

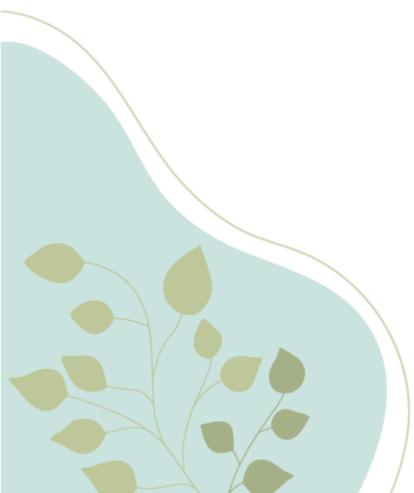
UNDERSTANDING FUTURE SCENARIOS THROUGH FORESIGHT

Water4All SRIA update process

Deliverable D1.15, April 2025



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D1.15 Understanding future scenarios through foresight

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

ACRONYM	FULL TITLE
AI	Artificial Intelligence
AMR	Antimicrobial Resistance
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
SRIA	Strategic Research and Innovation Agenda
Water4All	European Partnership on Water Security for the Planet

ABSTRACT

This report explores the role of foresight methodologies in understanding future water-related challenges and shaping research priorities within the Water4All Partnership. As part of the strategic research and innovation agenda (SRIA), a foresight workshop was held in January 2025 to identify key disruptors, emerging trends, and future scenarios for the water sector. Experts, policymakers, and stakeholders used the Futures Wheel technique to map the cascading impacts of major drivers such as climate change, digital transformation, geopolitical tensions, and resource competition.

The findings highlight both risks and opportunities, emphasizing the need for resilient governance, adaptive policies, and interdisciplinary research. Key recommendations include strengthening water diplomacy, addressing cybersecurity risks in water infrastructure, and integrating economic and financial governance into future research agendas. The insights from this foresight activity will contribute to the update of the SRIA (2026–2029), ensuring that Water4All remains at the forefront of addressing water security and sustainability challenges in a rapidly changing world.

UNDERSTANDING FUTURE SCENARIOS THROUGH FORESIGHT

INTRODUCTION

In an era of increasing water-related challenges—ranging from climate change and pollution to resource scarcity and governance complexities—strategic foresight is essential for ensuring that research and innovation agendas remain adaptive, future-proof, and impactful. As part of the Water4All Partnership, foresight methodologies play a crucial role in shaping the Strategic Research and Innovation Agenda (SRIA), helping to anticipate emerging trends, uncertainties, and disruptive changes that could affect water security and sustainability.

To support this approach, the Water4All Foresight Workshop was held in Helsinki in January 2025, bringing together experts, policymakers, researchers, and stakeholders from across the water sector. This dynamic and engaging workshop aimed to create a joint vision for the future of the water sector while providing input for the upcoming update of the SRIA (2026–2029), targeting future water research and joint calls. A key feature of the workshop was the use of the Futures Wheel technique, a foresight method well-suited for exploring the cascading impacts of potential disruptors. Participants identified key disruptors, mapped their primary, secondary, and tertiary consequences, and developed possible scenarios for the water sector in 2050. These discussions fostered a deeper understanding of interconnected challenges and opportunities, shaping a more holistic perspective on water-related risks and adaptive strategies.

Additionally, participants shared their insights through [Menti](#) feedback, further refining key takeaways. This document synthesizes the main findings of the workshop, compares them with existing research priorities in Water4All's SRIA, and outlines recommendations for integrating these insights into future research and policy initiatives. By leveraging foresight methodologies, the Water4All Partnership aims to ensure that its strategic agenda remains resilient, responsive, and capable of addressing the evolving complexities of water security and sustainability.

