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Key Recommendations:

For governments

Take the lead
Make it happen
Be inclusive

For CSOs

Pull together
Build a stronger voice
Be accountable

For development partners

Finance good governance

Go beyond one-off multi-
stakeholder workshops

Be accountable for "leaving
no one behind"

For United Nations agencies

The HLPF needs to recognise
the role of CSOs in SDG6

Recognise the important role
that CSOs play

Global Review of National Accountability Mechanisms for SDG6

It has been almost three years since the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including SDG6: "Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all by 2030". According to WHO/UNICEF 2017, it is estimated that 30% of people worldwide, or 2.1 billion, still lack access to safe, readily available water at home, and 60%, or 4.5 billion, lack safely managed sanitation.

In a majority of low and middle income countries, progress is too slow to reach SDG6 by 2030 and there are decreasing trends in at least 20 countries.

Governments are accountable for their formal commitments under SDG`6 and have committed to engage in systematic follow-up and review of implementation. Furthermore, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development envisions "a world where we reaffirm our commitments regarding the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation and where there is improved hygiene".

Accountability means that those who are responsible, accept responsibility for their actions and omissions, and accept that they are called upon to give an account of why and how they have acted or failed to act, and adjust their policies and actions accordingly .

Effective accountability mechanisms are considered transparent, engage a diversity of stakeholders, facilitate and encourage critical reflection on progress, and are responsive to issues addressed by stakeholders. More than just seeking to correct past wrongs, accountability mechanisms are forward-looking, seeking to influence government actions in the future, making them more responsive to the SDG6 targets and the needs of citizens.

At the international level, the UN High Level Political Forum (HLPF) has a central role in reviewing progress towards achieving the SDGs. The 2030 Agenda, however, provides little detail on the HLPF accountability structure. The accountability mechanisms for international SDG commitments are of a voluntary nature, without guidelines, and are viewed by many as non-transparent, unfit for purpose tick-box exercises.

At the national level, every country has its own set of institutional structures and mechanisms to implement and report on the achievement of SDG6 targets. This study has investigated the nature of the existing accountability mechanisms at national level, challenges and opportunities.

Standards for institutionalised participation of civil society at the international and national voluntary review processes for SDG6 have never been set.

The map below highlights the countries in which our national members/partners led this study.

South Asia (8)
Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka

Europe (2)
France, Netherlands

Latin America (3)
Costa Rica, Honduras, México

Africa (12)
Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Ghana, Guinea-Conakry, Kenya, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Tanzania, Togo

With the support of SWA

Key findings from the country studies

In most countries, accountability mechanisms for SDG6 are not available. When reported, accountability mechanisms have been mentioned as not effective, and are limited mostly to some indicators of targets 6.1 and 6.2.

Hardly any of the countries report clear responsibilities for SDG6 specifically. Overall, responsibilities for the SDGs are allocated among various ministries, often chaired by high-level officials. Accountability is hindered by a lack of adequate monitoring and reporting on SDG6, including limited progress on implementation of commitments on targets.

Responsibilities for reporting on SDG6 related targets are unclear and scattered among different departments, or responsibilities are not identified or allocated at all. When mentioned, accountability mechanisms in country studies are available only for some indicators of targets 6.1 and 6.2.

Most of the accountability mechanisms and tools brought forward in the country studies are standalone events and not part of a systematic structured approach to accountability. Some countries are preparing for the High Level Political Forum (HLPF) in July 2018, but over half of the country studies have reported not to be aware of their government preparing for a Voluntary National Review on SDG6 progress.

Few country studies referred to the possibility of holding the Government accountable for progress on the SDG6 targets through complaint, grievance and enforcement mechanisms or other existing human rights mechanisms.

A few countries have indicated that joint sector reviews perform as an effective accountability mechanism, others refer to accountability through regulatory and democratic systems using parliamentary reviews. Some countries reported that decentralised mechanisms can be particularly effective avenues to influence and hold government accountable: social audits, open budget sessions, budget tracking and creation of basin committee.

Some of the country studies have referred to networks of civil society organisations (CSOs) as a means to more effectively hold their governments accountable. A few country studies have indicated that shadow reporting by civil society constitutes an effective accountability mechanism.

Few countries mention the role of media in raising public awareness and only two countries mention the role of the private sector in holding the government accountable.

