

# Designing Water's Future



People, creativity, and technology uniting  
to shift the world's dangerous course.

Now.

## WORK SESSION REPORT

New York | September 25, 2019

World Economic Forum Affiliated Session  
Sustainable Development Impact Summit

Produced and curated by



## IMPERATIVE MISSION: Design Water's Future

On September 25, 2019, leaders of major brands, designers of global movements, and developers of some of the most successful participatory projects in history came together for an urgent World Economic Forum-affiliated work session as part of the Sustainable Development Impact Summit.

Together they rolled up their sleeves to design a new strategy, that to create a water-secure world in a changing climate will take unprecedented tenacity, creativity, collaboration, hope, nimble-ness... and maybe even a few aliens.



# Designing Water's Future

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**Creating a water-secure world will take  
“unprecedented tenacity, creativity,  
collaboration, hope, nimble-ness, and  
maybe even . . . a few aliens.”**

BARRIERS

- No one “owns” water
- Lack of regulation
- Not clear who “we” is that is responsible
- people struggling w/ today can’t focus on tomorrow
- Crisis feels abstractly distant
- Lack of visible costs (Compared to Energy)
- Individual motivation to lower water use
- No valuation(\$) of H<sub>2</sub>O
- Priority? Company? Govt be consumer? Local
- Access to info about great  
Breaks

People need to be connected, inspired, and empowered with shared stories, data, solutions and urgency. This is the moment in history when arts, culture, and storytelling can combine with science and technology to shift our dangerous course.

That was the consensus from “Designing Water’s Future,” a special World Economic Forum-affiliated work session held in New York September 25 as part of the Forum’s Sustainable Development Impact Summit.

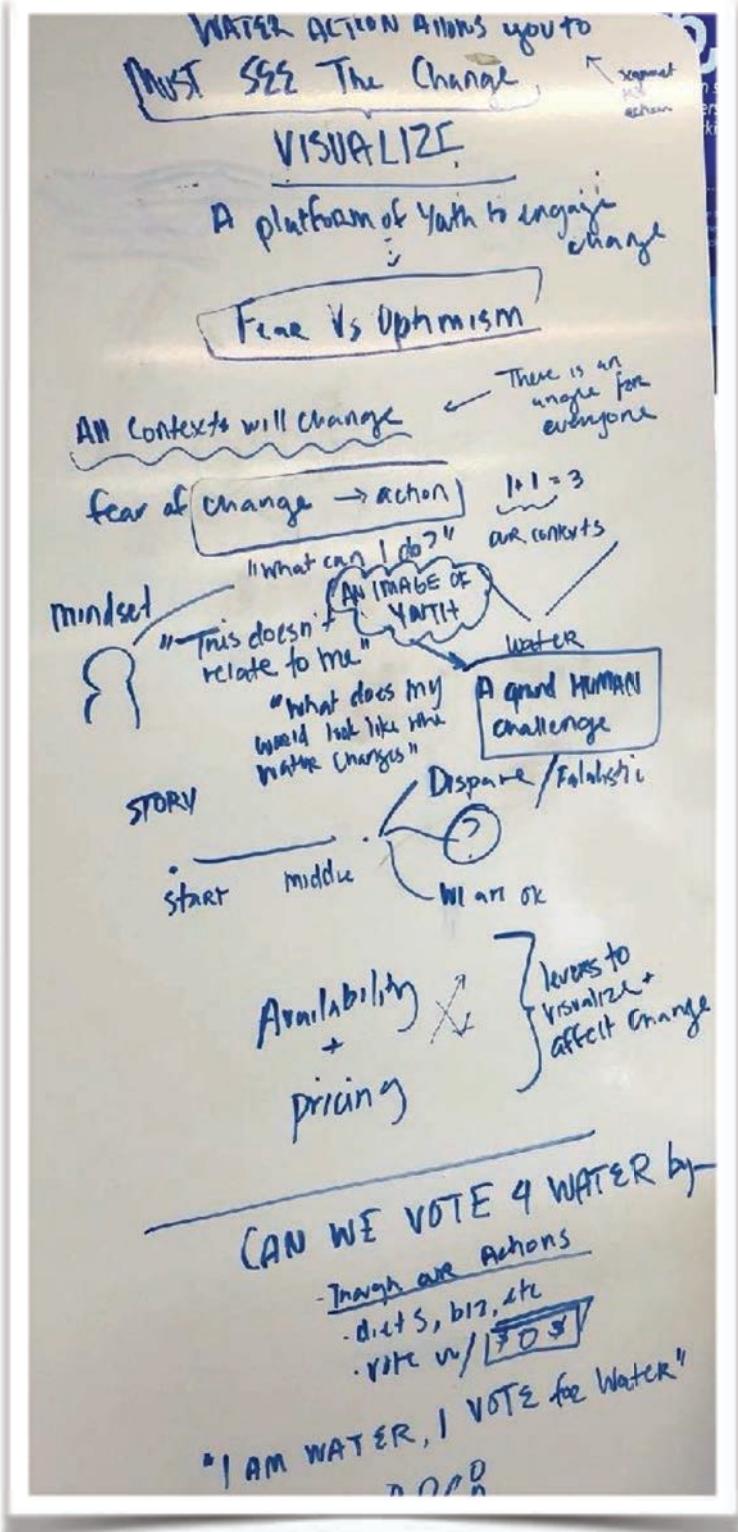
The workshop-format event, which also coincided with United Nations Climate Week, brought together more than 30 leaders of major brands, designers of global movements, and developers of some of the most successful participatory projects in history. It was hosted by Circle of Blue, the journalism and research organization focused on water, food and energy globally, and APCO Worldwide, the public affairs firm.

