Research Paper

Assessing national WaSH targets through a water governance lens: a case study of the Sanitation and Water for All partnership commitments

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ABSTRACT

Dysfunctional water, sanitation and hygiene (WaSH) systems are mainly determined by poor water governance, exacerbating inequalities and poverty. Multi-stakeholder partnerships provide an approach to more flexible and adaptive governance to explore these problems. In this article, national commitments made to improve WaSH, made through the Sanitation and Water for All (SWA) partnership's Mutual Accountability Mechanism, are examined through qualitative content analysis and guided by the SMART framework to assess the current target-setting. The analysis reveals that there are differences in the participation of the different constituencies regarding the number of stakeholders participating and their performance for measurable and time-bound commitments. This applies especially to research and learning and the private sector. Countries have prioritized commitments related to policy and strategy, efficiency and enabling conditions; further research should understand the linkages of the SWA commitments with other priority-setting processes at the national level. In sum, the commitments leave room for improvement to specify approaches to water governance in more detail and the chance to support the creation of sustainable and resilient systems with more diversified commitments from a wider range of partners.

Key words: national commitments, SDGs, target-setting, WaSH, water governance

HIGHLIGHTS

- The importance of more equal participation of all constituencies needs to be underlined, since there are differences in general participation and performance for SMART goals.
- Priorities in presenting certain governance components should be explored further to assess national goal-setting thoroughly.
- Diversifying commitments could increase the potential of commitments to support creating sustainable and resilient systems.

INTRODUCTION

The current research shows that lack of access and poor sustainable water, sanitation and hygiene (WaSH) services are limiting factors to achieving international development targets by 2030, despite water and sanitation being recognized as human rights (Jiménez *et al.* 2018). In many contexts, even though the technical infrastructure is in place, it is not functional or only partially functional. In fact, around '30–50% of WaSH projects fail after two to five years', due to governance-related problems (UNDP Water Governance Facility/UNICEF 2014). Hence, ineffective WaSH services are conditioned by poor governance, rather than due to technical constraints. Rogers & Hall (2003) refer to water governance as 'the range of political, social, economic and administrative systems that are in place to develop and manage water resources, and that ensure the delivery of water services, at different levels of society' (p. 7). To confront problems of the water sector, good governance principles can help to improve the performance of the sector and establish an 'enabling environment'. The latter facilitates the achievement of ensuring available and sustainable WaSH services for all as described in SDG 6. Good governance encompasses the

combination of many different processes (named governance functions, such as policy and strategy, coordination, regulation and financing) with a variety of governance attributes, including accountability, transparency, participation, inclusiveness, rule of law or deliberation, among other factors that are moving away from hierarchical, government-centric problem-solving approaches (Jiménez et al. 2020).

Following UNICEF (2016) and Jiménez et al. (2020), for the assessment of water governance, beside structural and institutional factors, building blocks, governance functions, governance attributes and outcomes can be used. Building blocks outline key aspects of successful governance, while functions help to identify more detailed *what* needs to be implemented. Governance attributes reflect *how* governance could be performed in order to attain the intended outcomes, while governance outcomes describe *for what* purpose governance is designed. These operational frameworks provide an opportunity to assess water governance, the enabling environment and possibilities of how to work practically by giving advice for improved, action-oriented water governance processes.

The concept of good governance has emerged as a response to global concerns that national top-down regulation and market-based approaches to address many sustainability challenges are severely limited and therefore require new approaches and service modalities to make progress towards SDG 6 (Kanie & Biermann 2017). A more flexible and adaptive type of governance, able to adjust to the non-linear nature of sustainability challenges, such as WaSH services, has therefore evolved since the World Summit of Sustainable Development (WSSD) in 2002. It was institutionalized in SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals), promoting international cooperation, involving a variety of stakeholders, beyond national governments, to encourage collaborative action towards sustainable development, including the SDGs (Bäckstrand 2006). To work collaboratively towards these common goals, national and local governments must lead the call to joint action and include the private sector, the scientific community and civil society. These partnerships are often seen as key in solving global WaSH challenges. Through their flexible and adjustable nature, they are able to align problem-solving goals to have substantial impact and influence on the quality of governance on several levels (Pattberg et al. 2012). Concurrently, transparent and accountable governance is seen as a decisive factor for the effective implementation of their objectives (Biermann et al. 2017), and partnerships cannot be seen as a panacea for global governance (Bäckstrand 2006). In 2001, the UN General Assembly adopted resolution 56/226, where partnerships were encouraged to draw up commitments at all administrative levels to implement their agendas (General Assembly 2001). These voluntary commitments were then used as benchmarks and indicators to enhance the formalization, goal-setting and success of the partnerships (Kanie & Biermann 2017).