Many country studies refer to a lack of awareness, knowledge and capacity among CSOs on what monitoring implementation of SDG6 actually means. Additionally, in some countries, among CSOs, there is confusion and a lack of coordination about roles, responsibilities and mandates regarding SDG6. In some countries, stakeholders reported a failure to be transparent, share information and to adequately represent voices from grassroots levels.

Accountability overall is hindered by a lack of adequate monitoring and reporting on SDG6, limited progress on implementation of commitments and limited opportunity for CSOs to contribute to monitoring SDG6 and to submit independent reviews.

Most countries in the study reported that they are still in the initial stages of developing a systematic process for monitoring and review that generates evidence on sector progress towards SDG6 and allows for multi-stakeholder involvement. Global monitoring instruments are often used for tracking progress towards SDG6 at national level. Some European countries have their own binding SDG accountability and reporting mechanisms.

In most surveyed countries, data is incomplete, inadequate and not disaggregated enough to allow for tracking progress on reaching the most marginalised groups (i.e. the poorest, indigenous groups, refugees and the elderly).

Some countries are still developing and mapping SDG6 baselines, indicators and targets and are in the process of developing new systems for data collection.

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Challenges reported by country studies

There are many challenges with the few existing, reported accountability mechanisms. At present, accountability mechanisms are not systematic, regular, inclusive and meaningful - and considered far from effective to hold governments accountable to their SDG6 commitments.

Challenges reported by country studies regarding the functioning and effectiveness of accountability mechanisms include the lack of a legal basis for existing mechanisms, the irregularity of the accountability processes and the limited extent of follow-up of outcomes from such processes. Country studies have indicated that governments' commitments on SDG6 remain a topic at the national level only, and are not being implemented and monitored at the local level.

Country studies have reported barriers to meaningful participation: CSOs and other organisations such as academia, private sector or the media are not invited to key meetings, relevant information for participation is not shared or is hard to find, there are unequal opportunities to participate in accountability mechanisms and in a few countries the space for engagement between governments and CSOs is limited.

Government-level challenges include lack of coordination and unclear allocation of roles and responsibilities, lack of interest and political commitments for SDG6 and not ensuring that there is enough diversity of stakeholders and representation of women and marginalised groups. Many country studies refer to a lack of awareness, knowledge and capacity among CSOs on what monitoring implementation of SDG6 actually means. Additionally in some countries, among CSOs, there is lack of coordination and confusion about roles, responsibilities and mandates regarding SDG6. CSO-level challenges include also a failure to be transparent, share information and to adequately represent voices from grassroots levels.

A major challenge often referred to by many countries is that financing and budget allocations are often insufficient for the well-functioning of accountability mechanisms, and CSOs struggle to fundraise and remain independent to effectively hold governments accountable to SDG6.

Opportunities reported by country studies

Almost all CSOs and government officials consulted agreed that participation in accountability mechanisms for SDG6 have a positive impact when carried out in an effective, meaningful way.

Country studies indicated that multi-stakeholder participation in accountability mechanisms strengthens partnerships, improves coordination of actions and leads to more clarity on roles and responsibilities among stakeholders. The role of traditional media is often mentioned as an important and powerful accountability accelerator, as it can be used to create awareness and to put public pressure on the government to take responsibilities for its decisions with regard to water and sanitation.

Country studies indicate that participatory accountability mechanisms have the potential to increase political attention and funding for SDG6. Moreover, it leads to capacity building within government for implementation of SDG6. Participation in accountability mechanisms can also lead to better and more effective ways for the collection of data and monitoring practices, which can successfully influence government policies, and an increased attention on marginalised areas, grassroots communities, and vulnerable groups.

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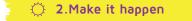
Recommendations for governments

Governments are accountable for their formal commitments under SDG6 and must realise the human rights to water and sanitation. Investing in effective national accountability mechanisms will support progress towards Agenda 2030 ambitions.

1.Take the lead

Ensure transparent allocation of roles and responsibilities for disaggregated data collection, monitoring and reporting on the implementation of commitments and progress on all SDG6 targets. Make sure the review on sector progress towards SDG6 is systematically done.

2.Make it happen

Develop official accountability mechanisms at national and local level that allow meaningful consultation of all stakeholders on a regular basis. Invest in citizens' engagement and the necessary capacity building and knowledge sharing initiatives. Make sure that there are mechanisms for enforcement of decisions.

3.Be inclusive

Make sure accountability mechanisms for SDG6 targets include all stakeholders and ensure the representation of excluded/marginalised groups.

