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WATER**

16 Experts

Offer their Ideas to
Solve the Threatening

UN **SDG6** Crisis



Is “Water for All” a complex topic? Well...

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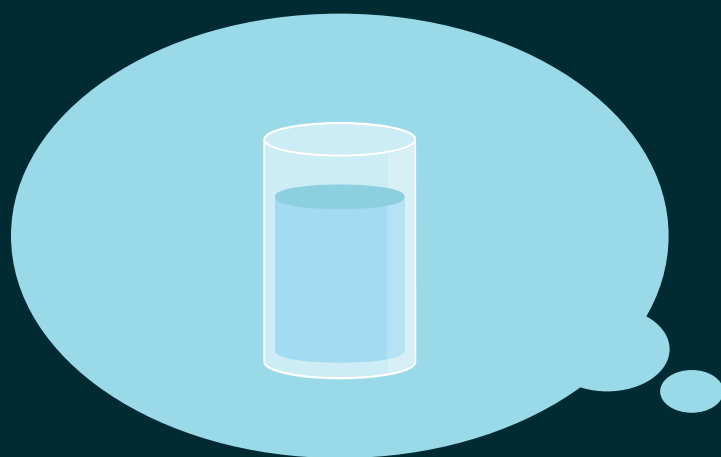
Everybody in Water will tell you how complicated it is. We need to make water simple! It is simple. If we don't have it, we die.



And that is a straightforward statement:

According to UNICEF, each day, nearly 1000 children die due to preventable water and sanitation-related diseases. That's a shocking statistic and it makes access to clean water and sanitation, one of the most urgent sustainable development goals!

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I could be enforcing Hasmik's statistic by explaining how **1 million people die from water**, sanitation, and hygiene-related diseases every year.

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How every 2 minutes
a child dies from a
water-related disease.



**Or how a child under 5 is
20 times more likely to
die from a waterborne
illness than from
war-related violence.**

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But:

We need to bring these numbers to life, and we need to help people to understand that these aren't just numbers on a page. They're real people's lives in places all over the World.



This sometimes sounds like an abstract story.
What? No Water? Come on, are you serious?

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My parents are second world war refugee children. They know exactly how it is to carry water home. It's just one generation away, and I live in pure luxury and health and without any problems at all. While they experienced the absolute opposite!

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In fact, our Water Safety is much more fragile than we think. It swiftly changes with conflicts and wars, not talking of climate change.

Your gender plays a role too:

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Men and women are impacted differently by climate change. It places a greater burden on women because of the social culture, roles, and responsibilities that women have. UN figures show that 80% of people displaced by climate change are actually women.



We alluded to the discussion about Day Zero in Cape Town, but you know, there will be Day Zeros for many countries!

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In Cape Town, Day Zero referred to the point where Municipal Water Supply would have to be shut down because of the Water Shortage. Since the Cape Town event in 2017, similar challenges arose in other places, like Chennai in 2019.



And the reason why it hasn't yet impacted more places around the World lies in the fact that we're heavily withdrawing the savings we had in the bank, aka we're overusing groundwater, which doesn't renew that fast.

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The amount of groundwater that contributes to the total Water available to humanity is going to decline. It must decline. And it can't be basically replaced by surface water because we are, in many cases, abstracting the surface water to the maximum possible that we can without destroying rivers and other ecosystems. So we have no choice, but to develop water reuse, desalination, or a combination of both.

Water Reuse is actually supposed to support 9% of our Water Needs by 2030, while desalination contributes to a further 2%.

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The World in general, can't complain about a lack of Water because we literally always have a water body or a water source close by. The challenge is: how accessible is Potable Water?



Yet, relying solely upon a technological race to cover our future water needs might be short-sighted.

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Let's not fall victim to this thinking that technology is going to save us. Sure, technology is a huge and important part of the puzzle and always has been. But, not every technology is good, just because it's a technology.

Indeed, there's a bigger picture at play:

We have pushed all the natural boundaries to the point of breaking. I don't think we intentionally set out to do that Antoine, I think we did it out of ignorance. We thought we were clever, but we were not.

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For the longest time, until quite recently, it actually served us humans quite well to abuse nature. You can think of that as services that the planet has been providing to us humans for free! We are now much healthier, wealthier, and in a much better position than our ancestors were in many, many ways. But we're now starting to damage ourselves. People are worried about what it costs to invest in sustainability, but it's totally the wrong argument! Yes, you should calculate those costs, but they're much lower than the cost of unsustainability.