One such partnership is the Sanitation and Water for All (SWA) partnership. SWA is a multi-stakeholder partnership aiming to initiate high-level political dialogue and coordinating and monitoring the progress of SDG 6 'To ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all' of the 2030 Agenda. SWA's Mutual Accountability Mechanism (MAM), launched in late 2018, is a rethinking, or further development, of the commitments process that had been in place since the inception of SWA.[1] The MAM serves as a tool to develop mutual accountability between partners at national and global levels by putting promises into practice and fostering effective implementation by a common vision and by common principles, obligations, challenges and requirements. Within the MAM, SWA regularly calls all partners to submit voluntary commitments through a multi-stakeholder process to an online database. The MAM has purposefully been designed to be flexible and respond to each individual country's context, planning processes and internal organization. This has led to a mechanism that values national multi-stakeholder processes and priorities highly – and as such does not set any limits on the content of the commitments, other than requiring that there is a limited number per constituency or partner (two or three), that as far as possible the other actors' commitments support government commitments and that they are SMART. The incentives for making commitments differ according to the type of actor – for governments, it is an opportunity to showcase their progress towards goals. In most countries, not all constituencies have made commitments – this is either because not all constituencies are represented in every country, or because there is not an active multi-stakeholder platform.

This research includes all commitments made between March 2019, shortly after the MAM was launched, and January 2020, representing 291 commitments by 55 countries and 47 other constituencies. The idea behind these voluntary commitments is that they specify a clear direction and serve as a public reminder for the different actors to work towards their national targets and thus to contribute to achieving the SDG6 targets.

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[1] More information about the MAM can be found on the SWA website: https://www.sanitationandwaterforall.org/about/our-work/mutual-accountability-mechanism (accessed 31 January 2021).

The formalization and goal-setting of voluntary commitments by setting clear benchmarks and appropriate indicators is important for the efficiency and success of the towards a concrete progress by 2030 (Biermann *et al.* 2017). Subsequently, monitoring and evaluating these multi-stakeholder partnerships' commitments is crucial to inform about partnership progress and engagement. Although commitments in WaSH have been made, no strategic analysis of commitments has been conducted so far.

The aim of this paper is to analyse the SWA commitments in relation to water governance frameworks in order to provide specific recommendations for the improvement of target composition. The commitments allow an insight into the current target-setting for WaSH, including what is planned to be implemented, how governance is planned to be conducted and for what purpose. Using the proposed framework, with this exercise we identify gaps that go beyond the building blocks used by the MAM, looking at what partners are doing to achieve an effective sector.[2] It must be borne in mind that the commitments are only an excerpt from the actual national policymaking and were chosen by the governments and other constituencies to be presented within the MAM. Hence, they need to be considered as an example case among a broader set of commitments made on different policy levels. This paper describes an exploratory study that does not aim to cover all aspects of the MAM process, focusing exclusively on the analysis of the commitment database.[3]

METHODS

This study combines a literature review with a descriptive analysis to depict an approximate profile of the current situation of approaches and commitments to improved water governance entailing three steps.

First, we conducted a literature review studying the current issues around water governance and WaSH to define appropriate frameworks for analysis. For this purpose, scientific papers as well as reports compiled by different UN organizations and research institutes were taken into account. Further material for background information was provided by SWA, for instance, the SWA framework.[4] The frameworks by UNICEF (2016) and Jiménez *et al.* (2020) were chosen to assess the commitments, including building blocks, governance functions, governance attributes and outcomes (see Figure 1). They were considered since UNICEF's more diversified governance functions are harmonized with the SWA framework's building blocks, while Jiménez *et al.*'s framework allows to give insight for improved, action-oriented water governance processes that go beyond explaining what is done, but also explains how and for which purpose.

