BEYOND THE NUMBERS:











ABSTRACT

This policy brief reviews Zambia's Farm Block Development Programme (FBDP), a key initiative to drive agricultural productivity. Despite allocating over ZMW 741 million between 2022 and 2024, only ZMW 109.2 million was disbursed, revealing major public investment lags and fiscal absorption challenges. Infrastructure development in the farm blocks has been uneven, with a few farm blocks like Nansanga and Luena making steady progress while most remain underdeveloped due to limited fiscal space, weak coordination, poor planning, low private investor interest and more importantly the absence of a comprehensive Farm Block Strategy.

The brief provides recommendations to improve implementation, including finalizing the Farm Block Strategy, prioritizing infrastructure that will create an enabling environment for private sector investments, enhancing fund disbursement efficiency, and strengthening accountability systems. Fully unlocking the programme's potential will require systematic public investment and integrated planning aligned with Vision 2030 and the 8NDP.

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CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	. i
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT	1
INTRODUCTION	3
BUDGET ALLOCATION AND DISBURSEMENTS	5
BUDGET ALLOCATIONS ANALYSIS	5
FUNDS DISBURSEMENT AND UTILISATION	6
PROJECT PROGRESS OVERVIEW	8
FARM BLOCKS KEY INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT PERFORMANCE	8
SUMMARY OF INFRASTRUCTURE STATUS IN THE TEN GAZETED FARM BLOCKS 1	0
OTHER KEY SYSTEMIC AND OPERATIONAL ISSUES IN FARM BLOCK IMPLEMENTATION	2
CONCLUSION 1	4
RECOMMENDATIONS 1	5

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Budget Allocation (Million Kwacha)5	
Figure 2: Budget Allocation Vs Disbursement (Million Kwacha)	ı

LIST OF TABLES

Table 2: 2022 budget allocations, actual disbursements, and activities by farm block	6
Table 3: Total number of infrastructure targeted vs total number of infrastructure actualized	7
Table 4: Summary of infrastructure status of the ten gazeted farm blocks	. 8

ABBREVIATIONS

ASTC	Agricultural Service and Training Centre
CPU	Community Production Unit
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DACO	District Agricultural Coordinator
ESIA	Environmental and Social Impact Assessment
FBDP	Farm Block Development Programme
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
FRA	Food Reserve Agency
GRZ	Government of the Republic of Zambia
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
KII	Key Informant Interview
MQA	Ministry of Agriculture
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
PAO	Provincial Agricultural Officer
PPP	Public-Private Partnership
RDA	Road Development Agency
ZARI	Zambia Agricultural Research Institute
ZDA	Zambia Development Agency
ZESCO	Zambia Electricity Supply Corporation
ZESCU	Zambia Electricity Supply Corporation
ZNS	Zambia National Service

INTRODUCTION

Agriculture sector has long been positioned as a strategic pillar for achieving inclusive growth, poverty reduction, and economic diversification. It has been identified as a key driver for achieving the country's Vision 2030 goal of becoming a prosperous middle-income nation. Agriculture plays a pivotal role in fostering Zambia's socio-economic development. The sector guarantees household and national food and nutrition security, is a major source of income for both rural and urban households and provides employment and wealth creation opportunities. The sector accounts for more than 20 percent of Zambia's formal labour force and is a source of livelihood for over 50 percent of the Zambian population. The sector is also the main source of raw materials for the manufacturing and food processing sectors, hence offering additional job opportunities, especially for women and youths, through downstream industries. Agriculture also plays a, and can play an increased, vital role in Zambia's Balance of Trade contributing seven percent to Zambia's export earnings.

Despite its importance, the sector continues to face persistent structural challenges ranging from low productivity and poor infrastructure to limited access to inputs, technology, finance, and markets. Only about 15% of Zambia's 42 million hectares of arable land is currently under cultivation, pointing to significant untapped potential. These constraints have limited the sector's capacity not only to ensure food security, but also to drive large-scale economic transformation, support exports, and generate public revenues.

To address these persistent bottlenecks, Government of Zambia has prioritized the development of farming blocks as a strategic model to unlock agricultural productivity, attract private investment, promote agro-industrialization, and enhance rural development. Farming blocks are designed as integrated agricultural zones that provide core infrastructure including roads, irrigation, electricity, and storage facilities to enable large-scale and smallholder production, processing, and market access.



