstrating political credibility at the highest level.

The Systems Academy is how we build the cadre of leaders and practitioners this transformation requires. It now offers 50 courses across water, sanitation and systems strengthening and transformation. Core courses are online and self-guided; and we are increasingly offering hybrid formats that combine online learning with in-person workshops, tailored to national contexts. The Academy is available in multiple languages, developed in partnership with UNICEF, the Asian Development Bank, WaterAid, Water For People and others. It has reached more than 18,000 professionals across 120 countries, with a 95% recommendation rate.

The Systems Academy: building the people who build the systems

More than 80% of countries report they don't have enough trained water, sanitation and hygiene professionals. A pump is installed; no one is trained to maintain it. A national strategy is written; planners don't know how to cost it. You cannot build strong systems without empowering the people within them.

We launched the Systems Academy in 2019 on exactly that conviction. Since then, more than 18,000 people across 120 countries have learned with us – through online courses, guided cohorts, and in-country workshops – and 95% find opportunities to apply what they've learned within six months. Moise Irankunda, a GIS Specialist at Rwanda's Water and Sanitation Corporation, now requires climate resilience components in every project proposal his team reviews. That is not a training output. It is a systems change.

Two universities in Rwanda have embedded our courses in their curricula. National training institutes in multiple countries have integrated our content into professional development pathways.

Over the period of this strategy, we will grow the Academy to 15,000 cumulative completions by 2030 – at least 30% from government – deepening our integration with national institutions and extending our reach into humanitarian settings.

4.2 Strategic advisory services

Political will, without the means to act on it, dissipates. Our strategic advisory work bridges commitment and delivery, operating at the intersection of finance, governance, planning and political economy.

Our most important advisory contribution in this area is helping governments develop credible, costed national financing strategies for water and sanitation. The structural gap between what governments currently allocate and what universal access requires is well documented. Closing it requires two things: first, more domestic public finance and then, improved access to repayable finance. We've developed costed national financing strategies in Ethiopia and Rwanda and we're developing further work with other national partners. Our goal is to make those strategies credible to development banks and climate finance mechanisms, not just bilateral donors.

We also provide advisory services on institutional reform, regulatory design, sector governance and the sequencing of reform in complex political

environments. These are grounded in years of national presence and draw on deep contextual knowledge.

4.3 Institutional reform and strengthening

Our nine-building-block framework for water and sanitation systems covers institutions, policy and legislation, planning, finance, regulation, monitoring, infrastructure, water resource management, and learning and adaptation. It has become widely used as a diagnostic tool for water and sanitation: adopted by UNICEF, the Agenda for Change partnership, and numerous national governments.

In districts, our master planning approach translates this diagnostic into a long-term operational plan, owned by local government, that aligns all partners around a shared vision. There are now 69 completed master plans. The District Master Planning Facility, a platform we launched in 2022, supports organisations beyond Riva to develop their own.

This capability area also encompasses our work in professionalisation – what the sector increasingly

calls utilitisation. We support governments and utilities through the shift from community management to professional service delivery: strengthening leadership and governance, establishing regulatory frameworks that create accountability without stifling growth, and building the financial and operational disciplines — costed maintenance plans, performance monitoring, regulation, water resource management — that turn infrastructure into services – and that makes those services credible and investment worthy. In fragile and refugee-hosting contexts where the gap between need and institutional capacity is widest, we bring the same systems approach, adapted to the realities of instability and rapid population movement. The transition from volunteer-led community schemes to professionally managed services is the single most consequential shift we can support in most of our partner countries – and one of the most politically complex.

What is a district master plan?

A district master plan is a government-owned, long-term (typically 10–15 year), costed roadmap for achieving universal water and sanitation services in a defined administrative area. It sets a shared vision, maps current service levels and gaps, establishes targets and strategies, and provides the basis for mobilising resources.

Plans are developed through a collective action process involving government, utilities, CSOs, communities and funders. They are the primary planning tool used in Riva's partner districts and are increasingly being adopted as national planning instruments. In Uganda, for example, the National Planning Authority agreed in 2023 to integrate the approach into its national development planning processes.