Secondly, we applied a deductive content analysis to focus on conceptualizing and describing the commitments included in the SWA MAM database. The analysis aimed to identify specific aspects related to water governance. The review of the framework by Jiménez *et al.* (2020) and UNICEF (2016) allowed the preparation of a tagging manual (adapted from the 'coding manual' following Bryman (2012)) for deductively conducting the quantitative content analysis. Furthermore, the SMART components adapted from Jones & Ducket (2004) were added to the tagging manual, since SWA partners were advised to use to model for designing their commitments presented in the MAM. We decided to assess only S, M and T components.[5] Categories and tags were defined, including practical examples, to provide instructions for coding following Kuckartz (2012).[6] All commitments were reviewed by applying the coding schedule and using the tagging manual to allocate at least one of the respective tags.

In total, the database included 291 commitments reported between 1 March 2019 and 21 January 2020. The database was provided in an online spreadsheet called 'Airtable'.[7] Participating parties are called *constituencies* and include governments, civil society, private sector, bilateral external support agencies, and research and learning constituencies working in WaSH.

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[2] More information about the SWA framework can be found on the SWA website: https://www.sanitationandwaterforall.org/about/our-work/priority-areas (accessed 15 May 2021).
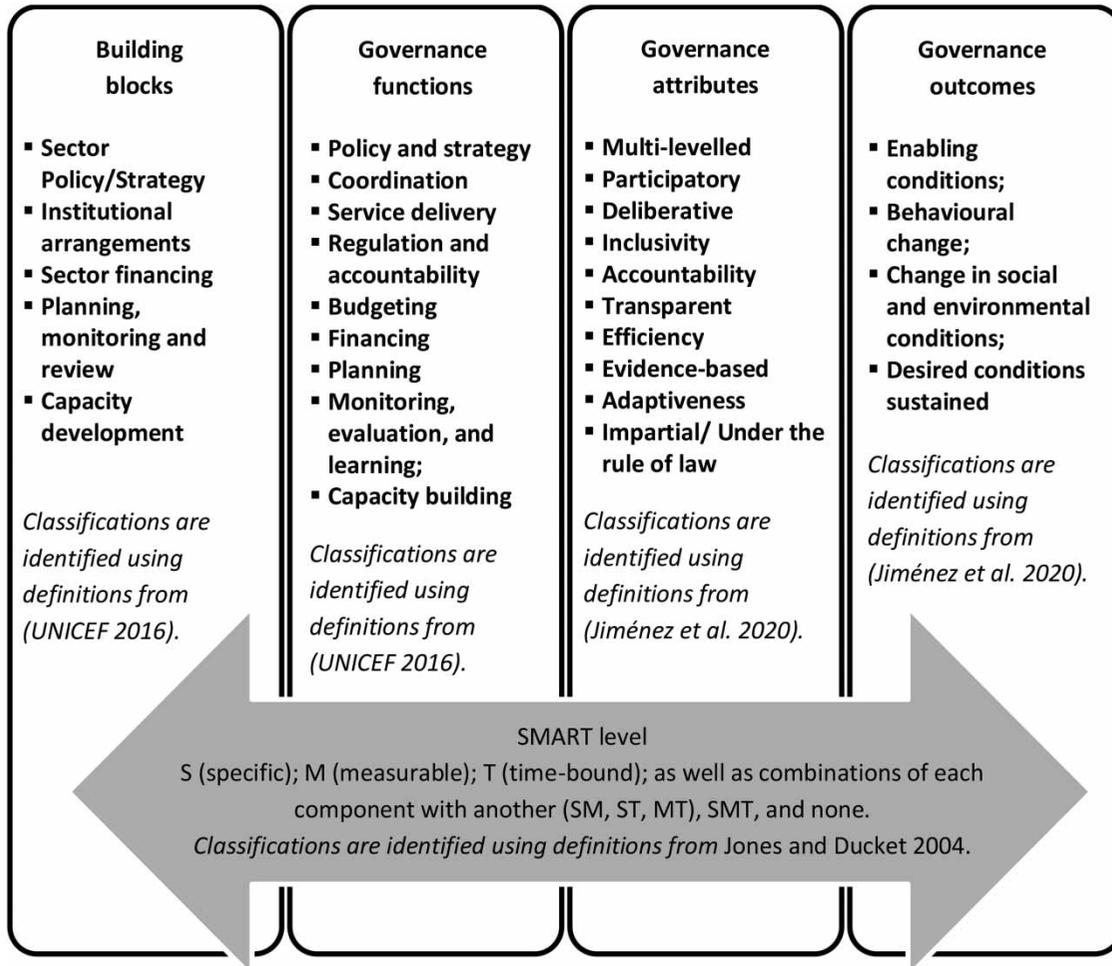
[3] There has been a separate research done which will be published soon: Willetts, J., Winterford, K., Liera, C., and Dickin, S. (2020). Strengthening mutual accountability in partnerships for WASH: Part 1 – Literature review and learning from other sectors. Prepared by UTS Institute for Sustainable Futures, SEI, IRC and SWA Research and Learning Constituency for Sanitation and Water for All Partnership.