METHODOLOGY

Methods were roughly outlined already in the planning phase (Water4All 2024, Guidelines for the foresight activities), where it was mentioned that in small groups, the participants will first identify uncertainty factors and then build scenarios for a plausible future of the water sector. We chose to use Futures Wheel as a method, as it is well-suited for exploring the cascading impacts of potential disruptors (Glenn 2009). This method encourages participants to map out primary, secondary, and tertiary consequences of major trends and events, fostering a deeper understanding of interconnected challenges and opportunities (Figure 1). The method also encourages open-ended exploration of multiple possible futures by considering the ripple effects of a trend or event. It's useful when you want to facilitate creative thinking and highlight unforeseen outcomes, including those that may be counterintuitive or unexpected. It is also a method that is suitable for participants with diverse backgrounds and variable previous foresight experience.

WORKSHOP PROGRAMME

The workshop programme is available in Appendix 2. The workshop included two plenary sessions and a foresight exercise.

1. Plenary session

The workshop started with opening words by Bjørn Kaare Jensen, Water4All Chair, followed by an introduction to Water4All and SRIA process and aims of the workshop, given by Water4All Vice-Chair, Miguel Angel Gillarranz. First day of the workshop included two keynote presentations. Second day was dedicated to the foresight exercise.

First, Professor Marko Keskinen from Aalto University gave a talk titled: “Water futures, future waters? Thoughts on sustainability, digitalisation and governance”, where he explored the future of freshwater systems through those three themes. He highlighted the increasing pressures on water resources, from scarcity and pollution to climate-driven uncertainties and noted how the current water use is not sustainable at a planetary scale. He emphasized that while digitalization is reshaping how we collect and analyze water data, its actual implications on management and governance remain uncertain and require a more careful and critical view. To conclude, Marko Keskinen called for transformative water governance that integrates sustainability, security, and digital innovation and provides a structured way to view water and its role from global to local scales. He concluded that co-creation and science-policy collaboration will be essential in shaping resilient water futures.

Professor Katrina Charles’ keynote at the University of Oxford, titled “*Designing Effective Research for Future Water: Environmental Health in a Changing Climate*,” explored how to create research that drives real-world impact. She emphasized the importance of an enabling environment, where collaboration, equitable partnerships, and sustained engagement shape effective research funding. While powerful tools exist to address water, climate change, and health challenges, inconsistent and fragmented data often limit their effectiveness, highlighting the need for systematic reviews and better international indicators. She stressed the importance of recognizing data limitations, particularly in low-income settings, and ensuring that evidence used for policy is robust and transferable. Additionally, she questioned whether access to information alone leads to change, emphasizing that without the necessary resources, knowledge, and capacity, it can instead cause anxiety. To advance effective research, she concluded that interdisciplinarity, long-term engagement with practitioners, and ethical collaboration are essential.

2. Foresight exercise

The second day focused on a foresight exercise facilitated by Anna-Elina Vilén and Millariia Wikman from [SWECO](#). Following an introductory lecture on foresight, participants were divided into groups and given the assignment of identifying key uncertainty factors. Here the participants were able to draw inspiration from a SWECO-created map highlighting eight major disruptors (Figure 3). The exercise began with gathering the knowns—expectations for the water sector and the most significant disruptors—before moving into the unknowns, exploring potential disruptions that may be overlooked, emerging trends from other sectors, and factors causing the most uncertainty.

Next, groups used the futures wheel technique to construct their scenarios. They selected 3-6 key disruptors, placing them in the first level of circles, then mapped out their consequences in subsequent layers, identifying the most significant effects. Each group named their scenario and described it with three adjectives. Participants then reviewed other groups’ work, noting similarities and differences. The day concluded with discussions on the desired future, where groups outlined its key elements, and the steps needed to make it a reality.