While the world faces accelerating and dire global water crises, the group’s assignment was to identify the most profound obstacles facing a water-challenged world and how to overcome them.



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J. Carl Ganter, Circle of Blue's managing director, opened the session noting the irony of Climate Week, where water was sparse on the agenda. "Water is climate," he said. "The biggest story, the biggest threat to our people, our planet, our environment is water."

Ganter shared a live world map of relevant water news coverage provided by EarthRise. "But you would think that this story would be lighting up the map everywhere. Look at these white spaces — millions of points of human and environmental water stress and solutions that aren't on the map. We have a lot of work to do to tell this story, make it visible, engage people worldwide, and change the course."

**"That's the level of narrative we are craving, one where everyone is a participant."**

What's missing is a classic storyline, said co-host Leland Maschmeyer, chief creative officer at Chobani, the global food brand. Existential threats like water crises and responses to them match templates from archetypal stories of drama, fear, love, failure, and redemption.

**"This is a moment that's played out across history, through common metaphors and storylines,"** Maschmeyer said. **"Yet we're living in times when we are part of a real story, and the hero has to win. Perhaps we need a dramatic, adventurous storyline based on aliens who have come to steal our water. This tiny blue planet, holding the key to life, and it's the human race that has to unite across cultures, strengths, technologies and egos to protect it."**

**"That's the level of narrative we are craving, one where everyone is a participant – where there are villains to fight against, heroes to rescue us, and an outcome that dawns a new day. It's the most important moment of our time, and our task, starting right here today, is to write the screenplay and how it ends and begins."**

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It's happening now.



The future is  
here. Ahead of  
schedule.



**Deep in that screenplay is a rising generation driven by purpose, but often stymied by fear and lack of direction.**

"We are not tapping our most important writers of the world's future," said Richard Odell, an expert on youth education across cultures and geographies, and founder of Heads Up. Odell described today as a moment when young people around the world are disconnected, buried in their screens or alternate realities. But they are also seeking an awakening of their purpose.

"We have young people like Greta and Malala who are showing kids there is a way forward, that we as adults have not totally destroyed their future," Odell said. "But many children today don't see their future, or the future they see is one they don't want or can't imagine. At such a young age, they lack hope and motivation, and retreat to these alternate realities. Imagine being a 12 year old today, reading about climate change, carrying water for hours a day, or watching a dramatic decline in the beauty of diversity of species. There are fewer fairytales and more nightmares. What can they do?"

**"What story do we tell them, what future do we help them write? These are the true designers of our water's — and our planet's — future."**

"Kids like Greta are stepping onto the world stage and giving voice to millions of children. This is a moment not to be lost. What story do we tell them, what future do we help them write? These are the true designers of our water's — and our planet's — future," Odell said.

Three participants representing industry, innovation, and transformation set the scene with further context and success stories. "What examples can we turn to for inspiration, guidance, or what not to do?"

Tom Butler, CEO of the International Council on Mining and Metals, noted that companies are stepping up, some faster than others, to take responsibility, act more in the public and planet's interest, and meet customer's higher expectations. They have to, Butler said, not only because of the pragmatic need for raw materials — water among them — or even a market for their goods and services, but because "companies have a responsibility to be part of the global water story. They have to build trust and maintain a social license to operate."

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# Designing Water's Future

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A network of  
superheroes.

At a rare moment in history, Designing Water Future activates and unites the collective genius of data experts, scientists, storytellers, young people, governments, companies and the public. It combines immersive journalism, arts and culture, and citizen science with sophisticated data analysis and AI at unprecedented scale.

Kim Polman, Co-founder and Chair at Reboot the Future, co-authored and edited the book *Imaginal Cells: Visions of the Future*. “Imaginals,” she explained, are the cells that contain the genetic information that enables metamorphosis from caterpillar to butterfly. The caterpillar “forms a chrysalis from which it will dissolve itself into an organic stew, where dormant ‘imaginal cells’ hold the vision of the new structure.”

At first they behave as single-celled organisms and are even attacked as foreign by the caterpillar’s immune system, she said. Soon, though, they “regroup, multiply . . . and form clusters,” ultimately consolidating as a multi-celled organism, “the beautiful butterfly.” Polman challenged participants to be “imaginals,” individual cells that regroup “to form change.”

To drive the change, Rick Smolan said we need to capture self-reflective moments, when the world can see itself in the mirror, find relevancy, meaning, and a shared story.