BACKGROUND

In the 2022 National Budget, the government renewed its commitment to reviving farm block development through systematic resource allocation and infrastructure investment. This renewed focus seeks to unlock agricultural productivity, enhance value addition, expand exports, and position agriculture as a key driver of GDP growth.

The Farm Block Development Programme (FBDP) was initiated in 2002 as a strategic move by the Zambian government to diversify the economy and promote rural development through commercial agriculture. The program aimed to establish large-scale farm blocks across all provinces, each encompassing approximately 100,000 hectares. These blocks were designed to include a mix of core ventures (large-scale investors), commercial farms, medium-scale farms, and smallholder out-growers (Ministry of Agriculture, 2023).

Nevertheless, since then, only Nansanga, Luena, and Luswishi farm blocks have had some support towards infrastructure development that stands at about 85 per cent, 40 per cent, and 15 per cent, respectively. The situation in the other farm blocks is not as developed in that only land identification and consent from the chiefs has taken place. The under development of farm blocks was mainly due to lack of systematic invest in basic infrastructure such as trunk and access roads, electricity, communal dams and other social amenities leading to failure to attract credible investors.

The 2022 budget policy commitment marked a turning point, with the government committing to systematic resource allocation to accelerate infrastructure development in all ten farm blocks. This renewed effort aimed to unlock Zambia's vast agricultural potential, enhance productivity, promote value addition, and position agriculture as a central driver of GDP growth and foreign exchange earnings in line with Vision 2030. This policy brief, therefore, seeks to review the status and quality of public investment in the construction, setup, and rehabilitation of Zambia's farming blocks. It provides an evidence-based analysis of geographic distribution, budget allocations, disbursement patterns, and expenditure credibility, while evaluating overall project progress and implementation performance.

The brief identifies key successes and bottlenecks, and proposes actionable recommendations to strengthen transparency, accountability, and impact in agricultural infrastructure investments, ensuring that farm blocks fulfil their potential as engines of inclusive rural development and economic transformation.

GEOGRAPHICAL COVERAGE

To date, the Government of Zambia has officially gazetted ten farm blocks across the country, strategically selected based on land suitability, agro-ecological potential, and provincial development needs. The original vision under the Farm Block Development Programme (FBDP) was to establish at least one farm block per province, ensuring equitable national coverage and leveraging localized agricultural strengths. With the renewed policy commitment outlined in the 2022 National Budget, the government reiterated its intention to prioritize infrastructure development in the already gazetted farm blocks, focusing on improving access roads, electricity, water supply, and other enablers of commercial viability. Table 1 outlines the distribution of the gazette farm blocks.

Table 1: Gazetted farm blocks

Farm Block	Province
Nansanga	Central
Mushindamo	North-Western
Luswishi	Copperbelt
Musokotwane	Southern
Shikabeta	Lusaka
Luéna	Luapula
Kalumwangé	Western
Manshya	Muchinga
Chikumbilo	Eastern
Kalungwishi	Northern
Source, Ministry of Agriculture	

Source: Ministry of Agriculture

BUDGET ALLOCATION AND DISBURSEMENTS BUDGET ALLOCATIONS ANALYSIS

In 2022, K110 million was allocated towards farm block development. The K110 million was specifically allocated to Nansanga farm block to support the rehabilitation of 10 bridges and the construction, rehabilitation, and upgrading of 500 km of roads. Consequently, in 2023, the government increased its national allocation to K125.4 million, representing a 14% rise from the 2022 funding level. Unlike the prior year, the 2023 allocation was distributed across six farm blocks including Nansanga, Luena, Luswishi, Kalumwange, Rufunsa, and Solwezi focusing on enhancing road networks, extending electricity supply, and constructing or rehabilitating irrigation and water harvesting infrastructure, including dams, canals, and weirs.

In 2024, the allocation to farm block development increased significantly to K506.4 million, indicating a 304% increase from the 2023 allocation. The funds were among other things earmarked for the construction of at least 300 kilometres of roads in Nansanga, Luena, and Shikabeta; construction of ten bridges across the targeted blocks; and installation of 200 kilometres of powerlines in Luena, Luswishi, and Shikabeta to facilitate rural electrification. This progressive increase in resource allocation between 2022 and 2024 substantiates government commitment towards farm block development (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Budget Allocation (Million Kwacha) Source: Author's construction form yellow books and national budget speeches

FUNDS DISBURSEMENT AND UTILISATION

Although the government has demonstrated increasing fiscal commitment towards the development of farm blocks, actual disbursement of allocated funds remains critically low, undermining the efficiency and credibility of public investment in the sector.