[4] The SWA framework can be retrieved from here: https://www.sanitationandwaterforall.org/news/financing-inequalities-wash-sector-why-it-critical (accessed 5 May 2021).

[5] By measuring the frequency of the SMART components, an estimation of the efficiency of the goals stated in the commitments was intended. We assumed it to be almost impossible to assess if the individual targets are achievable or relevant to the respective stakeholder without doing in-depth case studies (following Bowman et al. 2015). Consequently, for the analysis, only S, M and T components were assessed.

[6] The full tagging manual can be found in Appendix A.

[7] Airtable is an online spreadsheet: https://airtable.com/. The commitments are collected and stored in an Airtable folder.

Building blocks

- Sector Policy/Strategy
- Institutional arrangements
- Sector financing
- Planning, monitoring and review
- Capacity development

Classifications are identified using definitions from (UNICEF 2016).

Governance functions

- Policy and strategy
- Coordination
- Service delivery
- Regulation and accountability
- Budgeting
- Financing
- Planning
- Monitoring, evaluation, and learning;
- Capacity building

Classifications are identified using definitions from (UNICEF 2016).

Governance attributes

- Multi-levelled
- Participatory
- Deliberative
- Inclusivity
- Accountability
- Transparent
- Efficiency
- Evidence-based
- Adaptiveness
- Impartial/ Under the rule of law

Classifications are identified using definitions from (Jiménez et al. 2020).

Governance outcomes

- Enabling conditions;
- Behavioural change;
- Change in social and environmental conditions;
- Desired conditions sustained

Classifications are identified using definitions from (Jiménez et al. 2020).

SMART level
S (specific); M (measurable); T (time-bound); as well as combinations of each component with another (SM, ST, MT), SMT, and none.
Classifications are identified using definitions from Jones and Ducket 2004.

Figure 1 | Water governance framework adapted from UNICEF (2016) and Jiménez *et al.* (2020).

For the MAM database, SWA encouraged partners to limit the number of commitments per institution to three and use the SMART model from goal-setting theory; i.e. commitments should be specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound. A commitment usually involves one to a few sentences specifying the policy that is intended to be implemented during the next few years. One commitment entry includes the commitment, the constituency, date of adoption, target date to meet the commitment, means of verification, notes and the possibility of assigning tags, which were used for the analysis. In addition, supplementary files could be attached, e.g. for defining the details of policies planned.

Thirdly, the examination was conducted in Airtable.[8] A univariate analysis was applied, in which the category frequencies were measured in order to make comparisons.