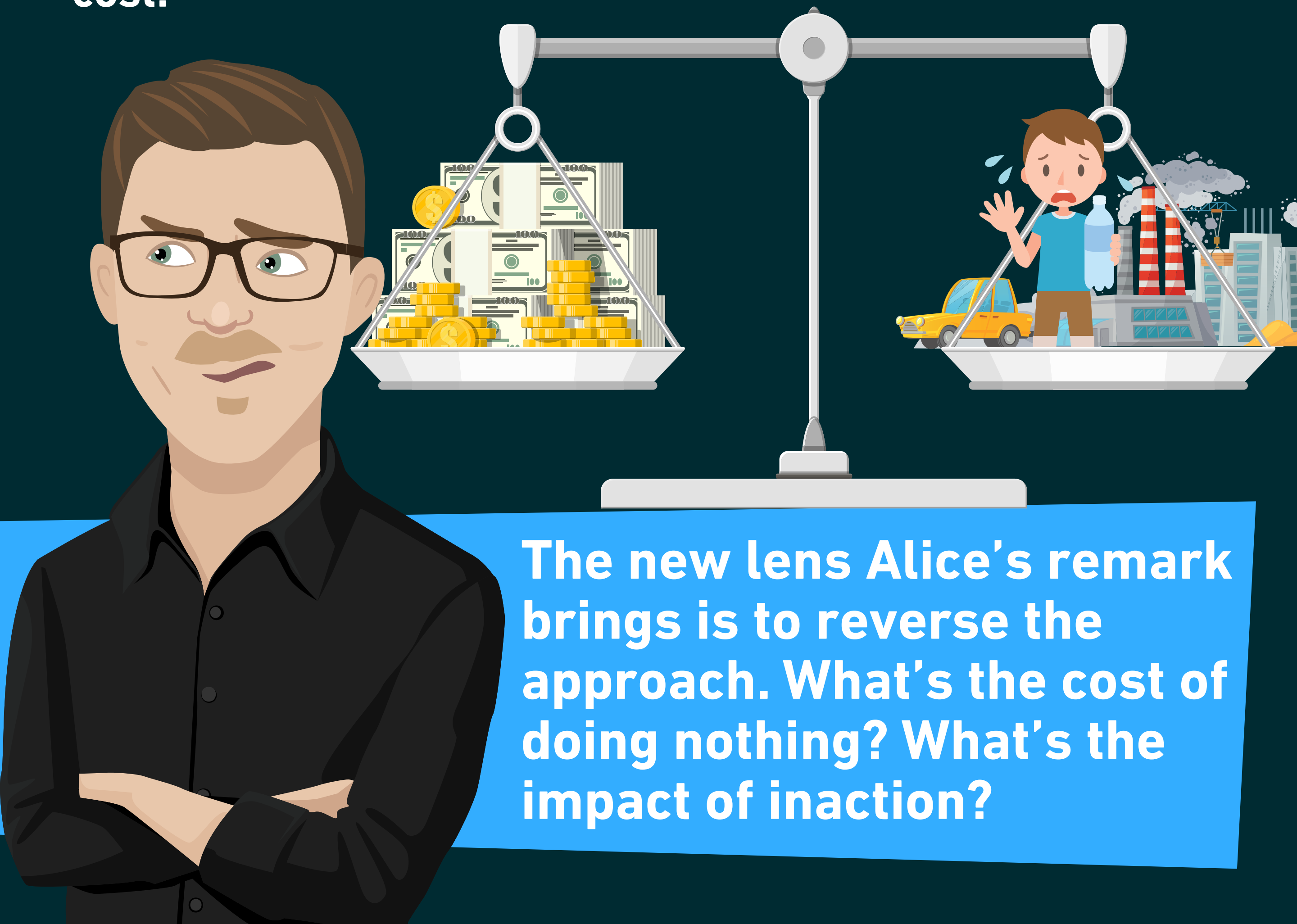
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We're used in the Water Industry to see any new treatment or effort to clean-up as a new cost. Because indeed, nothing's for free, so extending a network, building a treatment plant or surveying water quality will have a cost.

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The new lens Alice's remark brings is to reverse the approach. What's the cost of doing nothing? What's the impact of inaction?

In the past, we've had a tendency to take a very human-centric approach to water treatment. As long as it was safe for the humans, we said "job done!" Now we're recognizing, oh, there was actually a price tag attached to biodiversity loss.

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An illustration featuring a man with a beard and mustache, wearing a black shirt, with his hand on his chin in a thinking pose. The background is dark blue with abstract light blue lines. To the right, there is a yellow speech bubble with the text '(DON'T!) WASTE WATER'. Below it is a circular icon with 'H2O' inside. Further back, a globe is shown with a blue faucet dripping water into a glass labeled 'H2O'. Three stylized human figures (two adults and one child) are standing near the globe. There are also some colorful leaves and a small paper airplane in the background.