Figure 2: Budget Allocation Vs Disbursement (Million Kwacha) Source: Author's construction based on data from Ministry of Agriculture

The analysis reveals a significant disparity between budget allocations and actual disbursements under the Farm Block Development Programme. In 2022, only K10 million of the K110 million allocated was disbursed, translating to a disbursement rate of just 9.1%. According to MoA officials, the funds were mainly sourced from the Zambia Growth Opportunities (ZAMGRO) project.

However, these funds were diverted to preparatory activities. ZMW 7 million was directed towards environmental and Social Impact Assessments (ESIA) and stakeholder engagement in Luena while ZMW 3 million was allocated towards land auditing, land suitability assessments, and additional consultations (Table 1). Furthermore, while the national budget indicated that the K110 million was only for Nansanga, the disbursed funds were also utilized for the Luena farm block.

This inconsistency between the budget and actual utilization as well as the divergence between stated priorities (road and bridge rehabilitation) and actual expenditures (technical studies) reflects a deeper misalignment between planning and execution. Likewise, the substantial underutilization of funds earmarked for critical infrastructure upgrades such as roads and bridges in Nansanga Farm Block point to fiscal constraints.

Month	Year	Amount Budgeted	Amount Released	Activities Implemented
January	2022	ZMW 110m	ZMW 10m	 Environmental Impact Assessment in Luena and Nansanga Farm Blocks. Land auditing and land suitability assessment. Stakeholder engagements

Table 2: 2022 budget allocations, actual disbursements, and activities by farm block

Source: Author's construction based on data from Ministry of Agriculture

However, disbursement performance improved markedly in 2023, with K96 million released out of the K125.4 million allocated, yielding a disbursement rate of 76.5%. This improvement was likely driven by the availability of funds through the World Bank's US\$300 million support facility and enhanced inter-agency collaboration targeting multiple farm blocks.

Surprisingly, in 2024, despite a record-high allocation of K506.4 million, actual disbursement plummeted to only K3.2 million, resulting in a disbursement rate of a mere 0.6%. This sharp decline signals a regression in budget execution and may be attributed to broader fiscal constraints, bureaucratic delays, and institutional challenges in procurement, planning, and coordination. The stark mismatch between allocations and actual spending undermines the credibility and effectiveness of public investment in the sector, posing risks to the timely implementation of planned infrastructure and threatening investor confidence in farm block development.

PROJECT PROGRESS OVERVIEW FARM BLOCKS KEY INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT PERFORMANCE

		Target	Actual
2022	Kms of road constructed or rehabilitated	500	-
	Number of Rehabilited bridges	10	-
2023	Kms of road construction or rehabilitation	150	62 ^b
	Number of farm blocks electrified	2	1
	Number of Rehabilited bridges	24	2
	Number of permanent weirs constructed	110	-
2024	Kms of road constructed	300	-
	Kms of powerline constructed	200	_
	Number of constructed bridges	10	-

Table 3: Total number of infrastructure targeted vs total number of infrastructure actualized

Sources: Budget presentations, Investment plans, 8NDP progress reports. 2023 figures based on the 8NDP progress report apart from the # of weirs reported from the Investment Plan. ^b A further 50km was reported as achieved from the Ministry of Agriculture records. The 50 km road is still a work in progress, with funds from the 2023 budget.

An assessment of the physical outputs under the Farm Block Development Programme between 2022 and 2024 highlights critical gaps in implementation and persistent underperformance relative to set targets. In 2022, the government targeted the construction or rehabilitation of 500 kilometers of roads and 10 bridges, specifically in the Nansanga Farm Block. However, no physical progress was recorded that year, despite a budget allocation of K110 million of which only K10 million (9.1%) was disbursed.

This shortfall reflected institutional and fiscal bottlenecks that hampered implementation and was mainly attributed to delay of the programme for development of farm blocks which was still under formulation during the period under review in 2022 with implementation deferred to commence in 2023. In 2023, output performance improved slightly. Of the 150 kilometers of roads targeted for construction, 62 kilometers were officially reported as completed according to the 8NDP progress report. Additionally, the Ministry of Agriculture reported a further 50 kilometers, bringing the total to 112 kilometers, or 74.7% of the annual target. However, in terms of electrification, only 1 (Luena) out of the 2 farm blocks (Nansanga and Luena) planned for connection to power infrastructure was partially electrified.