**This story, if we can tap into it, is perhaps the most powerful way to engage and activate the public, our policy makers, our children.”**

Smolan produced the Day in the Life book series, the most successful photography and participatory publishing events in history. In 2007 he created Blue Planet Run, for which the world’s best photojournalists captured facets of water’s beauty and peril around the world.

“Everyone has a water story, yet what we learned is this story is exceptionally and universally complicated,” Smolan said. “On one part of the planet there may be plenty of water, on another it may be flooding, while on another, the water may be polluted. Somewhere else it may be in perfect harmony and underlie the entire culture. This story, if we can tap into it, is perhaps the most powerful way to engage and activate the public, our policy makers, our children.”

Participants then formed small working groups to address three provocative questions to help shape the Designing Water’s Future initiative:

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# Designing Water's Future

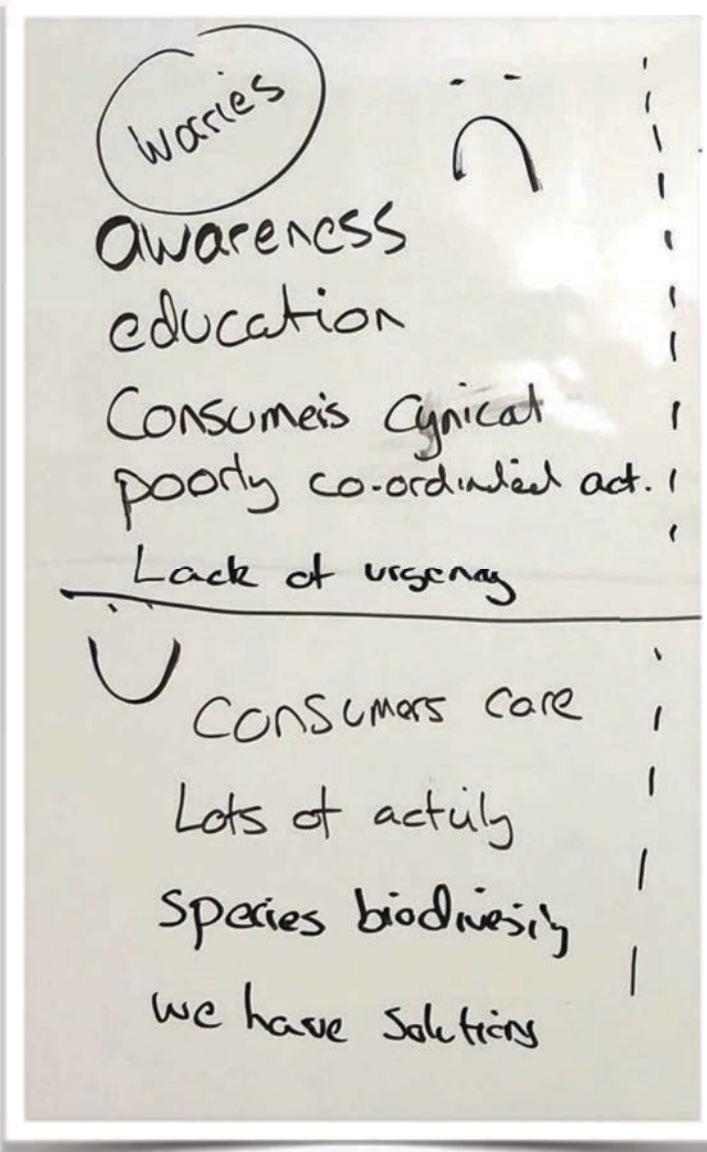
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1. Identify big and undeniable global changes that can be leveraged to “design water’s future.”
2. There are dramatic shifts at every level, hyper-local to global, but many are so complex that people cannot connect emotionally; the issues don’t feel personal. What big change – what shift – will convince leaders, the public, and students, that they all have something at stake – something to win or lose?
3. What transformative gap or gaps must Designing Water’s Future fill to facilitate and bring about viable technology and policy solutions as the world faces a convergence of profound water challenges?

When participants regrouped, they found their diverging discussions led to convergent insights. Parallel and even identical themes and narratives emerged:

- One group focused on “the consequences of inaction,” the ultimate endpoint for the planet: extinction.



**One group focused on “the consequences of inaction,” the ultimate endpoint for the planet: extinction.**

- Several participants emphasized the necessity to “tell the truth” to inspire and rebuild trust as well as a sense of *real* urgency.
- The need to communicate urgency, was a common theme, with one group observing that “there are too many conversations about it,” “all this messaging across all this space” without a specific or collective call to action in a defined time frame.

People have become cynical and fatalistic, convinced that there is nothing they can do. As one put it, “only if people feel they’re actually getting real information, not feeling they’re getting fabricated stories from the government or corporations. Can we actually make a change?”

