

“No Trust in Miracles”

Leading Through a Water Crisis in Cape Town

Epilogue

KIMBERLYN LEARY, FERNANDO MONGE, AND JORRIT DE JONG

Patricia De Lille sat at one table, with just a few city officials sitting at some distance away. The rest of the room was full of journalists.

De Lille delivered the news: “We have reached a point of no return. Despite our urging for months, 60 percent of Capetonians are callously using more than 87 litres per day.ⁱ It is quite unbelievable that a majority of people do not seem to care and are sending all of us headlong towards Day Zero. At this point we must assume that they will not change their behaviour and that the chance of reaching Day Zero on 21 April 2018 is now very likely.”¹

The message spread quickly and seemed to have an impact on further reducing city consumption levels to close to the required 500 million liters a day.² For Deputy Mayor Ian Neilson, “[The announcement] created significant concern, panic . . . certainly one can say that it probably contributed towards focusing peoples’ minds on getting the consumption down together with all the tariffs and pressure reductions, etc.”

Others, however, did not feel the announcement was responsible for the impact.ⁱⁱ There were other factors that offered the city some relief, like the national government finally driving agricultural demand down and the Groenland Water Association’s transfer of some of its water to the city (500 million liters for sixteen additional days).³

Although crafted as a clear and direct picture of the consequences of the drought for Capetonians, Day Zero was not an easy message to communicate. First, it was not exactly the day when all taps would run out of water, but rather when a partial shutdown of the reticulation system would occur to prioritize water distribution to critical sites (e.g., hospitals), vulnerable, and economically important areas. Second, the April 21 date was a moving target, since reductions in water consumption would

ⁱ According to the World Health Organization, we need at least 50 liters of water per person each day to satisfy our basic needs—drinking, cooking, washing (ourselves and our clothes), flushing the toilet, and other basic uses. In the US, on average, each person uses about 300 to 378 liters per day (80 to 100 gallons per day). See https://www.usgs.gov/special-topic/water-science-school/science/water-ga-how-much-water-do-i-use-home-each-day?qt-science_center_objects=0#qt-science_center_objects

ⁱⁱ See, for example, studies conducted by behavioral economist Martine Visser, Professor in the School of Economics of University of Cape Town, and also her interview in the Drought Response Learning Initiative Film Library.

This case was developed solely as the basis for class discussion. It was written for the Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative, a collaboration between Harvard Kennedy School, Harvard Business School, and Bloomberg Philanthropies. It is not intended to serve as an endorsement, source of primary data, or illustration of effective or ineffective management. Copyright © 2020, 2021 President and Fellows of Harvard College. (Revised 1/2021.)



push it further ahead in time. This generated confusion and distrust. “Maybe it wasn’t as well understood as we would have liked it to be, initially, that you can prevent Day Zero, it is not a fait accompli . . . but there was public distrust because ‘you said that it was going to be on X date and now it is not,’” recalled Director of Communications, Priya Reddy.

The communication campaign also had an international dimension that City Hall had not anticipated. When Reddy saw that the news of the drought made it to CNN, she thought, “This has far reaching effects in terms of the global reputation of the city, in terms of tourism, which brings something like seven jobs for every tourist . . . We will need to really look at how we are going to fix and rebuild the reputation of a city that thrives on tourism, on events, on conferences . . . So as much as one would like to segment a market and say this is the message for people in the city, ‘It’s dire, you need to save, but for the rest of you please come, please continue coming here . . .’ is not possible.” Indeed, according to some calculations, there was a 30 percent reduction of tourist visits measured by occupancy rates.⁴

“The question is whether [Day Zero] was necessary,” reflected Neilson, one of De Lille’s main critics within City Hall and the DA, “the one thing that Cape Town has is a high reputation for service delivery. I think in all objective measures, you compare it to any city in South Africa, or any city in Africa in fact, the service levels are very high . . . so, to get to a point where the possibility was there that we would not be able to supply water to our people, the most basic of our services, was a very severe knock on our credibility.” Upon reflection, Mayor De Lille said, “With hindsight, we should have started earlier. I think we should have acted when the dams reached 50 percent levels.”

The mayor’s announcement of Day Zero also marked the final break up between De Lille and her party, the DA. Shortly thereafter, the party removed De Lille from the management of the water crisis and put deputy mayor Neilson in charge. It also suspended her from her role as mayor, initiating a fierce legal battle between De Lille and the DA. Some saw in this fight evidence that the party, still controlled by elite white men, had not tolerated a strong female and Colouredⁱⁱⁱ leader with an international reputation such as De Lille. For others, the DA decided to end what they perceived as De Lille’s mismanagement of the crisis and to curtail the damage to the DA’s reputation as the party with the best management credentials in the country.

Finally, in October 2018, the DA withdrew charges against De Lille, who abandoned the DA and the mayoral post to form her own party, GOOD. She ran for the national election, winning two seats in Parliament and was appointed Minister of Public Works and Infrastructure in the new government headed by President Cyril Ramaphosa in 2019.

ⁱⁱⁱ According to *Oxford Dictionaries*, the term “Coloured” is used in South Africa as “an ethnic label for people of mixed ethnic origin, including Khoisan, African, Malay, Chinese, and white.” Oxford University. See <https://www.lexico.com/definition/coloured>. The Population Registration Act No 30 of 1950 divided the South African population into three groups: White, Black and Colored. See <https://omalley.nelsonmandela.org/omalley/index.php/site/q/03lv01538/04lv01828/05lv01829/06lv01838.htm>. While some parts of the Coloured community use this term with pride, there are also efforts to change it. See <https://www.enca.com/news/calls-term-coloured-be-abolished>.

Day Zero was averted by the City of Cape Town in 2018, when the rains finally came in early May to start filling the dams and gradually enable the lifting of restrictions.^{iv} This was a relief for Capetonians, as well as for everyone in charge of managing the drought. Yet, the long and sustained crisis, including the tensions that it brought, was hard to manage. “I had a good team of people around me . . . and fortunately, thanks to the C-40 mayors, of the Global Covenant of Mayors . . . I received a lot of support,” said Mayor De Lille of her sources of resilience. But the water crisis took a toll on many within City Hall. Xanthea Limberg, one of council members most directly in charge of the crisis, was one of them. “It is an extreme pace that one needs to keep up with,” she said. “Only, should I say, after the very real risk of Day Zero not being there, did I feel the impact on my body. And I actually became very ill, in about May 2018, and ended in hospital for ten days. What did give me relief was that it was raining.”

Endnotes

¹ Statement by Patricia De Lille on January 18, 2018, available at <https://resource.capetown.gov.za/documentcentre/Documents/Speeches%20and%20statements/18%20January%2018-%20Day%20Zero%20new%20emergency%20measures.pdf> [accessed October 2020].

² Barry Wood, interview in the Film Library of the Drought Response Learning Initiative, available at <https://www.drought-response-learning-initiative.org/>.

³ Peter Flower, interview in the Film Library of the Drought Response Learning Initiative

⁴ David Green, interview in the Film Library of the Drought Response Learning Initiative.

^{iv} Restrictions were finally entirely lifted in November 2020.