The Systems Academy is designed to unlock everyone's potential to lead systems change by connecting them to inspirational people, knowledge and ideas to deliver sustainable water and sanitation for everyone.

Sixty plans. One approach.

In 2018, we developed district water, sanitation and hygiene master plans in three pioneer districts: Asutifi North in Ghana, Banfora in Burkina Faso, Kabarole in Uganda. Each plan was built through a collective process involving government, utilities, CSOs, communities and funders – not a technical document handed down, but a shared commitment to a vision of universal services, with targets, costs and accountability mechanisms attached.

The approach works because it changes who owns the plan. A government-owned master plan is not a wish list: it is a basis for mobilising resources, holding service providers to account, and sustaining progress through changes of leadership and funding. In Uganda, the National Planning Authority agreed in 2023 to integrate the approach into its national development planning processes – the district level feeding the national level, exactly as it should.

By 2026, there are 69 completed master plans across seven countries. The District Master Planning Facility, launched in 2022, now supports organisations beyond Riva to develop their own.

Over this strategy period, our ambition is scale: ten countries where master planning covers at least 25% of national territory, with four in our core focus countries. We also see real – if still early – potential for AI tools to reduce the time and cost of developing plans, bringing government-owned master planning within reach of districts that currently lack the resources to undertake it. District by district, plan by plan – and increasingly smarter – that is how systems change is built.

4.4 Innovation, research and knowledge

Riva's credibility rests on thought leadership grounded in practice. For more than 50 years we've helped to define how the sector understands its own problems – from the shift to systems strengthening, to the political economy of service professionalisation, to the emerging case that credible institutions are the key to unlocking large-scale investment.

As a think-and-do network, our research is inseparable from presence in the field: we produce evidence that is too compelling to ignore because it comes from places where we have worked for years. Our research covers: water and sanitation financing and investment readiness; service professionalisation; climate resilience; social inclusion and equity; and the political economy of sector reform. We publish openly, and we include findings that challenge our own assumptions.

Beyond research and publications, our convening function is how we translate knowledge into collective action. The All Systems Connect and All Systems Go Africa symposia, the Heads of State Initiatives platform, sector learning alliances – these bring systems leaders together across countries, sectors and levels of power. The next event in this series will be the Africa Water & Sanitation Systems Leadership Symposium 2026 in Kigali, where we'll support co-hosts AMCOW and the Government of Rwanda. What we observe in partner districts shapes our research agenda; our research challenges our field practice; and our field practice generates the evidence we take into global policy debates. This learning loop – between presence, evidence and influence – is a discipline we maintain deliberately, not a by-product of the work.

From niche to mainstream: the All Systems conversation

When we convened the first All Systems symposium in 2019, systems strengthening was a minority language in a sector still dominated by infrastructure thinking. The conversation was important; the room was small.

Six years later, the room looks different. More than 700 changemakers gathered in The Hague in 2023 – governments, development partners, utilities, financiers, researchers and practitioners confronting together why services fail, what makes systems credible to investors, and what kind of leadership change requires. The year before, 250 leaders had gathered in Accra to advance the same agenda for Africa. At the close of that symposium, Dr Tanko Yussif Azzika of AMCOW put it plainly: we are obliged by slow progress to deeply reflect on the necessary actions in our governance and management systems.

What changed is not just the numbers. Systems strengthening has moved from a niche discussion to a language that governments, financiers and regulators increasingly share – and a recognised agenda for action. There is still much to do: most investment remains tied to specific projects rather than the systems that make them last. But the foundations are there, and the symposia have helped build them – by creating the connections and shared commitment that no policy paper can.

In August 2026, we return to Africa – co-hosting the Africa Water & Sanitation Systems Leadership Symposium in Kigali with AMCOW and the Government of Rwanda. That event will launch Africa's Water and Sanitation Systems Transformation Agenda. The conversation has grown up. Now comes the hard part.

4.5 How we work across levels

Riva's most distinctive capability is vertical integration: connecting what we learn in partner districts with national policy and bringing global evidence back into local planning. Our 13 partner districts – home to 2.3 million people – are proof-of-concept platforms. Work in countries and districts translates district evidence into policy influence. Regionally and globally, our participation in the One For All alliance with Water For People, in Sanitation and Water for All, and in Agenda for Change is how we contribute to the discourse that shapes what donors fund, what multilaterals prioritise, and what governments aim for.