Each group universally settled on storytelling. We need “stories anchored in local identity,” one rapporteur said. “How do we get Chris’s Aunt Karen to understand that what has happened in Cape Town could happen to her?”

continued >>

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**You can help us manufacture change. Whether that's on the communication side, the political side, the fundraising side, or working on the local school level to talk to children and giving them the language and the structures with which they can carry the story on because they're the ones who are going to be inheriting this."**

Several insisted that not all of these stories have to be dire: "We should not just tell stories of scarcity, but stories of plenty as well – giving people hope rather than just scaring them." Others noted that water crises aren't always issues of scarcity. There are regions of the globe flooded with too much water, or that have access only to water that is polluted. "How do we make using 50 liters of water feel as good as using 500 liters?"

The resulting common threads:

**Water stories make otherwise abstract issues resonate on local and personal levels. Perhaps what is needed is a nexus, a mechanism to link stories, a worldwide sharing of hyper-local changes, challenges, and solutions. And to tie them to over-arching issues like climate, food, energy, and health.**

In closing remarks, Leland Maschmeyer of Chobani told the story of Père Marin Mersenne, a 17th-Century monk and polymath who, among other achievements, created the first "pen pal" network of scientists and scholars throughout Europe. It was perhaps the earliest historical opportunity for

**"We should not just tell stories of scarcity, but stories of plenty as well – giving people hope rather than just scaring them."**

people or their communities to pursue shared ambitions. "A protean Royal Society," as he described it, "setting standards for the transition from natural philosophy to objective, measurable, replicable science."

"Change doesn't just happen," he said. "And there is no 'silver bullet.' But there is 'silver buckshot': Many, many scattered, differing ideas. But you need one body to pull it all together to help manufacture that change." To be the constant resource you return to "for information, for connections, for structure, even governance."

We can't depend on governments, Maschmeyer said, "because they're too slow. And we can't depend on corporations because of their competing interests, among other things."

"There needs to be a virtual body that we all agree that we can look to. To set standards and protocols, to help us shape the conversation. By providing a central nexus that we keep returning to we can, over time, create small changes, big changes, coordinated changes, happenstance changes – changes that add up to the tectonic shifts that we need."

# Four challenges to change the world’s most dangerous course.

1



## A New Generation Designs a New Narrative

Students from more than 250 universities from Beijing to Boston will take on water as a client using a broad array of design tools, working through cross-disciplinary teams to create the new narratives needed to frame the challenges, capture attention and imagination, and to make hope visible.

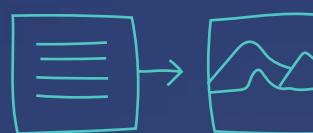
2



## Engage the World: On-the-Ground Stories & Citizen Science

Integrated crowdsourced content: #MyWaterStory, #MyWaterScience, #MyWaterData, and #MyWaterSolution, sparks participation and creative problem-solving among story tellers, researchers, scientists, data experts, engineers, practitioners, (unrecognized) geniuses, students, and the wider public. Participants share water status, challenges, history, arts, culture, and perspectives, and are empowered to collect and share data on their water.

3



## Evidence-Based Data, Clearly Visualized

A hackathon will invite data experts, designers, and others to verify and package water data into insightful, compelling, and cutting edge visualizations that reveal new trends and stories, and inform decision-making and action.

4



## Connection & Collaboration

More than a status quo accumulation of content, Designing Water’s Future becomes the world’s first active multidisciplinary, persistent network of engaged storytellers, data collectors, and scientists sharing urgent problems, inspiring solutions, feedback, and new systemic responses to the world’s water crises.

**“People need to be connected, inspired, and empowered with shared stories, data, solutions and urgency.”**

**SETTING THE SCENE**

J. Carl Ganter  
Managing Director  
Circle of Blue





**“It’s the most important moment of our time, and ours, right here, to write the screenplay and how it ends and begins.”**

**SETTING THE SCENE**  
Leland Maschmeyer  
Chief Creative Officer  
Chobani



**“Many children today don’t see their future, or the future they see is one they don’t want or can’t imagine.”**

SETTING THE SCENE  
Rich Odell  
Heads Up





**“Companies have a responsibility to be part of the global water story. They have to build trust and maintain their ‘social license to operate.’”**

**SETTING THE SCENE**

Tom Butler  
International Council  
on Metals & Mining

**“We are all  
imaginaries, the  
cells that form  
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SETTING THE SCENE

Kim Polman  
Reboot The Future



**“The only hope for water’s future is the one we deliberately design.”**



**“We all have a water story, that if we can tap into, is the most powerful way to engage and activate the public, our policy makers, our children.”**

**SETTING THE SCENE**

Rick Smolan

Against All Odds Productions

Creator, “Day in the Life” book series and “One Digital Day”

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# PROVOCATIONS

1. Identify at least one big, undeniable change that has occurred or is happening right now that can be leveraged to design water's future?
2. The freshwater ecosystem is experiencing dynamic shifts at multiple levels, from hyper-local to global, but are so complex that many people have difficulty connecting emotionally. What is the big change that everyone can't deny, and feels they have something at stake, to win or lose?
3. What is/are the one (or two) most transformative gap/s that Designing Water's Future needs to fill as the world faces a convergence of profound water challenges, and promising technology and policy solutions?