Bridge construction again fell short, with just 2 out of 24 bridges rehabilitated (8.3%), and no progress was recorded in the construction of the 110 planned permanent weirs, which are critical for year-round irrigation. More importantly, the target to have one Comprehensive Farm Block Strategy developed was not met as no strategy was not developed. These findings show challenges in capacity to scale infrastructure development in line with budget allocations. In 2024, physical output indicators show little to no progress despite the significant allocation of K506.4 million.

None of the 300 kilometers of roads, 200 kilometers of power lines, or the 10 targeted bridges were reported as completed at the time of this analysis. The complete absence of physical achievements in 2024 despite a threefold increase in budgetary allocation from the previous year and expanded coverage of farm blocks raises significant concerns about fiscal absorption and overall project management capacity.

In summary, while 2023 recorded relative progress, the Farm Block Development Programme has consistently struggled with planning, coordination, and implementation efficiency. The recurring underperformance points to systemic weaknesses in public investment management and constraints in fund availability and disbursement mechanisms. The widening gap between targets and actual outputs raises serious concerns about the programme's capacity to deliver value for money and achieve its intended developmental outcomes within planned timelines.

SUMMARY OF INFRASTRUCTURE STATUS IN THE TEN GAZETED FARM BLOCKS

Table 4: Summary of infrastructure status of the ten gazeted farm blocks

FARM BLOCK	KEY DEVELOPMENTS
Nansanga	 41 km of roads and several bridges constructed, coordinated by the Zambia National Service (ZNS). Partial electrification achieved; ZESCO received K18 million in 2023 for expansion, with full electrification expected by end of 2025. Have two dams were constructed prior to 2022 and mechanization services (via Zambia Correctional Services). Significant critical components such roads in eastern zones, irrigation systems, communication towers, police services, storage units, and social amenities are still lacking. The Core venture remains inactive Low land utilization persists despite investments, due to infrastructure gaps and the delayed operationalization of strategic facilities
Luena	 Luena has seen relatively substantial infrastructure investment due to the presence of major co-ventures like Green 2000, Kawambwa Tea, Sunbird and Kawambwa Sugar. A high-tension power line was installed, benefiting Kawambwa Sugar through reduced energy costs, but Green 2000 remains unconnected and reliant on diesel. Road access has relatively improved, with 62 km built by ZNS and 65 km funded by the World Bank, making Luena relatively more accessible than other farm blocks.
Luswishi	 Infrastructure development is ongoing but remains incomplete. Partial electrification has been achieved, funded entirely by GPL a private co-venture due to delays in government support. Road construction is planned, with funding support from the African Development Bank to enable value chain development. Soil surveys and land assessments have been conducted, although some areas were inaccessible, emphasizing the urgent need for road infrastructure as a development enabler.
Kalumwange	 A dam to support irrigation was constructed prior to 2022. No proper road infrastructure. Road construction, however, in advanced procurement stages, with implementation planned under the 2025 national budget. No electricity yet
Shikabeta	 Currently lacks basic infrastructure. No electricity yet (Electrification quotations obtained from ZESCO) Although included in the 2024 budget, implementation is delayed due to lengthy procurement procedures.
Musokotwane	 Early mobilization phase - Full development has not yet started Dam construction plans are included in the current (2025) national budget No electricity (electrification quotations have been received from ZESCO)
Kalungwishi	 Early mobilization phase - Full development has not yet started Identified as a priority area for infrastructure investment in 2025 national budget. Included in the development pipeline alongside Kalumwange Farm Block due rising investor interest
Mansha, Chikumbila, Mushindamo	 Minimal to no infrastructure; some land audits and demographic surveys are ongoing. Lack of roads, electricity, and water has stalled investor operations. Rising absenteeism and underutilization observed.

Source: Author's construction based on data from Ministry of Agriculture



The field-based assessment of Zambia's Farm Block Development Programme between 2022 and 2024 reveals significant disparities in infrastructural development across the designated farm blocks. While a few strategic locations such as Nansanga, Luena, and Luswishi have seen notable investment and physical progress, most other farm blocks remain in the early stages of planning or face delays due to procurement, coordination, or funding challenges.

Nansanga Farm Block is among the most developed, with partial electrification, road and bridge works undertaken by the Zambia National Service (ZNS), and additional infrastructure such as dams and mechanization services. However, incomplete development of key infrastructure such as irrigation, storage, and social services has limited land utilization and deterred investment. Luena Farm Block also shows progress, benefiting from co-venture investment and donor-funded roads, yet full electrification remains pending for some entities. Luswishi Farm Block has made progress through privately funded electrification and donor-supported road planning, with preliminary land assessments already conducted.