Collective action through these platforms is intrinsic to our systems approach. Systems transformation requires multiple people and institutions working in alignment. Riva's role – as hub, as knowledge broker, as convenor – is to facilitate that alignment. The transition to the Riva network makes all of this more effective by shifting the centre of gravity to the countries where the work happens. Decisions are

made closer to the evidence. Advocacy is grounded in direct experience. And the federation's legal and governance set up creates formal bridges between levels – so that what is learned in Kabarole or Asutifi North can reach Geneva and New York and shape the global conversation.

Cross-country collaboration is the horizontal complement to vertical integration. The federation's most underutilised asset is what Riva knows collectively: the lessons from scaling master planning in Uganda that are directly applicable in Rwanda; the financing strategy approach developed in Ethiopia that Ghana wants to adapt. Making that learning flow requires deliberate investment – in joint research and shared knowledge platforms, in peer exchanges between country teams, and in the incentive structures that make cross-network investment worthwhile for member CEOs who have, rightly, their own national agendas and accountabilities. The Network Regulations and the business planning process both create mechanisms for this. But it also requires explicit recognition – in how we plan and fund the network – that time invested in collective learning is

not a distraction from country work. It is what makes country work better.

Our wider partnership ecosystem is the other dimension of how we work. Universities and research institutes – including long-standing academic partners and the institutions contributing to the Systems Academy – provide the intellectual rigour and peer review that makes our evidence credible. Development banks – the World Bank, the African Development Bank, the Asian Development Bank – are both funders and the primary route through which systems-strengthening approaches get embedded in large-scale investment programmes; engaging them is how our approach reaches scale without Riva having to deliver at scale. Regional economic communities and continental bodies – AMCOW, ECOWAS, the East African Community – set the intergovernmental frameworks that shape national policy; our engagement with them is how country-level progress gets codified into continental norms. Civil society and CSO networks provide the community voice and accountability mechanisms that strong systems depend on. And the private

sector – utilities, technology providers, service operators – is the delivery infrastructure our systems approach is designed to strengthen. Each category plays a distinct role. Managing these relationships deliberately, rather than as a by-product of project activity, is part of how we sustain our influence.

4.6 Geographic scope and ambition

Riva's geographic engagement operates at three levels. The first is national: deep operational presence in the focus countries where we demonstrate what systems transformation looks like in practice. The second is regional: deliberate engagement with the continental bodies and multilateral institutions that translate country-level learning into sector-wide policy and investment frameworks. The third is global: positioning Riva as a knowledge resource for development agencies, multilaterals and – increasingly – governments and institutions beyond the immediate sector. New country entry at the national level is disciplined by demonstrated demand and the expansion and withdrawal criteria being developed as part of this strategy.



Master plans are owned by our local government partners and guide our district work. Each one contains a statement of a shared vision and political commitment. image credit: Petterik Wiggers

Our operational country presence is concentrated in sub-Saharan Africa: Ghana, Ethiopia, Uganda, Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. Rwanda and Bangladesh are newer focus countries, each chosen for specific, strategic, reasons: Rwanda for its rapid progress on national water and sanitation financing and climate-resilient infrastructure; Bangladesh for its scale, climate vulnerability, and increasingly sophisticated approach to water and sanitation governance in a middle-income context. Together, these geographies give Riva a presence that spans sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, and a range of development contexts.

At regional level, we engage deliberately with Africa's continental water and sanitation architecture. Through AMCOW – the African Ministers' Council on Water – we contribute to continental policy dialogue and support governments in connecting national commitments to the broader African agenda. Through AfWASA and AFUR, we engage with the professional and regulatory communities building the institutional foundations that national systems require. This regional layer is not peripheral: it is how country-level progress gets codified into continental norms, and how Riva's evidence reaches the intergovernmental bodies that shape the policy environment for all our members.