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H₂O

Other ecological crises will come in the next months or years. It's just the beginning of climate change and biodiversity decline. If we always follow the same pattern saying that economy and businesses come first, then after nature, there will be a point where there will be no more economy because it depends on nature.

This is also what Claudia Winkler and Alice Schmidt describe in their “Sustainability Puzzle” book as Mickey Mouse thinking. Yes, everybody agrees that Sustainable Development exists and relies on a triple bottom.

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ENVIRONMENT

SOCIETY

ECONOMY

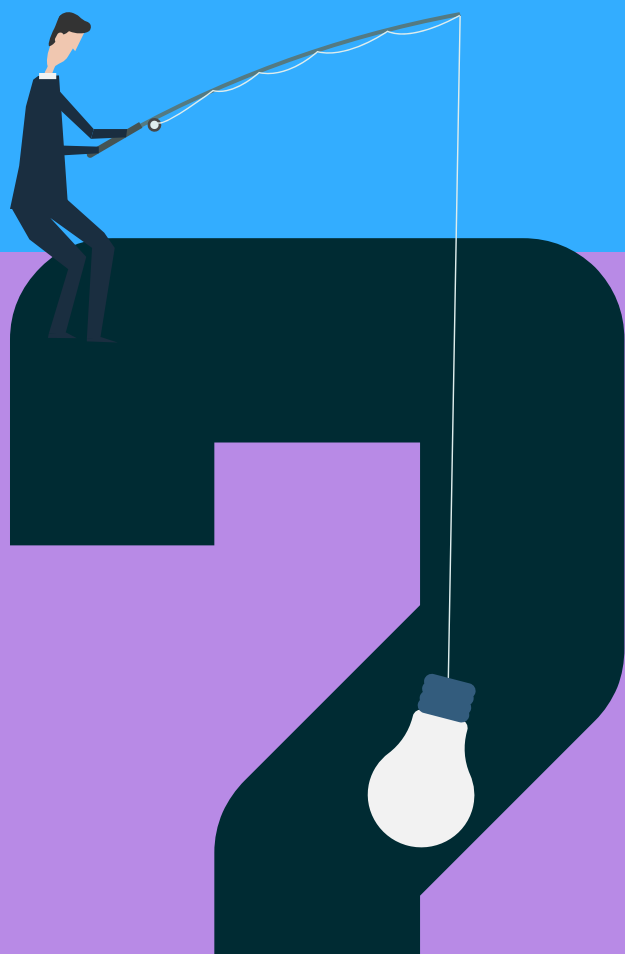
But that triple bottom today is heavily unbalanced. The economy is Mickey's head, while Environment and Societal aspects only are its ears.



This is why John Elkington, the creator of the Triple Bottom himself, recalled his concept. If everyone uses it as an excuse to keep doing what they've always done, he doesn't want to support it. What shall we do instead?

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The basic idea is that we're not solving water problems just for making money. We're solving them for social reasons and for environmental reasons. And we can prove that over time.



What did we see so far? Well, clearly, there's a problem. Too many people don't have access to safe water sources, and the challenge will not solve itself alone.

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So what are we doing? Well...



It's actually shocking how disconnected people are and how apathetic people are at fixing or helping to fix the problem.

**That we don't do much
is an understatement.**

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**In a place or for a topic like
Water we've failed for years
because we've fought against one
another, or we've been lobbying
one another to do things. And the
reality is that we'll only succeed,
if we start to unite and work in
the same direction.**



I don't think we intentionally set out to make a mess. We just happened to make a mess. Now that we know we've made a mess, can we actually ignore it? Don't we have an obligation to fix it?

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The problem is that on the broader scale of things, that mess doesn't get the attention it deserves

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Every government at the moment has to make hard decisions. And Water is always going to be down on the agenda politically.



**Well, wait a second.
I thought things were clear!**

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**Indeed, in September
2015, 193 countries
adopted the United
Nations Sustainable
Development Goals.**

These 17 goals were
supposed to pave a
sustainable road
towards 2030.

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For Water, SDG6 is very clear: we will ensure availability and sustainable management of Water and Sanitation for All by 2030.