## GROUP 1

### Consequences of inaction

- 12-year tipping point
- Running out of water
- Empty aquifers
- Extinction

### Actions

- Create water economy
- Tell the truth
- Connect to climate and other issues
- Emphasize urgency

### Barriers

- No one “owns” water
- Lack of regulation
- No clear who “we” is responsible
- People struggle w/today, can’t focus on tomorrow
- Distant, abstract crisis
- Lack of visible costs
- Water has no value
- Whose priority?
- Climate is connected to carbon, not water

# GROUP 2

## Top Worries...

Lack of awareness

Lack of education

Consumer cynicism

Poorly coordinated actions

Lack of urgency

## Lead to...

Unfettered use (flood irrigation)

False hope (the gods)

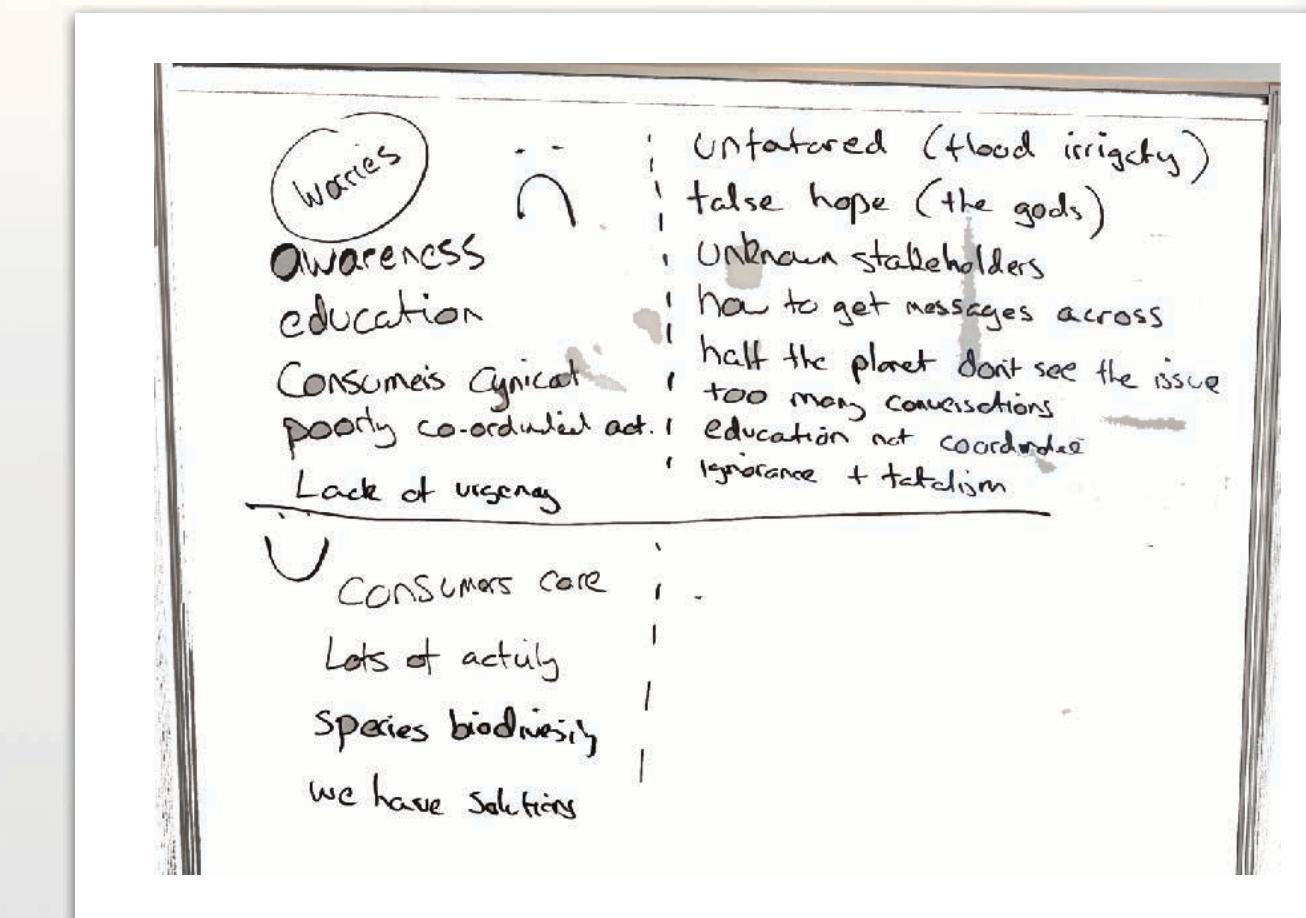
Unknown stakeholders

Disconnected messages

Uncoordinated education

Ignorance and fatalism

Lack of urgency



- ① mass migration  
• war conflict  
• income inequality  
• (crisis is now)
- ② tangible / simple  
• "make 50L feel like 500L"  
• story anchored in local identity  
• scarcity vs plenty approach
- ③ ground water resources  
affects us all  
• traceability / blockchain  
• charge for water  
• position clearly politically  
• Farmers  
• Transparency
- ④ people are running out  
• Actions to take (give)  
• we are all vulnerable  
• What can we do with more water  
• Creativity

## GROUP 3

For water action...