Our primary commitment in this strategy is depth, not breadth – to build lasting presence in existing countries and translate what we learn there into the regional and global conversations that shape the whole sector. In Asia, our footprint is Bangladesh and, through our One For All alliance, an emerging presence in India. As in Africa, our regional engagement extends to the multilateral bodies and development banks – the Asian Development Bank and regional utility networks – that set the investment climate for the whole region. New country entry happens only where there is genuine demand and the conditions for sustained work; the expansion and withdrawal criteria being developed as part of this strategy give that discipline formal expression.

In Europe and other high-income contexts, our ambition runs beyond serving development agencies and multilaterals. The longer-term question – speculative, but genuine – is whether the systems approaches we have developed and tested in

sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia have application in European settings facing their own water and sanitation challenges: ageing infrastructure, climate adaptation, affordability pressures and institutional fragmentation. Systems leadership looks different here, but the underlying logic – that durable services require political commitment, institutional investment and credible governance – is universal. Our Netherlands base gives us the access and credibility to explore this seriously.

In Latin America, our One For All alliance partner Water For People carries the work – considerably stronger there than Riva is. Through the Alliance, Riva contributes to and benefits from that presence as part of a genuinely globe-spanning shared agenda. The division of labour is deliberate, reflecting the principle that geography should be governed by comparative advantage.

5. Our organisation: fit for this strategy

How the federated model enables our strategic ambitions



Image credit: Riva

5.1 The Riva network: a strategic choice

The Riva network is a federation of autonomous national organisations united by a shared mission, brand and standards. It is a strategic choice grounded in our theory of change. Riva is locally led, legally registered in the countries where it works, and able to develop talent from those countries. This gives legitimacy that a foreign NGO field office cannot replicate. It's this that makes it possible for us to be commissioned – and ultimately funded – by the governments we serve.

Under the federation, each member operates as a national partner to government – not as a project office of a Northern NGO.¹ This positions our country teams to lead the kind of multi-stakeholder collective action that a Presidential Compact or a national financing strategy requires: they are peers to ministries.

The federation model also reflects a clear-headed view of where knowledge lives. The understanding that produces impact in Kabarole district is held by people who have worked in that district for years and know the political economy, the key relationships, and the institutional history. Putting decision-making power where the knowledge is makes the organisation more effective, not just more principled.

We are alert to the risks. Running a federation is harder than running a single organisation. Governance is more complex, maintaining consistent quality across members requires investment, and keeping incentives aligned across members requires good relationships and regulations. The Network Regulations address these risks, but this will require continuous, deliberate work.

1. Each member's strategic and business plan is a companion document to this strategy, available separately.

5.2 The One For All alliance

Riva is a member of the One For All alliance together with Water For People. The Alliance operates under a shared Destination 2030 strategy and theory of change, with joint targets for local impact (20 million people in 150 partner areas), national impact (200 million people in 20 countries), and global influence. The registration of One For All UK, and Riva's ambitions for a further registration in India, represent the next steps in deepening the partnership.

This Riva strategy reflects our specific comparative advantages and federated structure. Where this strategy and the Destination 2030 strategy overlap – substantially – we are contributing directly to shared goals. Where our approaches differ, we manage that within One For All's partnership governance. The One For All Destination 2030 theory of change sets out the logic of how systems strengthening leads to impact at scale – from what we do, through the outcomes that matter, to the people reached (see Figure 1 below). Riva's contribution sits within this: we operate across all three levels – local, national and global – through the four capability areas described in Section 4. What makes us

distinctive is the vertical integration between those levels, and the depth of presence that turns evidence from partner districts into policy influence at national and global scale.

5.3 The capabilities we are building

Our proven capabilities, built and tested over more than a decade, are outlined in detail in Section 4. Our core strength is institutional: the ability to work alongside governments across districts, countries and regions, and over the long timescales needed for genuine systems transformation.

We are also building new capabilities. Working across adjacent but increasingly inseparable systems: water resource management, climate finance, public health, and integrated district planning. Engaging meaningfully with this is a work in progress. The boundaries between sectors become permeable the closer you get to actual delivery on the ground. We will rely on existing core staff, deepen competencies through partnership, and be open about what we are still learning.