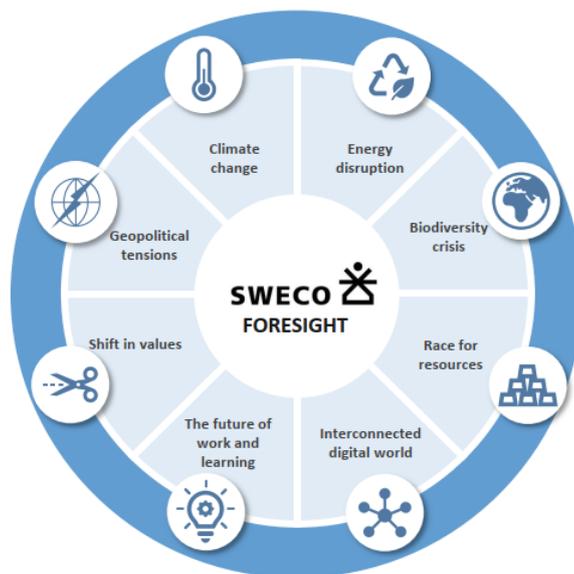


Figure 3. The map of eight key disruptors identified by SWECO.

SYNTHESIS

As outlined in the Guidelines for the foresight activities (Water4All 2024), the primary objective of this foresight activity was to gather insights from a diverse range of water experts on future trends and drivers affecting water-related issues. The dedicated foresight workshop aimed to 1) develop a shared vision for the future of the water sector, and 2) lay a foundation for updating the Water4All SRIA. The following chapters will synthesise the workshop discussions and key findings, highlighting the identified key disruptors, emerging trends and future scenarios. Additionally, a dedicated chapter will examine how the workshop outcomes align with the current version of the SRIA. It will also provide recommendations on how the SRIA could be improved based on these insights, including specific areas where it could be expanded or strengthened—particularly in relation to key themes that emerged during the workshop.

1. Key Disruptors and Emerging Trends

Across all discussions, certain disruptors emerged as particularly influential in shaping the future of water sector such as climate change, geopolitical tensions and digital transformation.

Climate change was identified as a fundamental driver of uncertainty, exacerbating extreme weather events, altering hydrological cycles, disrupting water quality and increasing the risk of crossing critical tipping points. The unpredictability of these changes, coupled with their widespread consequences, underlined the urgency of developing resilient water management strategies.

Geopolitical tensions were also widely recognized as a growing challenge, with water increasingly framed as a strategic resource that could fuel conflicts and exacerbate inequalities. Many participants anticipated a decline in international cooperation over shared water systems, particularly as political instability and shifting alliances reshape global priorities. This highlighted a need for stronger water diplomacy and governance mechanisms to prevent disputes and ensure equitable access to resources.

Digital transformation emerged as a double-edged sword. While technological advances have the potential to improve water monitoring and efficiency, participants also raised concerns about cybersecurity threats to water infrastructure, the spread of misinformation, and the ethical risks of AI-driven decision-making. The

growing dependence on digital systems for water governance could introduce new vulnerabilities, requiring proactive safeguards to ensure reliability and public trust.

Competition over natural resources—particularly **groundwater depletion and land grabbing**—was another pressing concern. Participants noted that over-extraction of groundwater, driven by agricultural and industrial demands, is leading to rising costs, declining water quality, and regional disparities in access to drinking water. This trend, if unaddressed, could contribute to both economic instability and social tensions in water-scarce areas.

Beyond these environmental and technological concerns, discussions also pointed to **systemic challenges within governance structures**. Political polarization, the crisis of democracy, and the weakening of institutional trust were viewed as barriers to effective water management. In many regions, political instability may lead to short-term decision-making that prioritizes immediate economic gains over long-term sustainability. The potential for inadequate or inconsistent policymaking in response to water crises was seen as a significant risk, further complicated by misinformation and public disengagement.

Health-related concerns, particularly **antimicrobial resistance (AMR)** and the growing presence of pharmaceuticals in water systems, were highlighted as emerging threats. While water quality issues are already a well-recognized challenge, the increasing prevalence of AMR bacteria in water sources could have profound consequences for both human and environmental health. Participants noted that this issue is underrepresented in current research priorities, despite its potentially severe long-term effects.

Finally, **financial and economic uncertainties** were discussed as key factors shaping future water governance. Shifting funding priorities, privatization trends, and the economic viability of water infrastructure projects could significantly influence which solutions are prioritized and who has access to water resources. Some groups noted that financial mechanisms are often overlooked in water-related foresight discussions, despite their crucial role in implementation.