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**A challenge when you
consider that in 2020,**

**2 billion people lacked safely
managed drinking water,**

**3.6 billion people lacked
safely managed sanitation,**

**and 2.3 billion people
lacked basic hygiene.**



**But what's a challenge
when 193 countries unite
to overcome it? You see it
coming. Don't you?**

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**Progress towards SDG6 is running at a
quarter of the level required.**

Regarding safe and
affordable drinking water
for all,

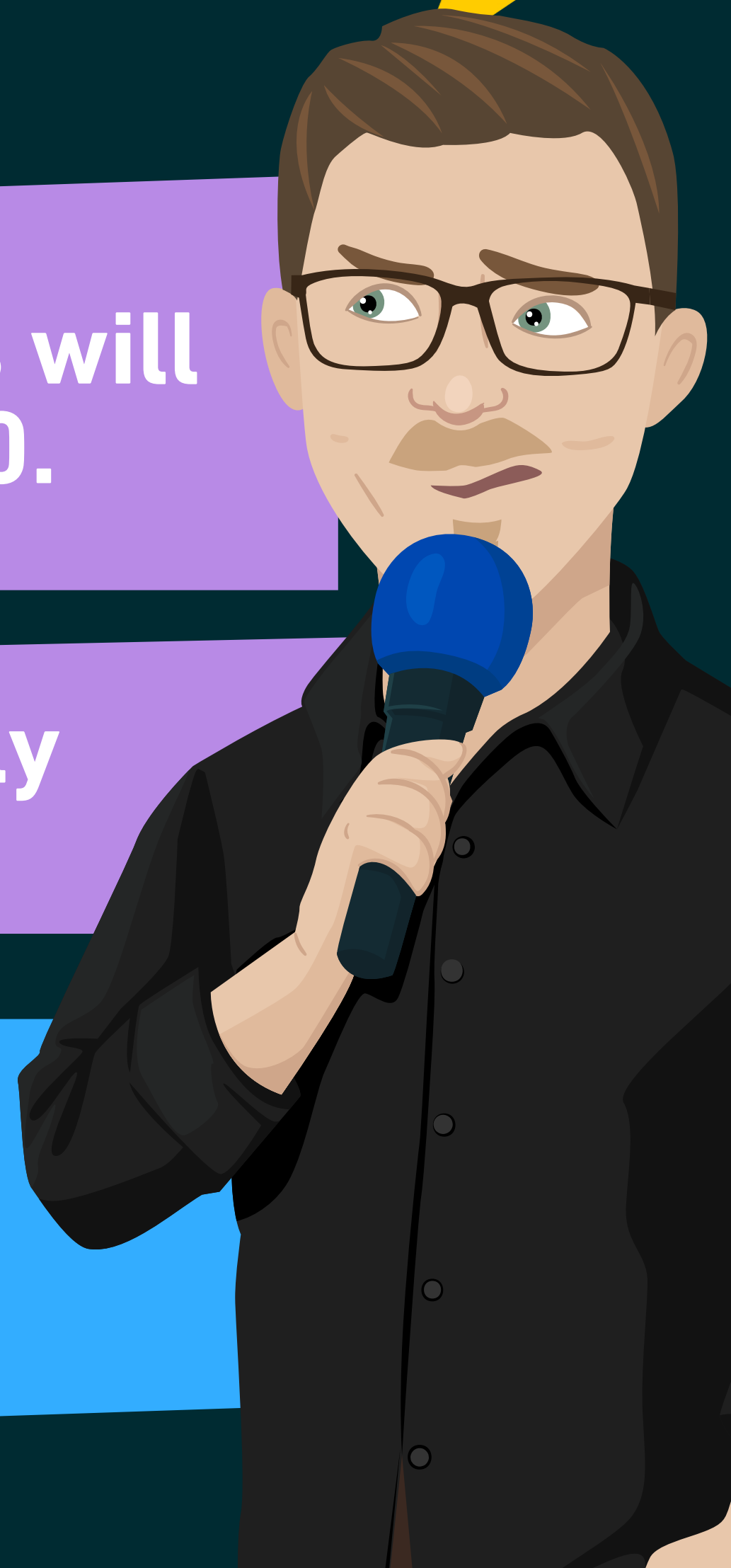
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17% of the 193 countries will
meet the Goal by 2030.

...another 72% will partially
meet the Goal.