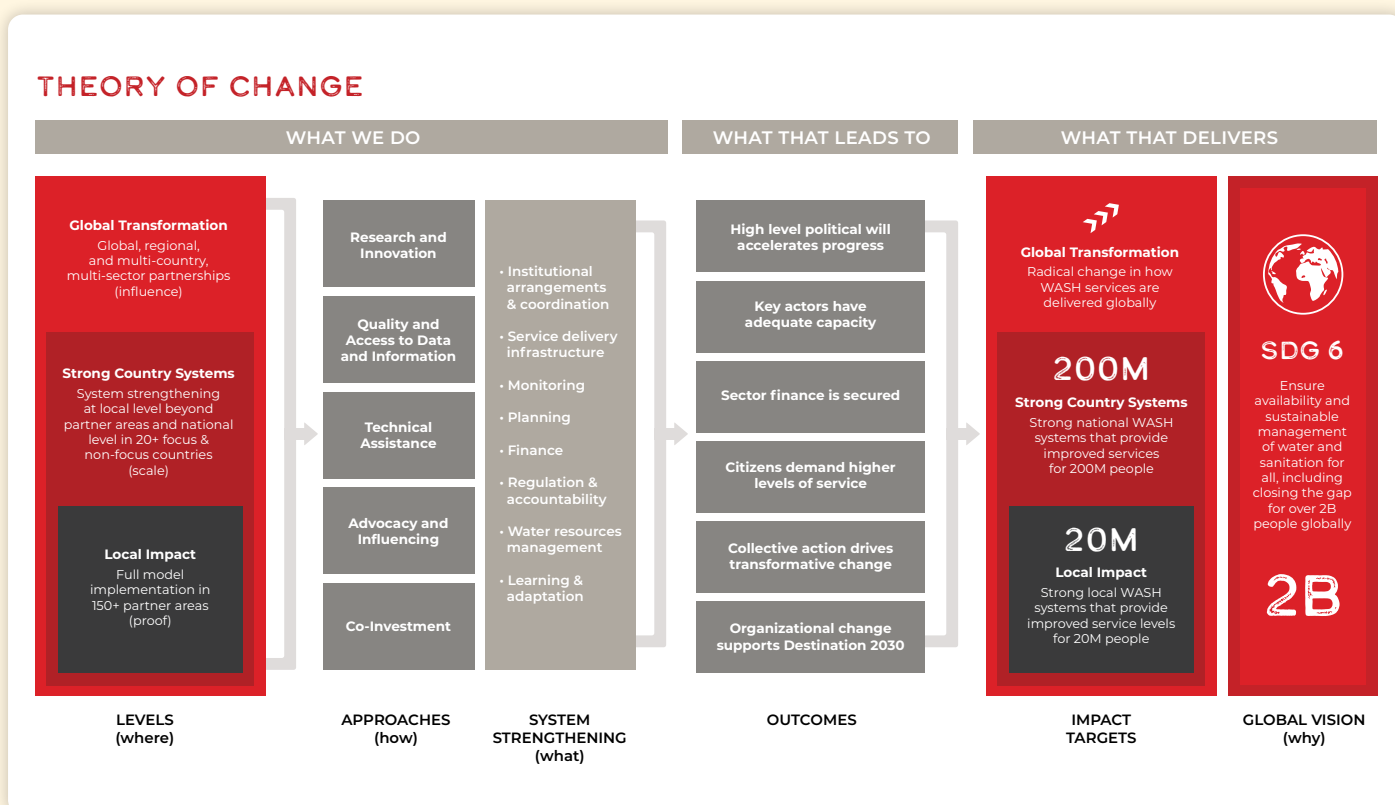


Figure 1 — One For All Destination 2030 Theory of Change

At the heart of everything we do is a fundamental commitment: we help governments build systems that work for everyone – especially the poorest and most excluded. Systems that exclude the marginalised are not strong systems. Inclusion and equity are not an add-on to our diagnostic frameworks, our master planning and our capability development – they are the measure of whether those systems are actually working. We have a substantive history here, built through programmes such as Watershed and through years of integrating CSO voice and community accountability into our systems approach. We are deepening that commitment as we grow.

5.4 Financial sustainability

Revenue contracted from a record €12.5 million in 2023 to €10.3 million in 2025, with continued pressure through 2026–27. It shapes our sense of urgency and every strategic choice in this document.