Must see the change

Visualize

A platform for youth to engage, change

Mindset: This doesn't relate to me

It's a grand human challenge

## Actions

Create water economy

Tell the truth

Connect to climate and other issues

Emphasize urgency

water  
A grand HUMAN  
challenge

"I AM WATER, I VOTE for Water"  
DOPN

Fear Vs Optimism

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The Designing Water's Future session was produced by Circle of Blue and hosted by APCO Worldwide. Special thanks to Margery Kraus, Judit Arenas, Anna Tunkel, Prateek Allapur, and Mischa Sindyukov of APCO, and to the World Economic Forum for including “Designing Water’s Future” as an affiliated session of the Sustainable Development Impact Summit.

## DIVERSE CREATIVITY

### Represented Organizations

**APCO Worldwide**

**ARUP**

**CEO Water Mandate**

**CFC Advisors**

**Chobani**

**Circle of Blue**

**COLLINS**

**Consumers International**

**Against All Odds Productions**

**Doberman**

**FKTRY**

**Global Center on Adaptation**

**Heads Up Education**

**Higher Grounds / On the Ground**

**International Council on Metals & Mining**

**Leaders on Purpose**

**Pacific Institute**

**Procter & Gamble**

**Qlik**

**Reboot the Future**

**Rockefeller Foundation**

**Tales of Change**

**Vector Center**

**Waves for Water**

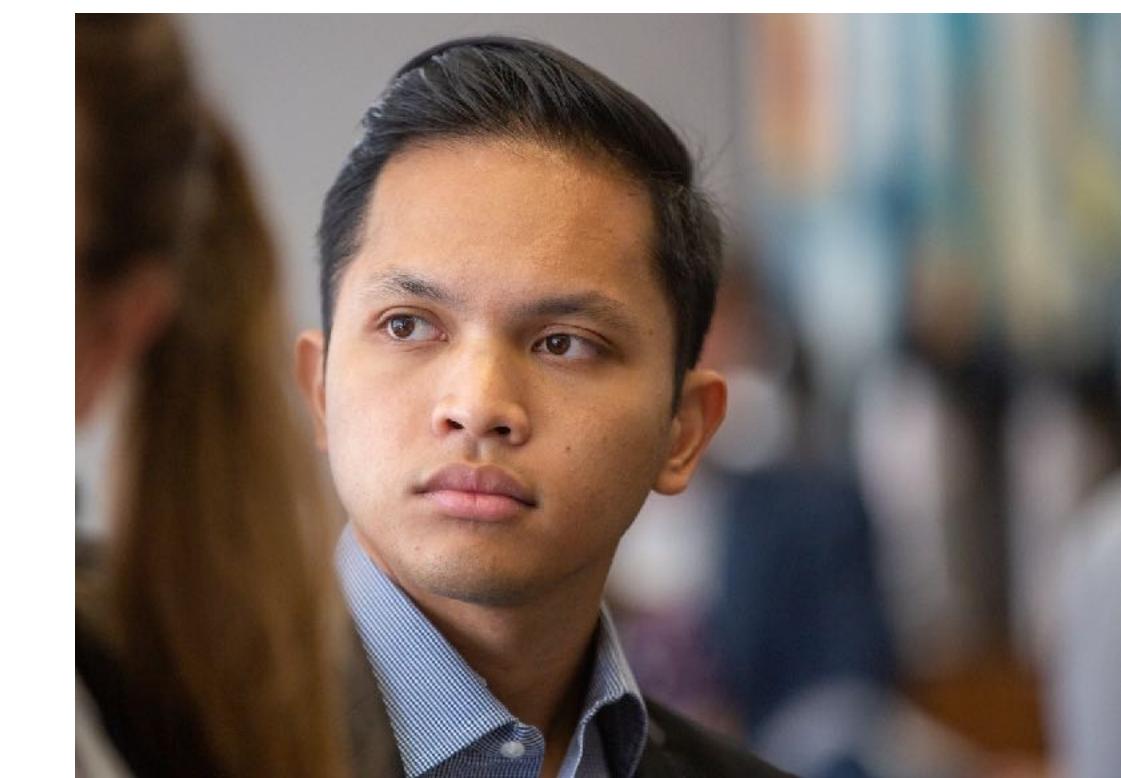
**Water Health International**

**World Economic Forum**

**Xylem**



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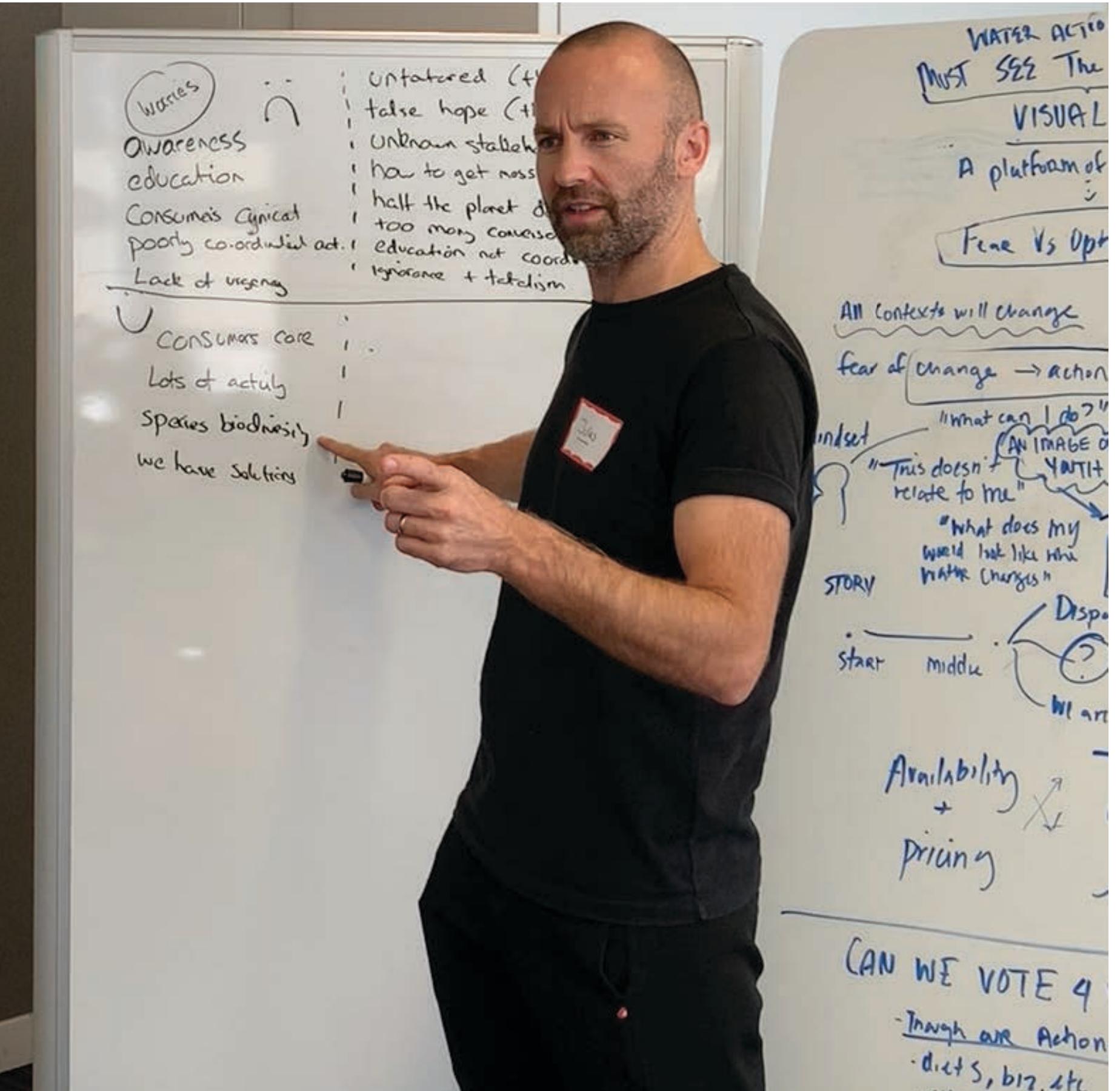