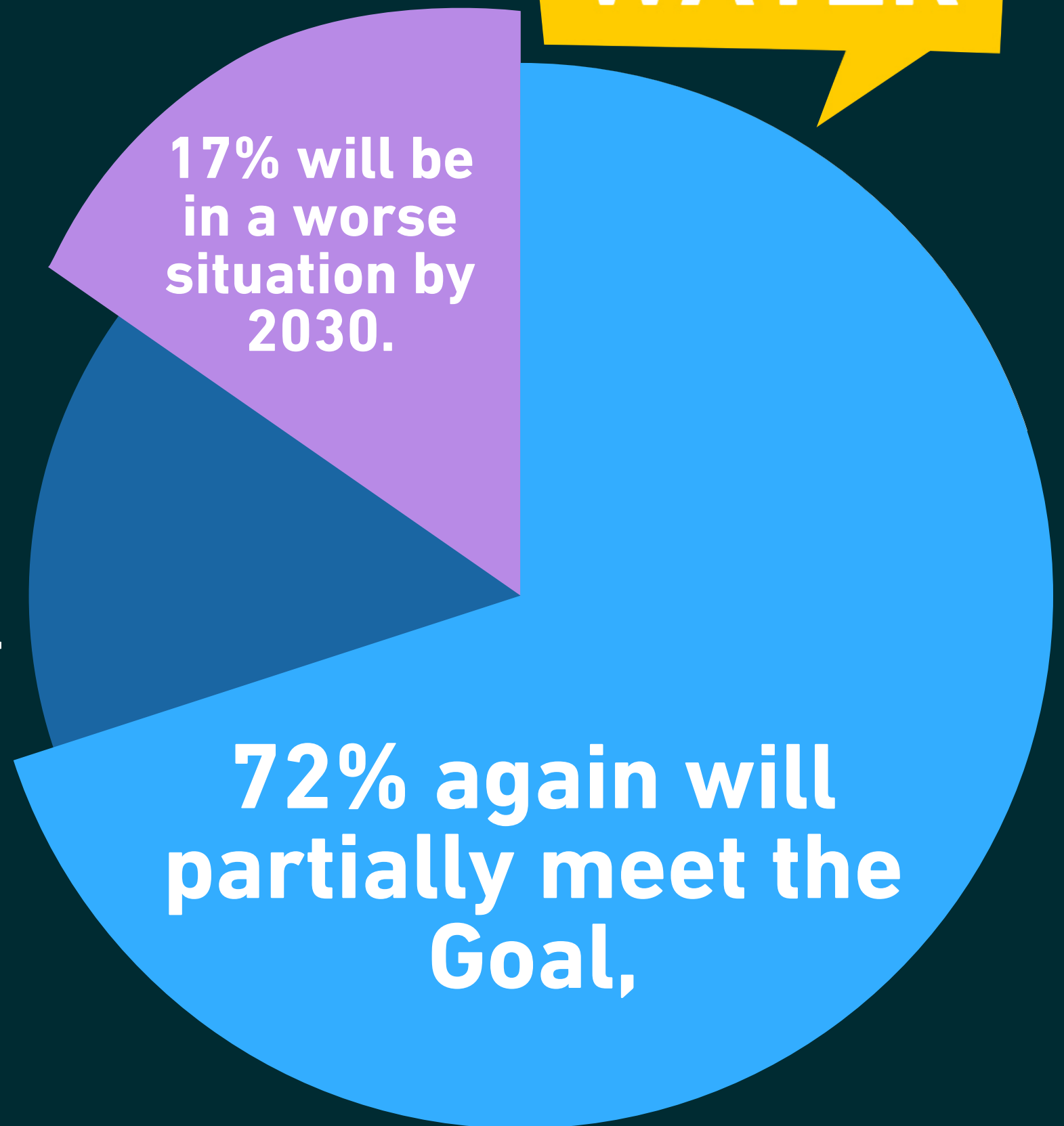
But 11% will be in a
WORSE situation in 2030
than they were in 2015.




Regarding safe and affordable drinking water for all,

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Only 11% of the countries are set to meet the Goal by 2030.



Let me repeat that. More countries will be in a worse situation regarding sanitation and hygiene in 2030 than will reach the Goal. Hence the urge:



Could we actually accelerate action because here's the thing about Water. We don't have 20 years, 30 years, or 40 years to solve this problem.