2. Future Scenarios and Key Themes

Using the Futures Wheel approach, groups developed potential scenarios for how these disruptors might interact and evolve (Figure 4). One scenario, titled "Race for Safety," envisioned a future marked by intense competition for water resources, with growing inequalities and geopolitical instability defining access to clean water. A second scenario is reflecting water abundance (technology and innovation towards sustainable practices) and digital transformation (enabling technologies and smart water). Another, "Complex Interdependencies," highlighted the deeply interconnected nature of water challenges, suggesting that any attempt to solve one issue—such as water scarcity—would inevitably affect broader economic, social, and environmental systems.

Some scenarios introduced optimistic counterpoints, emphasizing opportunities for technological innovation, participatory governance, and adaptive policymaking. The "Potential for Innovation" scenario, for instance, proposed that while climate change and geopolitical instability pose significant threats, they could also drive transformative breakthroughs in water management, such as decentralized water systems and AI-assisted resource optimization. Similarly, the "Doom & Hope" scenario acknowledged the increasing pressures on water systems but underscored the urgency for action, suggesting that a combination of governance reforms and community-driven solutions could mitigate worst-case outcomes.

However, there was a shared sentiment that most discussions leaned toward pessimism, reflecting both the current global climate and the framing of the workshop around disruptors. Some participants noted that this emphasis on risks and challenges might have overshadowed discussions on how opportunities could be harnessed—a crucial consideration for future research and policymaking.



Figure 4. Futures Wheels created by the different groups.

3. Integrating Workshop Insights into Water4All’s SRIA

The findings from the workshop align with many existing priorities within Water4All’s Strategic Research and Innovation Agenda (SRIA), which is structured around seven thematic areas: circular economy, ecosystems and biodiversity, sustainable water management, water and health, water sector infrastructure, international cooperation, and governance (Table 1).

Many of the identified disruptors—such as climate change, digital transformation, and geopolitical tensions (water security and water governance)—are already central to SRIA’s focus areas. However, several key gaps were identified where the SRIA could be expanded or strengthened:

1. **Enhancing Water Diplomacy & Conflict Prevention** – The workshop strongly emphasized geopolitical tensions, resource conflicts and declining international cooperation. Water4All’s SRIA could expand its work on transboundary water governance, diplomatic strategies, and conflict-resolution mechanisms. The SRIA tries to shape people’s awareness of, and behaviour towards, water challenges, but there are still gaps that grasp the opportunities.

2. **Addressing Political Instability & the Crisis of Democracy** – Many discussions pointed to the destabilizing effects of political polarization, misinformation, and governance failures. Water4All’s governance theme could be updated to explore these dynamics in greater depth.
3. **Strengthening Research on Cybersecurity & Digital Risks** – While digital tools are transforming water management, participants warned of cyberattacks, data manipulation, and AI governance risks. Future Water4All research initiatives could integrate these concerns into infrastructure planning.
4. **Prioritizing AMR & Emerging Health Threats** – Antimicrobial resistance and pharmaceutical pollution were highlighted as underexplored threats. Expanding research under the water and health theme could ensure proactive mitigation.
5. **Incorporating Financial & Economic Governance** – The role of market forces, investment models, and privatization vs. public water management received significant attention. Strengthening economic perspectives in Water4All’s research agenda could help bridge this gap.

Table 1. Suggestions to align the workshop outcomes.

Key themes identified in the workshop	Alignment with the current SRIA
Climate Change	Covered in Theme 3 (Sustainable Water Management) and Theme 2 (Ecosystems & Biodiversity) but tipping points and extreme events could be given greater focus. Consider more comprehensive approach to climate resilience.
Geopolitical Tensions	Related to Theme 6 (International Cooperation) and Theme 7 (Governance), but workshop discussions suggested an even stronger role for water diplomacy to mitigate conflicts and promote international cooperation. Theme 7 could be enhanced to include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research on the impact of political polarization on water governance • How misinformation and declining trust in institutions affect water policy
Digitalization & Cybersecurity	Mentioned in Theme 5 (Infrastructure for Water) but could be expanded to address misinformation, cybersecurity risks, and AI-based governance challenges. Topics that could be included are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research in cybersecurity threats to water infrastructure • Risks of misinformation and AI in decision-making • Ethical governance of big data and digital water systems
Water Scarcity & Resource Competition	Addressed in Theme 3 (Sustainable Water Management), but issues like land grabbing and economic inequality could be more explicit. Consider highlighting more explicitly at least socio-economic dimensions.
Biodiversity Loss & Ecosystem Collapse	Fits within Theme 2 (Ecosystems & Biodiversity), with potential expansion on ecosystem resilience.