Other farm blocks like Kalumwange, Shikabeta, Musokotwane, and Kalungwishi are in various early stages of development, with plans for electrification, dam construction, and roadworks underway or planned for 2025. However, several farm blocks such as Mansha, Chikumbila, and Mushindamo have seen little to no infrastructure development. This has led to unutilized land, absentee landlords, and stalled investor engagement due to the absence of basic enabling infrastructure.

Even within the relatively developed blocks, critical gaps in infrastructure such as lack of police posts, health centers, educational facilities, structured markets, and storage continue to hinder the attractiveness of these areas, especially for youth and smallholder farmers. These findings point to systemic issues in planning, procurement, and implementation capacity that must be addressed to unlock the full potential of the farm block programme.



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OTHER KEY SYSTEMIC AND OPERATIONAL ISSUES IN FARM BLOCK IMPLEMENTATION

Beyond public investment flows and infrastructure development progress across the farm block development initiative and the review also established the following cross-cutting structural, operational, and governance-related issues in the farm block implementation.

Data Inconsistencies Across Key Documents: There are notable discrepancies in data across official documents such as the Budget Speech, Yellow Books, and 8NDP Annual Progress Reports. For example, the 2023 Public Investment Plan stated that electrification would be undertaken in three farm blocks; however, the 8NDP Progress Report referenced only two, Nansanga and Luena. Similarly, the Investment Plan targeted the rehabilitation or construction of 11 bridges, while the 8NDP Progress Report set the target at 24 bridges. Budget discrepancies further compound these issues for example, the Ministry of Agriculture reported a total allocation of ZMW 127.9 million for farm block development, with the Yellow Book reflecting ZMW 125.4 million.

Additionally, while the key milestones such as the procurement of vehicles, road and power infrastructure works, and the undertaking of demographic surveys were documented in the Ministry of Agriculture records but were not clearly mirrored in either the 8NDP Progress Report or the 2023 Investment Plan. Misalignments in reported disbursements, implementation outputs, and employment figures hinder transparency and obstruct efforts to track value for money. The lack of harmonized data across implementing agencies weakens accountability mechanisms and complicates evidence-based decision-making.

Weak Inter-sectoral Coordination: Despite the multi-sectoral nature of the farm block model, collaboration among key institutions such as the Ministries of Agriculture, Lands, Local Government, Finance, and the Zambia Development Agency remains inadequate. Most of these ministries and departments often work in silos, leading to duplicated efforts, infrastructure delays, and inconsistent directives. Provincial and district teams report limited communication and delayed updates from national authorities, further undermining implementation efficiency.

Lack of Decentralization in Farm Block Operations: Critical decisions regarding planning and procurement are highly centralized, with minimal involvement of district-level agricultural officers and local governance structures. This top-down approach has resulted in inefficiencies, such as underutilized equipment and limited local oversight. The lack of decentralization hampers responsiveness to local needs and undermines ownership by community stakeholders.

Implementation Inefficiencies and Potential Misuse of Resources: Several inefficiencies have been observed in resource allocation and infrastructure development. These include overinvestment in administrative facilities at the expense of productive assets, underutilization of developed land, inflated procurement costs, and poor sequencing of investments (e.g., irrigation without confirmed water sources). For example, in Nansanga, one of the investors indicated that the delay in electricity connection was mainly due to the high quotation from ZESCO which led to prolonged discussion before they could come to an agreement.

Weak Governance, Monitoring, and Accountability Mechanisms: The review established that the governance framework for farm blocks is characterized by limited transparency, inadequate monitoring systems, and poor role clarity across administrative levels. Stakeholder representation especially for smallholder farmers is limited, and there is a limited independent oversight. For example, in Nansanga, one of the most heavily invested farm blocks, there was very little outcome monitoring data available. Key informants highlighted that evaluation is typically conducted by the same agencies responsible for implementation, undermining objectivity and accountability. Responsibilities between national, provincial, and district levels are not well defined, resulting in duplicated efforts, conflicting directives, and limited public disclosure of project progress or budget utilization.