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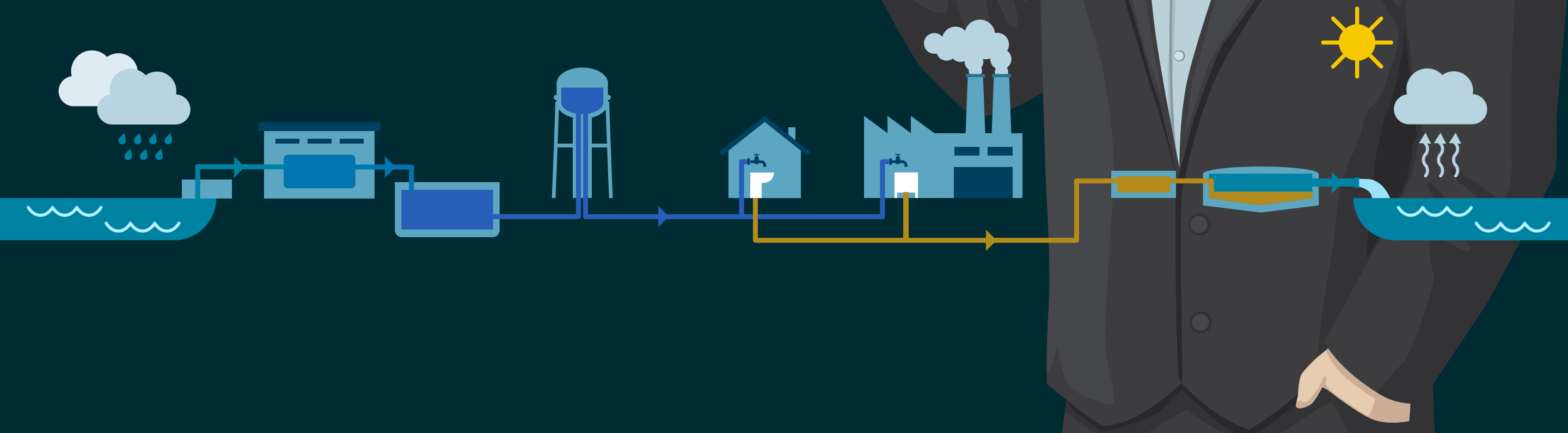
The problem is, that we're simply not walking the sustainable talk. To achieve SDG6 by 2030, the World needs to spend an additional **43 billion dollars per year** on drinking water and **70 billion dollars per year** on sanitation.

What are we really investing in? Well, 16 billion dollars for both. 14% of what would be needed.

I think the reasonable target for SDG6 by 2030 would be that we have the capacity to start working on delivering it. It turns out, that a large number of countries still don't even have an accepted definition of what safe Water is, let alone a program to install it.

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Problems in meeting targets need to be overcome because there is no choice but to succeed in delivering on the target. SDG6 failure is not an option!

Two opinions here. For David, let's be realistic and do our best to align ourselves by 2030 to meet the goal by 2050. For Mina, it is simply not acceptable to fail the Goal.



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**What do you think?
I'd be curious;**

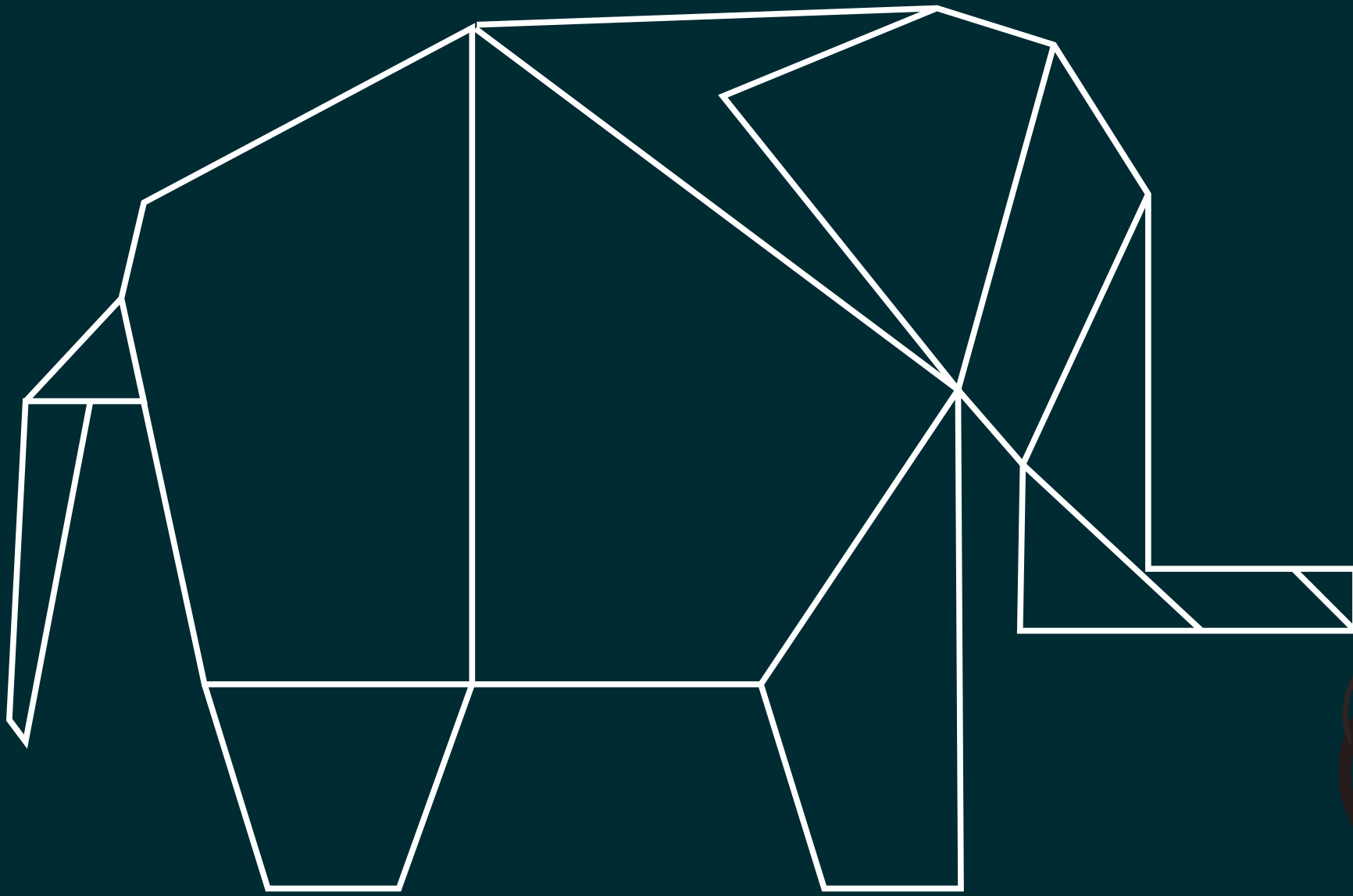
**come tell me in
the comments or
on LinkedIn**