Key themes identified in the workshop	Alignment with the current SRIA
Public Engagement & Missing Voices	Strongly connected to Theme 7 (Governance), but workshop discussions emphasized this as a bigger challenge than the SRIA currently does. Theme 7 should include research on methods to strengthen participatory governance and public trust.
Health & Water Quality (AMR, Pollution)	Fits into Theme 4 (Water and Health), but the workshop identified antimicrobial resistance (AMR) as a more urgent disruptor than currently reflected. Consider the need to prioritize AMR resistance to better address health threats related to water quality. Enhance focus on pharmaceutical pollution and waterborne diseases. Integrate One Health approaches into water management strategies.
Finance & Market Dynamics	Mentioned in various sections, but the workshop highlighted economic and financial governance as an underdeveloped area in water management discussions. Consider the need to address better economic and financial governance. Theme 7 could be strengthened to include following financial aspects: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Investigating new investment models for water security • Exploring the impact of privatization vs. public water governance • Assessing financial barriers to implementing sustainable water solutions

PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK AND REFLECTIONS ON THE FORESIGHT WORKSHOP

The foresight workshop brought together a diverse group of experts, researchers, and stakeholders, facilitating dynamic discussions, collaborative exercises, and knowledge exchange. Participants generally praised the event's organization, expert input, and networking opportunities, but also provided constructive feedback on areas for improvement.

Many attendees highlighted the high-quality organization of the workshop, noting the smooth logistics and well-structured sessions. The diverse expertise of participants enriched discussions and provided valuable insights. Engaging discussions and networking opportunities were seen as key benefits, allowing participants to connect with peers and expand their networks. For some, the event was a valuable learning experience, particularly for those unfamiliar with foresight methodologies. The well-chosen venue and professional atmosphere further contributed to the overall positive experience.

While the diversity of participants added depth to discussions, some found it challenging to work with experts from very different backgrounds, as expectations and working styles varied. Additionally, some participants were unclear on how the workshop results would be used. This was a deliberate choice to encourage free thinking beyond Water4All and its SRIA, but it also led to uncertainty about the workshop's impact. However, this deliverable serves as tangible proof that the outcomes were indeed useful.

Some participants felt that too much time was dedicated to presentations and early-stage exercises, leaving less room for discussions on future visions and strategies. Networking could have been facilitated more effectively with a structured introduction session at the beginning. Some participants also expressed frustration with the foresight process, as it does not provide direct answers but rather encourages a new way of thinking.

The future wheel method was selected to encourage broad thinking, visualize interconnections, and simplify the process for those unfamiliar with foresight. The balance between introductory steps and main exercises aimed to accommodate both newcomers and experienced participants. Ultimately, foresight is a crucial tool because strategies are inherently future-focused, and planning cannot be based solely on present knowledge.

KEY TAKEAWAYS AND FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS

In case a similar workshop is organized in the future, it would be beneficial to improve pre-event communication to set clear expectations and ensure a balanced agenda between presentations and interactive work. More structured networking opportunities at the beginning could help participants establish connections earlier. The choice of method is important for such a process. The method chosen, the future wheel, was specifically selected to accommodate a diverse group of participants by encouraging broad thinking and integrating multiple perspectives. Finally, providing a clearer roadmap for post-workshop follow-ups would help sustain engagement and demonstrate the practical impact of the discussions.