Despite the fact that this research uses ratio-scaled data, the analysis was of a purely qualitative nature, which is why differences can only be explained with a limited certainty. Future research might explore the quantitative differences in more detail and describe correlations. This analysis focuses only on the commitments in the SWA database and does not take into account the MAM process or impact. The data are therefore limited to the commitments in the database. Future research could assess the underlying processes and concrete impacts by applying further research methods. Having said this, it needs to be noted that the commitments made under the MAM are not representative or even indicative of all government

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[8] The filters only allowed to filter the tags with 'is exactly' or 'has any of', e.g. 'The commitment is exactly [is any of] "government".' As in all categories, commitments could be tagged with more than one tag, the total frequency of tags exceeded the total amount of commitments (291) using the 'is any of' filter. However, using the 'is exactly' filter, not all commitments were counted, as double or triple tagged commitments were not filtered. This was considered when assessing the commitments, depending on the type of information that should be extracted.

Table 1 | Descriptive data of SWA commitments analysed by constituency and region

Constituency	General		Government	Research and learning	External support agencies	Private sector	Civil society
Region	Total	Relative frequency (%)	Relative frequency (%)				
SSA	155	53.3	53.5	0	16.8	3.9	25.2
MENA	7	2.4	85.7	0	14.3	0	0
LAC	24	8.2	83.3	0	0	0	16.7
EAP	16	5.5	100	0	0	0	0
SA	42	14.4	28.6	0	0	4.8	66.7
Europe	15	5.2	0	33.3	80	0	0
NA	13	4.5	0	38.5	38.5	0	7.7
Global	19	6.5	0	36.8	63.2	0	5.3
Total	291	100	47.1	5.8	19.2	2.7	25.1

policies, strategies and targets, and should not be understood as such. They do not exclusively reflect the countries' approaches to WASH policy, since there are multiple other commitments made outside these MAM commitments that are not subject of this research, including the SDGs and the Ngor Commitments.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In total, 291 commitments from eight different regions were analysed (see Table 1). The regions encompass sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), Middle Eastern and North Africa (MENA), Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), East Asia and Pacific (EAP), South Asia (SA), Europe, North America (NA) and commitments from global institutions, e.g. UN institutions or international NGOs, defined as 'global' (regional classifications adapted from UNICEF (2017)).

The descriptive data reveal a varying number of cases from particular regions and of commitments per constituency. For instance, around half of the commitments were submitted by governments (47.1%), while civil society organizations account only for around one-quarter (25.1%). Only governments from SSA, MENA, LAC, EAP and SA submitted commitments. Furthermore, in SSA, MENA, LAC, EAP and SA, research and learning institutions did not submit any commitments. Certainly, this reflects the membership structure of the partnership, where most of the partners from Europe, NA and Global act as supporting entities.[9] Furthermore, only 2.7% of all commitments were submitted by private sector partners, and only from SSA and SA. In sum, these tendencies of unequal participation can have certain implications and should be kept in mind, when analysing the data.

Commitments are geared towards policy and strategy

The analysis of building blocks and governance functions revealed that commitments were tagged with comparatively high frequency as *sector policy/strategy* (56.7%) or *planning, monitoring and review* (25.4%), while the governance attribute *efficiency* (35.4%) and the outcome *enabling conditions* (47.8%) were tagged with the highest frequency (see Figure 2). In turn, other blocks or functions and attributes were tagged with a considerably lower frequency of tags (≤20% of all commitments), excluding 'deliberative'.[10] Furthermore, a high share of commitments was tagged with aiming at enabling conditions as outcome, while the other outcomes are tagged each about the same number of times. These results indicate that certain governance aspects were prioritized over others to be presented in the MAM. To understand this choice, further research is needed to explore how commitments are embedded in national policymaking.

Furthermore, the results reveal a tendency to describe actions planned as being implemented 'efficiently', while other attributes are mentioned less frequently. Since the performance of governance functions and outcomes is connected to the

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[9] More about SWA partners can be read here: Partners | Sanitation and Water for All (SWA).

