

New initiative documents lessons from Cape Town water crisis

A collective of academics and practitioners has launched a new initiative that will document and capture key learnings from the 2017-2018 Cape Town water crisis that came close to being a catastrophe for the city.



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In November 2017, with dam levels at just 38.4%, the City of Cape Town officially adopted the concept of Day Zero – the day when the taps would run dry and citizens would be rationed to collecting 25 litres of water per person per day. In January 2018, Day Zero was pegged at 22 April that year.

Cape Town Drought Response Learning Initiative

“Fortunately, we know how the story ends,” says Peter Willis from Conversations that Count and one of the prime movers behind the Cape Town Drought Response Learning Initiative (CTDRLI) and film library launched in Cape Town this week. “Thanks to a huge range of efforts – including a dramatic response from citizens to save water – the prospect of Day Zero was averted, at least for now.

“The complexity of the response to this crisis was striking,” continues Willis. “The city as a whole responded in a lot of really intelligent ways, but often with limited awareness of how the rest of the system was responding. In the end, what we collectively achieved was remarkable, and many around the world see it as such. Since the story of what actually happened is tremendously rich and vivid, we wanted to make sure some of these perspectives were preserved, allowing us all to learn from what happened.”

The CTDRLI is a collaboration between the UCT African Climate and Development Initiative (ACDI), Conversations that Count, and CineSouth Studios and enjoys active support from the City of Cape Town's Director of Resilience.



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The film library is the first phase of the initiative. A free online resource, the library will eventually feature 45 high-quality, in-depth interviews with a range of key societal actors across a number of sectors who were intimately involved in the drought response. Each video is summarised and indexed for easy searching.

“With this initiative,” says Victor van Aswegen from CineSouth Studios, “we are applying the tools of filmmaking to document the lessons learned by key individuals involved in the drought response. We then apply analytical and intellectual tools to this substantial volume of material, amounting to close to fifty hours of footage, to distil the essential learnings that came out of the crisis. These lessons are not limited to water, but relate to urban resilience shocks and stresses broadly, and are applicable to cities around the world.”



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Transdisciplinary approach

Professor Mark New from the ACDI at UCT, says that the CTDRLI is an exemplar of a transdisciplinary approach that sees researchers working with societal actors to understand and find solutions to complex problems.

“The initiative brings together those with research backgrounds and those who were in the thick of the drought response – in terms of city managers, businesses on the ground and other individuals with a range of capabilities and skills. The aim is to create situations where we can have challenging conversations out of which important insights can emerge. The film library alone will be an invaluable historical archive and a resource for a whole range of analysis for many years to come,” he says.

Dana Omran, MD for Africa at 100 Resilient Cities, says the initiative to capture and enable learning out of a city-wide shock event such as Day Zero is novel and relevant to other cities focusing on resource governance as part of their larger urban resilience efforts.

“Cities are at the frontline of our world's greatest challenges, and water – either too little, too much, or of poor quality – is central to these challenges. Cape Town avoided a major crisis last year, though our new climate reality dictates that similarly extreme droughts may be expected in the years ahead. By learning from the experience, we can put systems in place so that Cape Town and cities worldwide can build a water resilient future.”

Phase Two of the CTDRLI will see a synthesis of the many learnings from the material in the film library that will trigger a series of workshops where the learnings will be shared and discussed with different sectors in order to build resilience

more broadly. A feature-length documentary titled *Day Zero* will constitute phase three.

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