CONCLUSIONS

The workshop provided a rich and thought-provoking discussion on the future of water governance, with broad agreement on the risks and challenges ahead. While many of the identified trends paint a worrying picture, the discussions also underscored the potential for innovation, resilience, and adaptation if proactive policies and research investments are made.

Moving forward, integrating these insights into Water4All's 2025 SRIA update could ensure that research and policy strategies are aligned with real-world emerging trends and expert concerns. Additionally, continued dialogue—through policy workshops, interdisciplinary collaborations, and targeted funding calls—will be essential in translating these foresight insights into actionable solutions. Systematic reviews (e.g. mapping and assessments of existing research, policy documents and other relevant literature) could be utilized to see if there are gaps related to issues discussed in this workshop. Thematic working groups of experts is another effective tool for conducting systematic reviews of specific themes.

By bridging the gap between foresight and implementation, Water4All has an opportunity to not only anticipate future challenges but to actively shape a more sustainable and equitable future for water security worldwide.

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Water4All 2024: Guidelines for the foresight activities (Deliverable D1.6)

https://www.water4all-partnership.eu/sites/www.water4all-partnership.eu/files/2024-10/Water4All_D1.6_Guidelines%20for%20foresight%20activities.pdf

APPENDIX 1

WATER4ALL FORESIGHT WORKSHOP, 15-16 JANUARY 2025.

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS.

First name	Last name	Organisation	Country
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Marko	Keskinen	Aalto University	Finland
Antonio	Lo Porto	Water Research Institute (IRSA-CNR)	Italy
Amanda	Loeffen	Human Right 2 Water	United Kingdom
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Alyssa	Offutt	IHE Delft Institute for Water Education	Netherlands
Komlan	Sangbana	Water Convention Secretariat / UNECE	Switzerland
Jari	Silander	Finnish Environment Institute (SYKE)	Finland
Nora	Sillanpää	Aalto University / Sitowise Oy	Finland
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Anna-Elina	Vilén	SWECO	Finland
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Millariia	Wikman	SWECO	Finland
Vesa	Yli-Pelkonen	Research Council of Finland	Finland

APPENDIX 2

WATER4ALL FORESIGHT WORKSHOP, 15-16 JANUARY 2025. PROGRAMME.

Meeting venue: Helsinki, Finland - Radisson Blu Seaside hotel (Meeting room Visio 1-2)

Wednesday 15th January 2025

13:00 – 14:00	Registration and coffee	
14:00 – 15:45	Welcome (15 min)	RCF/Water4All Chair
	Introduction to Water4All and SRIA process and aims (30 min)	Water4All Vice-Chair Miguel Angel Gilarranz
	Keynote presentation: <i>Water futures, future waters? Thoughts on sustainability, digitalisation and politics</i> (60 min)	Prof. Marko Keskinen (Aalto University, FI)
15:45 – 16:15 Coffee break		
16:15 – 17:30	Keynote presentation: <i>Designing effective research for future water: environmental health in a changing climate</i> (60 min)	Prof. Katrina Charles (University of Oxford, UK)
	Short orientation to the foresight part and closing the day 1 (15 min)	Research Council of Finland
17:30 – 18:30 Break		
18:30 – 22:00	Dinner at Bistro Gimis (Radisson Blu Seaside)	

Thursday 16th January 2025

08:30 – 09:00	Registration and coffee	
09:00 – 09:15	Opening of day 2: foresight workshop (15 min)	RCF and SWECO
09:15 – 10:00	Introduction to foresight (45 min)	SWECO
10:00 – 11:00	Identifying uncertainty factors (60 min)	SWECO, Participants
11:00 – 11:10 Short break		
11:10 – 12:30	Scenario building (80 min)	SWECO, Participants
12:35 – 13:30 Lunch break		
13:30 – 14:00	Gallery walk (30 min)	SWECO, Participants
14:00 – 15:00	Synthesis (60 min)	SWECO, Participants
15:00 – 15:15	Wrap-up of the foresight workshop (15 min)	SWECO, RCF
15:15 – 15:30	Closing words & Next steps (15 min)	Water4All Chair



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