[10] The governance attribute 'deliberative' is mostly relevant for commitments coming from constituencies with an advisory function looking for wider consensus around priority-setting.
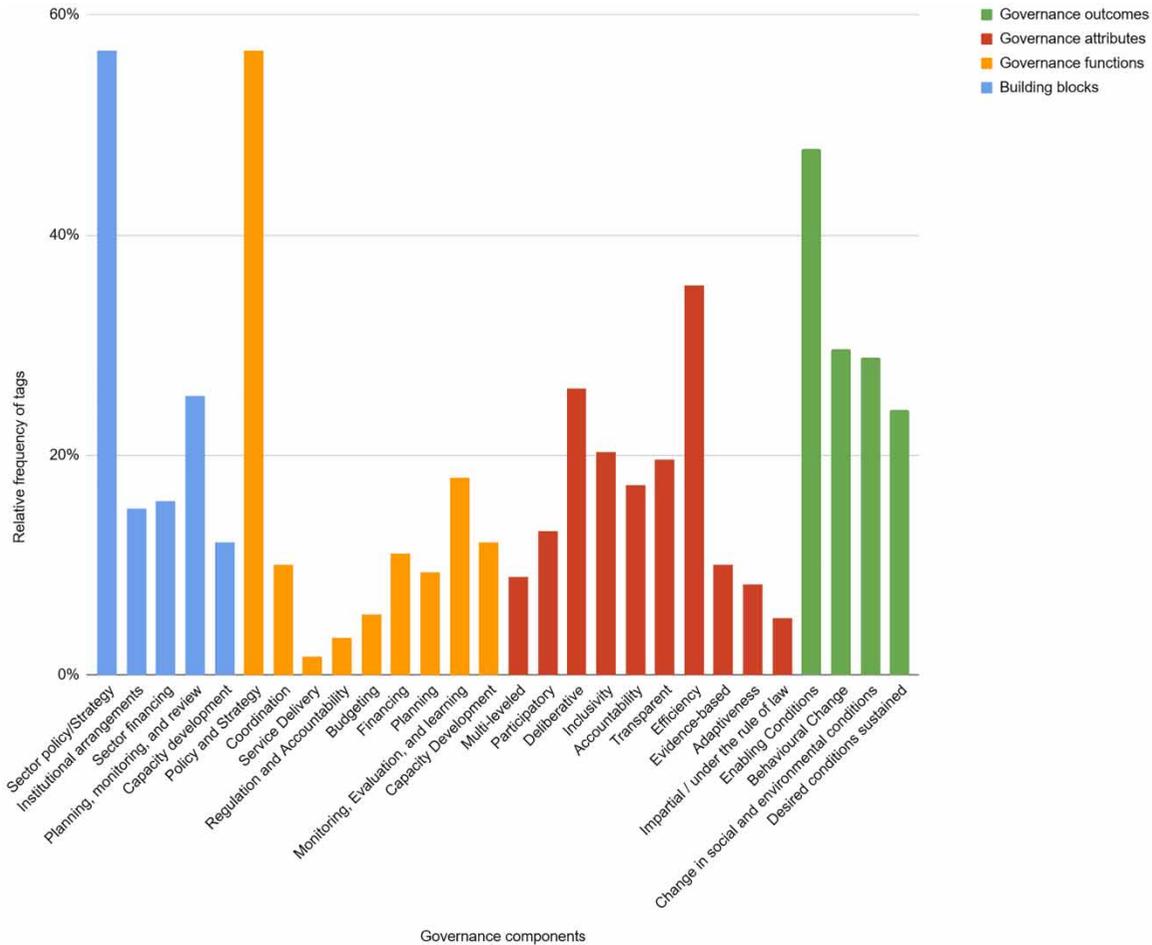
Figure 2 | Relative frequency of tags by governance components ($n = 291$).