Recommendations for CSOs

Civil society, WASH sector organisations and human rights organisations seem to work alongside each other without profiting from each other's expertise. The processes of change required to reach SDG6 takes time and no single organisation can succeed alone. Connect with others and strategise together.

1.Pull together

Build capacity and create awareness of SDG6 targets and corresponding national commitments and policies. Create strong partnerships among CSOs, increase the coordination and communication among all stakeholders to join and support existing platforms and networks for holding the government accountable for their commitments.

2.Build a stronger voice

Actively involve grassroots and marginalised groups to understand their needs and challenges. Include their voice in advocacy and in consultations with government. Document the evidence and share this often unwritten knowledge.

3.Be accountable

Accountability starts with your organisation and network. Be accountable to your constituency – not just to your donors – and actively seek feedback on your activities to hold governments accountable to SDG6.

This study was led by CSOs in 25 countries under the umbrella of End Water Poverty, Watershed Consortium, Coalition Eau and the Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council (WSSCC). The study took place between October 2017 and March 2018.

The process and the results of the study aim to strengthen CSOs' capacity to advocate for improved accountability mechanisms and for their involvement in decision-making and follow-up actions around progress towards SDG6. This study has facilitated - and in many instances started - a much-needed conversation in-country between governmental and non-governmental stakeholders.

At the international level, the aim of the study is to inform the development of accountability mechanisms within the HLPF.

The results of the study are based on more than 1,000 surveys, interviews and validation meetings with stakeholders working on water resources, drinking water and sanitation in 25 countries. Stakeholders who participated voluntarily in this study include governments (national and decentralised), CSOs, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), development partners, UN agencies, research and education institutions, and think-tanks. The private sector and trades unions representation in the study has been limited.

Recommendations for development partners

Financing water governance is as important as financing infrastructure. CSOs have a key role to play in holding governments accountable on progress towards SDG6.

☼ 1.Finance good governance

Donors should continue to support the aid effectiveness agenda and work within government frameworks and priorities. Engage with governments on national sector development strategies and plans, particularly on the need for national accountability mechanisms and strengthening CSOs' role within them.

☼ 2.Beyond one-off multi-stakeholder workshops

Support governments and CSOs with the technical and financial means to establish formal, regular and inclusive multi-stakeholder accountability mechanisms for the implementation of SDG6. One-off irregular sector events remain relevant, but are not effective accountability mechanisms.

☼ 3. Be accountable for "leaving no one behind"

Increase accountability on the use of your own funds that contribute to the achievement of SDG6. Make sure that the monitoring and reporting on the spending of your funds have disaggregated data on progress towards reaching the most marginalised people, who traditionally have no voice in the implementation of SDG6.

Recommendation for United Nations agencies

There need to be well-defined opportunities for effective engagement of CSOs in review mechanisms.

☼ The HLPF needs to recognise the role of CSOs in SDG6 and to adopt recommendations and guidelines for national governments to establish and use national accountability mechanisms for reporting on SDG6. It is expected that governments will then involve CSOs in relevant processes.

☼ Recognise the important role that CSOs play in assisting with effective SDG implementation, as well as providing reliable information on progress for marginalised and vulnerable persons on the ground.

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Participating Organisations

Afghan Civil society Forum-organisation (ACSFo)

Alliance pour la Maitrise de l'Eau et de l'Energie (AME)

Asociación Regional Centroamericana para el Agua y el Ambiente

CCOAD-Niger

Centre for Environmental Justice

CN-CIEPA/Wash -Mali

Coalition Eau

Coalition of Non Governmental Organisations in the Water and Sanitation (CONIWAS)

Conseil des Organisations Non Gouvernementales d'Appaui Développement (CONCAD)

Deevlopment Organisation of the Rural Poor (Dorp)

Freshwater Action Network Mexico (FANMEX)

IRC-WASH

Jeunes Verts Togo

Kenya Water for Health Organisation

LNW Consulting/Bhutan Rural Sanitation and Hygiene Programme

Modern Architects for Rural India

NGO Forum for Urban Water and Sanitation ONG Carbone Guinée

Partenariat National de l'Eau du Benin (PNE-Bénin)

Punjab Urban Resource Centre

Sanitation and Water Action (SAWA)

Sécrétariat Permanent des Organisations Non Gouvernementales (SPONG)

WaterCare

Women Environmental Programme