

Excellence in Practice (EiP) awards 2022

*Transforming small irrigation farm businesses
and their irrigator corporations from
underperforming to sustainable business
units.*



University of South Australia (UniSA) Business

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Executive Summary

A partnership of seven organisations (providers) from Australia and Africa developed and implemented a theory of change using learning and development interventions to transition irrigation farm businesses and their irrigator corporations from dysfunctional to profitable business enterprises. A two-pronged approach was adopted. The first intervention was soil and nutrient monitoring tools to facilitate farmer learning about soil moisture and nutrient dynamics for improved irrigation decision-making. The second intervention was Agricultural Innovation Platforms (AIP), which functioned as spaces for innovation and learning. The AIPs facilitated the identification of barriers to improve productivity and profitability and implemented interventions to overcome them and initiated an iterative cycle of learning, increased profitability, development toward sustainable business enterprises. The project implementation was funded by the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR) and the partner organisations.

The project was entitled '*Transforming Irrigation in Southern Africa*' (TISA) and initially operated in six irrigation schemes in Tanzania, Mozambique and Zimbabwe (2013-17). The two-pronged approach was implemented in partnership with farm businesses, irrigator corporations, extension officers, local stakeholders and local, district and national government institutions. Based on the success of the approach, it was out-scaled in the three countries (2017-22.) TISA now works with 15,500 farm businesses and 42 irrigator corporations and has up-scaled to include AIPs at regional and national levels.

The partnership between the seven organizations, the farm businesses, irrigator corporations and local stakeholders proved to be very successful and has been sustained across the implementation period. The learning and development interventions have proved to be very effective and impactful. Reflecting this, the funding agency has extended the project twice and a tenth year has just been approved.

The two-pronged approach has reduced water use, time spent irrigating and conflicts over water among farmers, within households and with downstream users, and it has increased yield, farm business profitability and non-farm income. This in turn has increased farmers' willingness and ability to pay water fees and participate in scheme maintenance. This has increased the viability of the irrigator corporations and the effectiveness of the supply infrastructure. It has also increased value-adding business opportunities and job creation within the local communities.