attributes defining the governance process, this is of particular interest. The definition of efficiency used by Jiménez *et al.* (2020) refers to processes and institutions that produce results that meet the needs of society while making the best use of resources at their disposal (p. 12). This entails providing a clear concept of how effective and sustainable outputs should be achieved. Facing a complex and uncertain future with rapid changes, disturbances and non-linear change, a key to create effective outcomes for social–ecological systems might be adaptive governance (Chaffin *et al.* 2014), which was only considered in about 8% of the commitments. The successful implementation of adaptive governance practices is connected to adaptive capacity and the level of resilience of institutions (Neely 2015). Institutional arrangements' performance is one of the identified bottlenecks for successful water governance (UNDP Water Governance Facility/ UNICEF 2014), since they are crucial for reliable and affordable WaSH services and accountability (UNICEF 2016; Jiménez *et al.* 2020). Capacity building can support the resilience of WaSH services (Kohlitz *et al.* 2019) and improve the coherence between actions and outcomes, which is key for successful implementation of national objectives (Pattberg & Widerberg 2014). Capacity building can also be key to prepare duty-bearers and decision-makers in WaSH to work with new forms of governance and practice, for instance, inclusive decision-making (Tropp 2007). Besides, studies show that, for instance, polycentric governance regimes with distributed power but effective coordination enable a higher ability to respond to challenges emerging from climate change (Pahl-Wostl *et al.* 2012). Hence, the orientation towards multi-levelled water governance and effective coordination might support the change to an adaptive governance approach. Showing that governance components are interconnected and complementary in order to achieve the desired outcome and to prevent risks, the concept of efficiency may be reconsidered in consultation with MAM partners.

In sum, a shared understanding of efficiency for sustainable systems might be explored best by looking at different attributes and functions through a resilience lens. Although being oriented towards a short time-frame of execution, in the face of growing global challenges, the commitments need to reflect an understanding for designing governance that aims at creating systemic change. The differences in choosing certain building blocks and governance functions to present in the context of the MAM need to be explored further in order to analyse national policy and target-setting further.

## Commitments lack measurable and time-bound components

The analysis revealed that most commitments lack *measurable* components, while being mostly tagged as specific, meaning that the goals encompass specific information about what kind of engagement is planned (see Figure 3). Governments performed best with over 25% of commitments. In particular, research and learning constituencies did not hand in any measurable commitments. Moreover, there is a gap in the frequency of tags for time-bound commitments between the constituencies. While a higher percentage of governments', external support agencies' and CSO's commitments are time-bound, again, research and learning as well as the private sector show low frequencies of tags for time-bound commitments. Furthermore, the private sector shows the highest frequency of commitments with none of the components tagged.

The results indicate that all constituencies could improve their performance for drafting SMART goals, while some showed better performance than others did. Considering that SWA advised all constituencies to submit SMART commitments, in the process of drafting commitments, the equal responsibility and general awareness about the importance of drafting commitments that are measurable and time-bound needs to be underlined.

It is widely recognized that the effectiveness of goal-setting to change human behaviour relies on substantial commitment by its stakeholders (MacLeod 2012). Gollwitzer & Sheeran (2006) point out that the clear formulation of intention can have several positive impacts on their goal implementation; hence setting measurable and time-bound targets can be an effective entry point for all constituencies to design more effective goals. In the process of formulating, the authors should be guided to set up realistic and aligning objectives. Also, feedback should be provided to demonstrate the progress towards the goal (Locke *et al.* 1981).

However, in the analysis only three out of five components could be assessed, due to the difficulty to measure attainability and relevance without knowing the specific country context. Therefore, looking forward, a method that serves as an instrument to set up and evaluate the SMART goals objectively is recommended. For example, Bowman *et al.* (2015) take up the SMART goal logic and define evaluation criteria suitable for auditing goal statements leading to their so-called SMART Goal Evaluation Method (SMART-GEM). SMART-GEM demonstrates a good construct validity as well as very good inter-reliability and can be used as a standardized method for the drafting and evaluation of commitments. Therefore, using SMART-GEM might be an effective guideline for writing and evaluating future SWA commitments.