**But either way, one thing's
for sure: you eat an elephant
piece by piece.**

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**If you say “we want to change the whole
world,” we’ll be sitting here and drafting
a plan for the next 40 years and don’t do
anything.**



So what's our short goal, our short incentive for action, that can start things moving?

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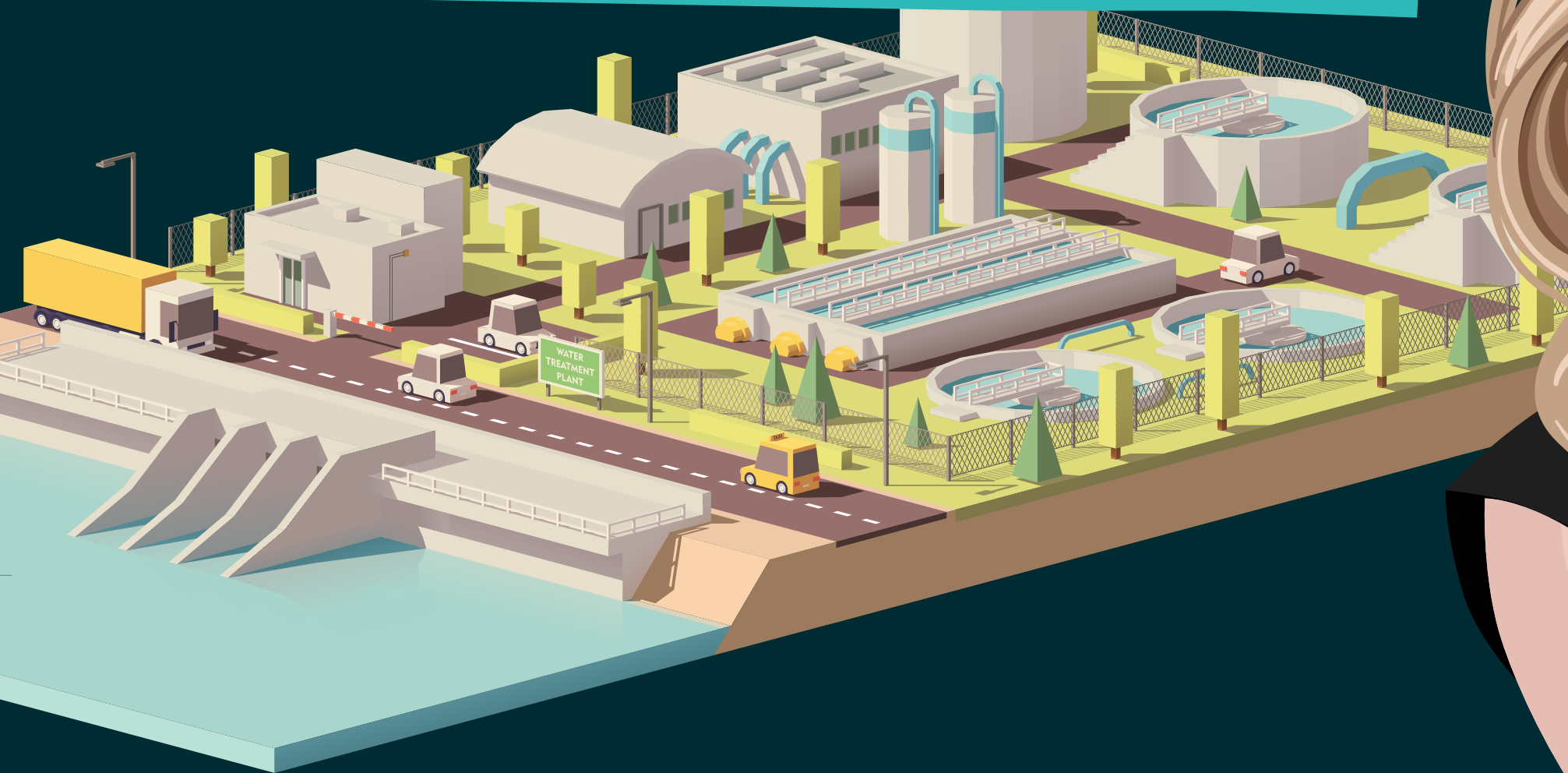
I think we're at a really unique moment in time, which is that we have an opportunity to move from "Water is a major problem" to saying, "how can we be part of the solution." That unique opportunity is in 2023, when the United Nations hosts their big conference on Water the first in almost 50 years.