Our financial goal is a growing, diversified revenue base. In 2025 our income came from 43 funders, with the top five accounting for approximately 60% – a genuine diversification. We are targeting €12 million by 2028 and €15 million by 2030.

The path has three strands. The first is government-commissioning: growing the proportion of income where governments and regional institutions commission and own the agenda. In many of our operating contexts, this income is still financed by development partners, multilateral development banks or trust funds – the shift is about who sets the agenda and who Riva is accountable to, not always who signs the cheque. The second is philanthropy: patient, flexible capital from foundations suited to the long-term work that systems change requires and that bilateral project contracts cannot fund. The third is a strong and growing base of bilateral and multilateral partnerships, pursued deliberately and maintained with discipline.

Funding acquisition – identifying opportunities, building relationships, developing proposals, maintaining pipeline – is a strategic priority that will absorb significant leadership time across this strategy period.

5.5 Strategic risks

What could derail us, and how we manage it

Getting systems strengthening finance is hard.

The bulk of money flowing into our sector is still tied to projects, a fact that sits awkwardly with the sustained, long-term engagement that systems change requires. Short project cycles create pressure to show results on project timelines rather than system timelines; they fragment what should be cumulative institutional relationships. We navigate this tension every day. Managing it well – staying true to our mission, continuing to champion and sell systems strengthening, while keeping the organisation financially viable – is the central operating challenge of this period.

The funding environment. The form of funding is one challenge; the volume is another. The majority of Riva's current income comes from bilateral donors under sustained pressure to cut or redirect aid. The contraction of development finance – visible in USAID, FCDO and increasingly in European bilateral programmes – is not a temporary shock; it is a structural shift. Our move toward government-commissioning and earned income is the right response, but the transition takes time, and our current exposure is real. Managing this – through diversification, the sustained support of our philanthropic partners, and building the credibility that attracts new sources of funding – is one of the defining challenges of this strategy period.

Strong systems requires stability and good enough government.

Our theory of change depends on governments following through. Presidential Compacts, national financing strategies and master plans all require sustained political commitment across budget cycles, election cycles and – in several of our focus countries – the kind of abrupt political change that has affected the Sahel. We cannot eliminate this risk; we can build resilience against it by working at multiple levels simultaneously, so that progress at district level is not wholly undone by a change of minister, and the coalition behind a compact is broader than any single government.

Governing what you don't control. A federation is harder to run than a single organisation. Governance is more complex, consistent quality is harder

to maintain, and member incentives require active management. We have built the Network Regulations and the governance architecture that address these risks. Trust, strong human relationships and deliberate investment in the federation's cohesion will be essential to making it work in practice. This is continuous work, not a problem to be solved once.

When everyone is selling systems change.

As the case for systems strengthening has been won, more organisations claim to work in this space. Our advantage – track record, depth of field presence, independent evidence, multi-level integration – is real, but not always easy to see or evidence in competitive procurement. We face the risk of being outbid by lower-cost providers, or of being positioned as too expensive to the clients who we could help the most. Maintaining and communicating our distinctive contribution is a competitive imperative that will call for excellent market communications.

6. How will we know we're succeeding?

Strategic indicators, measurement, and the relationship to destination 2030

Our ultimate measure of success is impact at scale. The One For All alliance – Riva and Water For People – has set shared Destination 2030 (D30) ambitions on local impact (7.5 basic services, including at least a million from Riva partner areas), national impact (200 million additional people in D30 focus countries with at least basic water, sanitation and hygiene services, including 79 million from Riva focus countries), and global influence (2 billion people).

The One for All alliance contributes to this impact through what it does (in terms of activities and outputs) and what that delivers (in terms of outcomes). It monitors progress towards these through its results framework with outputs, outcome and impact indicators.

For this Riva strategy, 14 strategic indicators – organised in four categories – are the primary signals of whether we're on track. These are to a large extent in line with the D30 indicators, and operate at the level of the Supervisory Board. They represent an indicative set; additional outcome-oriented indicators – covering institutional performance, financing actually mobilised and sustainability of reforms – are being developed through the One for All alliance D30 results framework and will be incorporated as the strategy is implemented.