In sum, stakeholders need to be further encouraged to improve their SMART commitments. Drafting measurable and time-bound commitments should be underlined, especially for research and learning and the private sector. Using a method like
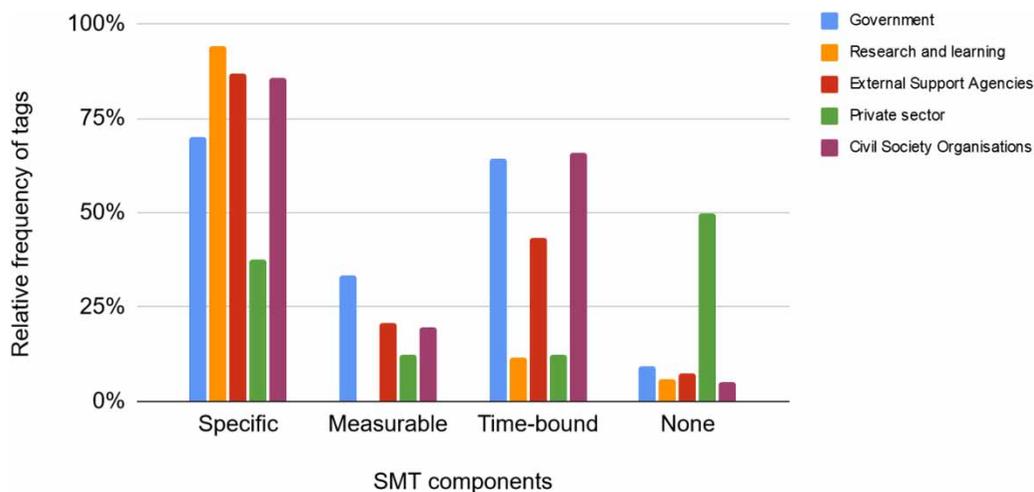
Figure 3 | Relative frequency of tags by SMT components sorted by constituencies ($n = 291$).

SMART-GEM has the potential to help improve commitments and therewith trigger positive consequences for the implementation.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This assessment of SWA members' commitments to improve water governance in WASH focused on analysing the approaches to water governance and provides recommendations for the improvement of target composition. The results indicate that significant improvements can be made to strengthen both the preparation process and the formulation of commitments to ensure more sustainable water governance.

The following statements elucidate the main conclusions and practical policy recommendations:

1. *Stakeholders are encouraged to recognize the importance of equal participation of all constituencies within the scope of the MAM*. The MAM serves as a tool to develop mutual accountability means between partners at national and global levels. Since there are differences regarding SMART commitments between the constituencies, the importance of equal participation in the design of such goals should be addressed and improved, concerning especially the private sector and research and learning constituencies. In addition, recognizing the varying number of stakeholders by constituency and country group, general participation in the partnership as well as in the MAM should be promoted further, for instance, to encourage the participation of the private sector.

2. *Stakeholders are encouraged to draft more diversified commitments and differences in governance components should be explored further to assess national target-setting priorities*. Resilient and sustainable WaSH services and systems are essential prerequisites to face challenges of approaching global crises. We conclude that there is a prioritization of presenting commitments in the context of MAM connected to certain building blocks, governance functions, governance attributes and governance outcomes. To explore the reasons behind choosing certain governance components over others, further research needs to be conducted about national policymaking and the focus of the SWA partnership in its work with governments and other partners in order to understand the role of commitments in the wider context.

3. *Stakeholders are encouraged to make commitments SMARTer by including measurable and time-bound components as well as request support in the drafting process*. A SMART formulation of commitments can support an effective implementation of the goals. Therefore, constituencies should be encouraged to include a more detailed description including measurable and time-related components, especially among research and learning constituencies and the private sector. Since stakeholders' commitments show their will to commit to action, the preparatory process may be informative about how commitments are made. Building on this, SWA could adapt its process for refinement and acceptance of commitments submitted supporting stakeholders in the drafting process.

We conclude that in the course of emerging global challenges that will most likely affect WaSH and aggravate existing problems, commitments can be an instrument for SWA to foster and track progress towards better water governance. For the next round of commitments, we recommend that all stakeholders be encouraged to draft SMARTer and more diversified commitments. However, our analysis shows that the process of making commitments and the commitments' relation to national target-setting priorities needs to be assessed further in order to find out how to support stakeholders to improve the commitments. Therefore, future research could also look at the drafting process and how the SWA commitments link and reinforce other national processes for priority-setting in the water and sanitation sector and beyond. Building on these lessons and taking into account the vital role WaSH systems currently play in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic, we have no time to wait to strengthen current WaSH commitments towards achieving water and sanitation for all.

Note on ethical concerns: the commitments are published on the SWA website (https://sanitationandwaterforall.org/about/our-work/mutual-accountability-mechanism). Therefore, there are no ethical concerns in using the material for analysis.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

All relevant data are included in the paper or its Supplementary Information.

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