Transparency, Inclusiveness, and Farmer Awareness: While initial consultations were held with some local farmers and communities, particularly in Luena, Luswishi, and Nansanga, the review established that these engagements were not sustained through regular and structured follow-up. As a result, many smallholder farmers remain inadequately informed about the operations, progress, and expected benefits of the farm block initiatives. The absence of continuous dialogue has led to confusion, unmet expectations, and a sense of exclusion among local stakeholders. Farmers have consistently emphasized the need for periodic information-sharing, strengthened accountability mechanisms, and the establishment of formal platforms for community representation and engagement in decision-making processes.



CONCLUSION

The FBDP reflects a strong commitment to boosting agricultural productivity and building an exportoriented sector, in line with Vision 2030. Despite allocating over K741 million between 2022 and 2024, only K109.2 million was disbursed, with disbursement rates of just 9.1% in 2022, 76.5% in 2023, and a mere 0.6% in 2024 highlighting severe fiscal absorption and public investment management challenges. Infrastructure delivery has been limited and uneven, with critical enablers such as roads, electrification, and irrigation consistently falling short of targets. In 2022, no infrastructure was delivered; in 2023, less than 10% of bridges, about 41% of the km's of road was constructed/ rehabilitated and about half of the planned electrification was completed; and by 2024, despite a tripling of the budget, there were no reported physical outputs. While farm blocks like Nansanga and Luena have seen some progress, most remain underdeveloped due to weak coordination, poor planning, minimal local engagement, and the absence of a finalized Farm Block Strategy. Additionally, limited social infrastructure and lack of transparency in land governance continue to discourage investor interest.

While the farm block model is inherently sound, it remains an underperforming initiative. The programme is currently characterized with serious implementation bottlenecks that limit its ability to deliver value for money or catalyze rural economic transformation as envisioned. To unlock its full potential, the government must urgently finalize and operationalize a comprehensive strategy, strengthen inter-ministerial coordination, and adopt a unified results framework. Enhancing transparency, accelerating fund disbursement, and prioritizing critical infrastructure delivery are essential to improve execution and realize the programme's promise of inclusive rural economic transformation.

RECOMENDATIONS

BasedBased on the findings from budget allocation and disbursement trends, infrastructure performance, and farm block status assessments, the following key recommendations are proposed to enhance the effectiveness of Zambia's Farm Block Development Programme.

Accelerate development and Operationalization of the Comprehensive Farm Block Strategy Finalizing and implementing the Comprehensive Farm Block Strategy will provide a coherent framework for planning, execution, and monitoring. The strategy should outline clear roles for public and private actors, specify investment thresholds, and integrate measurable performance indicators to track progress and accountability.

Strengthen Budget Execution and Disbursement Efficiency The government should enhance fiscal discipline and commitment controls to ensure that funds allocated to the Farm Block Development Programme are fully disbursed and utilized. Establishing clear timelines for procurement and minimizing bureaucratic bottlenecks will be critical to improving implementation efficiency.

Establish a Unified Monitoring and Evaluation Framework A centralized results matrix should be developed to align performance indicators across the national budget, public investment plans, 8NDP, and Ministry of Agriculture annual work plans. This will promote transparency, consistency, and coordination across planning and reporting frameworks, ensuring that all stakeholders are aligned on targets and performance expectations. The matrix should serve as a standard reference during budget cycles and implementation reviews.

Strengthened inter-sectoral or ministerial Joint Planning and Budget Alignment Mechanisms Regular interministerial coordination meetings especially during pre-budget and mid-year reviews should be strengthened to align targets, timelines, and funding priorities. This will reduce duplication, strengthen cohesion, and improve delivery efficiency.

Adopt a Phased and Prioritized Infrastructure Roll-Out A phased development strategy should be adopted to focus resources on completing critical infrastructure such as access roads, power connections, and irrigation within the most viable and strategic farm blocks. Infrastructure planning should be guided by a comprehensive investment framework aligned to national development priorities and the 8NDP.

Accelerate Development of Anchor Infrastructure and Core Ventures Timely completion of enablers such as road networks, electrification, irrigation systems, and core venture operations is vital to attract and retain investor interest. Enhanced coordination between key ministries such as Agriculture, Infrastructure, Energy, and Finance is essential to align timelines and budgets for infrastructure delivery.

Enhance Transparency, Monitoring, and Citizen Oversight To improve accountability, the government should publish standalone annual farm block implementation reports that provide financial and physical progress updates. This will foster accountability and provide a credible basis for policy dialogue and resource mobilization. Promoting citizen participation through budget tracking, social audits, and community scorecards will also consolidate transparency and strengthen local ownership of the programme.



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