6.1 Systems transformation

1. **Countries with Presidential Compacts** signed or in active preparation and/or delivery changed financing, institutional reforms and better services. Target: 25 by 2030, including four Riva focus countries
2. **Countries with operational national water and sanitation financing strategies.** Target: 10 by 2030, including four Riva focus countries (Note: Target to be decided / confirmed as part of the strategy development of the programmes)
3. **Riva focus countries demonstrating improvement in national water, sanitation and hygiene systems strength, using the building block assessment tool.** (Threshold for demonstrated improvement = progress since 2026 baseline on at least half of the building blocks). Target: Six Riva focus countries by 2030
4. **Partner areas with a functioning accountability mechanism** (referring to user feedback systems such as hotlines or databases, registers of feedback surfaced during water committee meetings, etc.) for service providers and service authorities. Target: 100% by 2030
5. **Countries with a governance framework for professional service provision in rural and informal urban settings.** Target: tbd (this is a new indicator, to be further developed in the Riva strategy's results framework)
6. **Number of countries where we work beyond traditional household water and sanitation in multi-sectoral national-level collaborations that influence national level policies or finance.** Target: 100% by 2030

6.2 Institutional influence and scale

7. **Research, publications and thought leadership** – number of annual Google Scholar citations of Riva's work. (Target: 500 per year by 2030)
8. **Systems Academy cumulative completions**, of which proportion from national government. Target: 15,000 completions by 2030, 30%+ from government
9. **Number of global-level collaborations or networks** that have influence on global or regional level water and sanitation policy and financing, that have been influenced by Riva members. Target: 10 by 2030
10. **Number of countries where water, sanitation and hygiene Master Planning has been scaled** to cover at least 25% of the country. Target: 10, of which 4 Riva focal countries by 2030



Image credit: Petra Brussee for Riva

6.3 Financial sustainability

11. Total network revenue. Target: € 12m+ by 2028, € 15m+ by 2030
12. Proportion of revenue from government commissioning and earned income, excluding bilateral Official Development Assistance. Target: 20%+ by 2030

6.4 Organisational health

13. Proportion of staff and leadership based in Global South member organisations. Target: 75%+ by 2030
14. Number of Riva members with Full Participant status under Network Regulations. Target: three members by 2028

7. Beyond 2030

Universal access to safe water and sanitation will not be achieved by 2030. The gap is well documented and the trajectory is clear. The 2030 deadline matters: it creates urgency, mobilises political commitment, and provides a common accountability framework. What it cannot do is substitute for the long-term institutional presence that is needed to build and sustain strong water and sanitation systems.

The strongest water and sanitation systems in the world did not emerge from five-year projects. They emerged from decades of sustained political commitment, institutional investment, and professional excellence. The journey from where Ethiopia or Uganda stands today to where they need to be is measured in decades rather than project cycles.

By 2030, we're building the infrastructure for that long-term improvement. National organisations with genuine local ownership and direct government relationships. A knowledge network that spans income levels and connects global evidence to local practice. A track record of being commissioned by governments that makes us financially sustainable without bilateral dependency. And a demonstrated ability to shift the discourse of a sector that still, too often, mistakes hardware for change.

The unreasonable persistence that got us here will continue to be required. The world needs more systems leaders. We are committed to developing them, and to being one.



Water is a birthright that connects us all.

And the services we build because of it, have the power to right injustice. They can be the foundation to resilient livelihoods. They can inspire the kind of change that ripples across generations.

This is why Riva exists: to be the catalyst for sustainable systems. To turn what is into what should be.

We are the lifeforce: a current that connects bold leaders to visionary ideas that can shape tomorrow.

Because we all rise, when leaders, communities, and experts, act together as a collective force to become nation builders. This is when action flows over to progress. So, let's lead the way to a future where essential services are provided to all. Let's keep building a world where local wisdom is strengthened by global connectedness.

Let's reimagine a world where our greatest solutions serve people; and our systems sustain human potential. We've always known that where water is, life thrives. But this isn't just about water. It's about the possibilities enabled by it.

Riva is proof that bold decisions can change the course of our public services. Because true leadership can move nations, beyond pipes and pumps, beyond crisis, beyond survival — into rich and resilient lives for all.

**Transforming
Tomorrow**