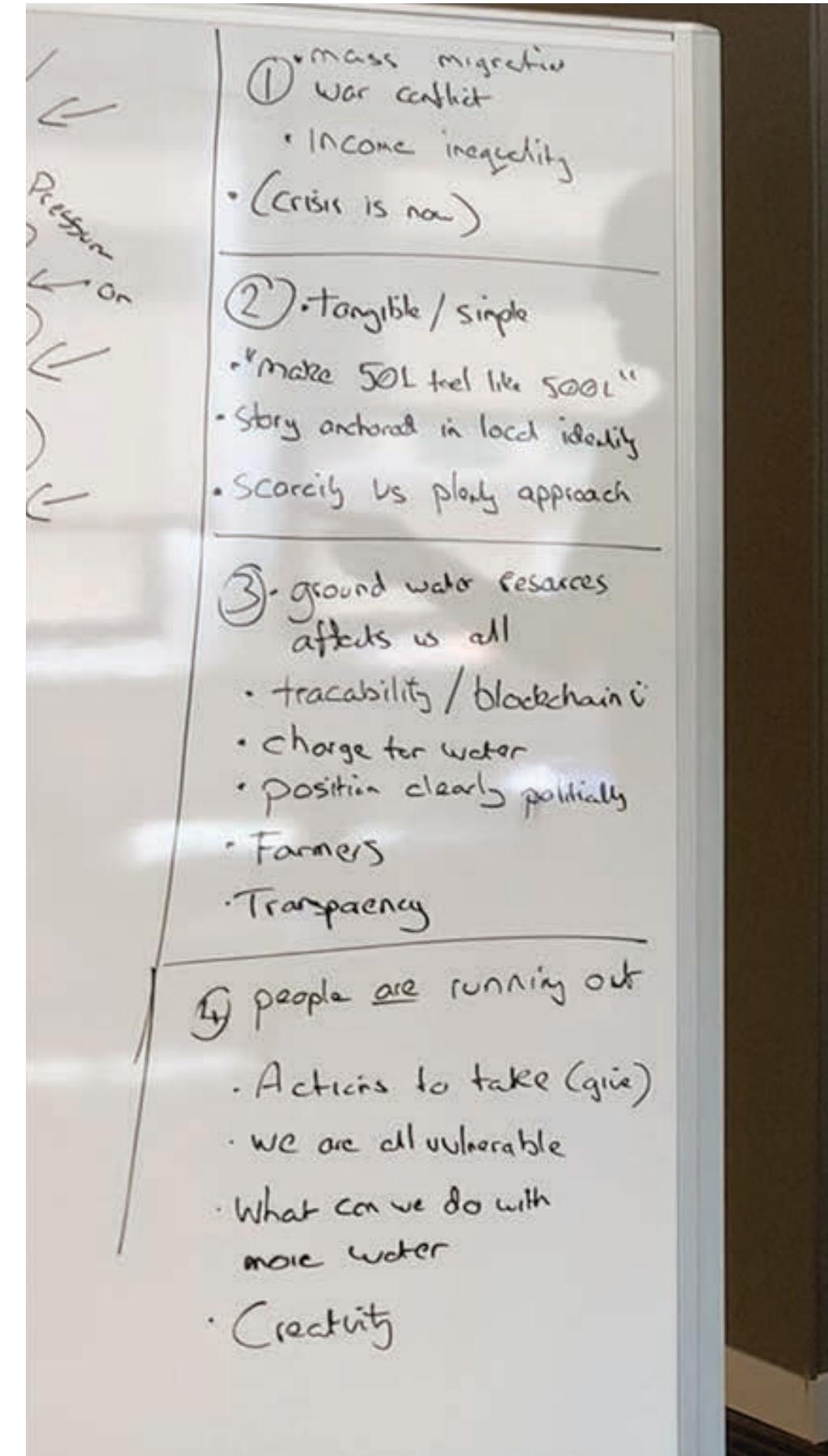
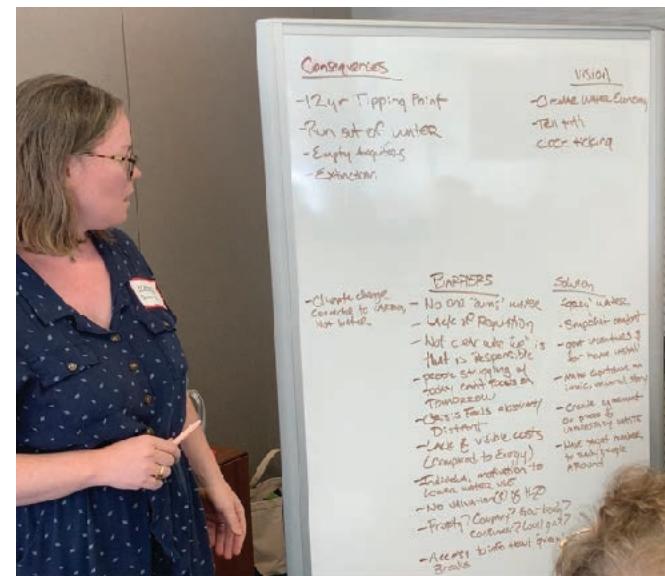
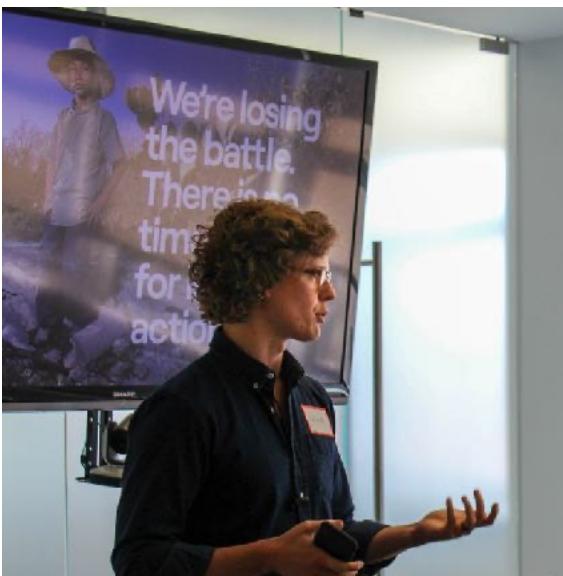
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“The only hope for water’s future is the one we deliberately design.”



# The Cumulative Network

Designing Water's Future's operating system creates and leverages feedback loops and processes to nurture "group genius" — the ability of a group working iteratively and collaboratively to seek, model and put into place higher-level solutions.



## Contact

### Register for updates

[designingwatersfuture.org](http://designingwatersfuture.org)

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### Water news

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