We have an opportunity at that time to say enough talk, now act. And the only way that that will happen is if we spend the next 18 months moving together in a unified way. And to say: by the time we hit the steps of the United nations, there must be no option, but to take meaningful, serious, bold action forward on Water.

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We could leverage it to transform our approach towards the way we design and think Water Management.





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If we look at 70% of the World's population living in cities by 2050, we can either build back the exact same way. Or we have a moment right now in history where we can kind of rethink. And re-engineer how we're designing our cities when it comes to water and wastewater.

It might also be an opportunity to zoom out before we zoom in:

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We need to look at things from various perspectives. If we all stay in our function, our silos of businesspeople in their business function, technical people in their function. Water people in the Waterfield, Energy people in the energy field, we will not have a chance to look at the holistic picture and we need to get together and see these things.





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I think we need to do three things. I think we need to mobilize a call for action worldwide. Second, we need to put Water onto the global agenda. And then third, we need to chart a clear path forward for action.

To succeed in rolling out this plan, we'll need everyone to buy in!

Things get regulated when people care about them, policies that are popular are much, much easier for politicians to push through. The mayor is unlikely to do something that is going to be unpopular with people. So getting people to care about Water, getting people to value Water is really the start. And how do you do that with Water? People need to understand that there is value here. There's value for everybody there's value for our ecosystems, our cities and ourselves in terms of our own health. And if we can get people to view it like that, then everything becomes much, much easier.

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We need to work on fostering this relationship with Water in order to encourage greater prioritization and the protection of freshwater resources, rivers, lakes, and underground water, as well as better management of water services. If citizens better understand this relationship, they will participate more and join efforts to solve common challenges.

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Water can be resilient to change because of that fragmented nature. It's almost like a buffer against disruption.



We shall all be like the hummingbird and contribute to the movement by doing our part. Embed sustainability in our business practices, and then go the extra mile.

I believe that any young business that starts now has to be sustainable and not brag about, “oh, look how sustainable I am!”

It's not just about achieving sustainability. Sustainability is not enough! If we sustain what we have today, that's actually wrong. It's about regeneration and you have to be even more ambitious. We want businesses to regenerate the planet.

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And if beyond the rationale and the path forward, you need this extra motivation kick to start changing the world, let's conclude with the pep-talk!

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I think too often, we've looked at these big global challenges, climate change, Water, all of these things. And we said, "it's too big, and I'm just one person." What on earth could I possibly do that will deliver meaningful change at the scale that it needs to solve this problem? And the reality is, that we are all capable of doing anything!



Did you like this deep dive? Then tell it to your friends and colleagues and share it around you.

Achieving SDG6 won't happen alone, as we've just seen. So the more we are to push the message, the better our chances that it gets heard.

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If you'd like to further explore the topic, listen to my full interviews with each of the experts featured in this synthesis, and make sure to subscribe to the podcast!

