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OPINION

Missing in action: The UN Water Action Agenda needs an overhauled commitment-setting process

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In March 2023, the United Nations (UN) held the first water conference since 1977. The UN 2023 Water Conference brought together more than 3000 representatives from UN Member States, intergovernmental organizations, UN entities, civil society (including international and national non-governmental organizations), and academia. The conference aimed to "unite the world for water" around the building blocks of "commitment to action, sustained and scalable implementation, and follow-up and review processes" [1]. This conference was timely, given the inextricable link between water and the fortunes of nations and the impacts of climate change, conflict, and pandemics. UN Member States and other stakeholders were invited to make voluntary commitments to catalyze action. These commitments would form the Water Action Agenda (WAA), designed to accelerate progress in the Water Action Decade (2018–2028) and the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) period (2015–2030) [2].

The intention and ambition are compelling. But did the conference and the WAA hit the mark? Did UN Member States and stakeholders rise to the challenge? Were commitments a bold response to pressing climate, economic, geopolitical, and health challenges of the 21st century? Are water stakeholders committed to the right mix of systems strengthening, infrastructure investment, workforce capacity development, and resilience to ensure governments finally achieve the "internationally agreed water-related goals and targets, including those contained in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development" [1]?

After the conference, commentators criticized the effectiveness of the WAA [3]. The Water Institute at UNC obtained access to a dataset of 764 commitments (91% of the 837 ultimately made as part of the WAA) [2]. The Water Institute analyzed these commitments to seek answers to the questions above. Of the analyzed commitments, the largest proportion (39%) were made by non-governmental organizations (NGOs). UN agencies made 6% of commitments, academic institutions made 8%, and the private sector made 9%. Only 187 (24%) were created by UN Member States. Of these, 135 (18%) were "domestic commitments" (we defined as commitments made by governments to be implemented in their own country), and only 73 (10%) were created by low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). Fifty-four Member States made commitments, representing 28% of the 194 UN countries. It is striking that at a

conference primarily designed to rally UN Member States, only a quarter felt compelled to make commitments. Notably, only 33 LMICs did, representing 17% of LMICs that are UN members.

Of the 73 domestic commitments made by LMICs, 7% were assessed to be measurable, time-bound, linked to monitoring and evaluation efforts, and aligned with existing policies and plans. Less than half (47%) addressed sanitation; only 8% specifically focused on hygiene.

These findings suggest that the commitment-making process was of little interest to governments. There were substantial challenges with the methodological development of the commitments, where few commitments met "SMART" (specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, time-bound) criteria, and few were linked with monitoring systems and existing policies and plans. The commitments were poorly connected. There were expectations of mutual accountability that were not met, and the sheer number of commitments and their varying quality made turning them into a true "action agenda" nearly impossible.

One silver lining, however, is that LMIC governments that set commitments indicated that they were committing to improving policies, institutions, and regulations, that is, to strengthening systems rather than focusing solely on infrastructure. How can water sector actors, including donors, academia, and civil society, support countries in these efforts?

Capturing successful learning from the local context

There is a need to identify local barriers and solutions to improving policy, institutions, and regulations and to build an evidence base on doing these well. While randomized controlled trials are often described as the research gold standard, little evidence is generated using alternative study designs exploring policy, institutions, and regulations. These are desperately needed and align with ongoing discussions advocating systems approaches [4–6]. Success stories and case studies are valuable in informing governments about what works and what doesn't. We know this can be done–there is a long track record in the health sector of systems strengthening [7]. However, this is relatively new in the water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) sector and has substantial challenges compared to the health sector, given that no countries have a dedicated executive or ministerial structure dedicated to WASH.

Strengthening an open platform for sharing information and ideas

We encourage the UN-Water Global Analysis and Assessment of Sanitation and Drinking Water (GLAAS) to continue to expand the compilation of case studies and for broad use of these resources in the sector [8–10]. Local evidence is essential for cross-pollination across countries so that approaches can be adapted for success in different contexts.

Sharing case examples through learning partnerships

An open platform for case studies would be best facilitated and distributed through learning partnerships, such as the Sanitation and Water for All (SWA) alliance (6). Learning partnerships will function best if they link various actor types and help translate evidence appropriately (i.e., span boundaries between actor types) [11]. Evidence cannot simply exist as a digital database but must be accessible and synthesized by partners into digestible, relevant advice for policymakers and practitioners. This will only be successful if cultural competency (working effectively with others in cross-cultural situations) and accessibility of evidence products are considered.

Enhancing training and capacity building

Development partners need to build the capacity of local actors—think tanks, civil society, academics, and policymakers—to advocate for change and act upon it when it happens. They must collaborate with and work through these local actors.

The commitment formulating process must improve for this support to translate into more meaningful action. Support systems are needed to enable national and local governments to review practical evidence, identify opportunities for improvement, craft ways to improve policy, institutions, and regulations, and establish sustainable infrastructure. The international community has an opportunity to support governments in formulating SMART commitments backed by evidence, matched by complementary commitments from donors, academia, and civil society, and that allow meaningful progress tracking.

A better system for supporting countries to formulate commitments is essential if future additions to the WAA are to be made. Only then can the WAA ultimately contribute to national and global goals and targets in the water sector.

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