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24 July 2019

Reflections on lessons learnt during Cape Town's water crisis

When Day Zero – the day when taps would run dry – was narrowly averted in Cape Town and the drought ended, Associate Professor Gina Ziervogel undertook an 18-month research that would look at what other cities around the world could learn from Cape Town's response to the crisis.

Complexity and collaboration were key in the once-in-a-century drought, the research found.

Associate Professor Ziervogel is a geographer and climate change adaptation expert at the University of Cape Town (UCT). She is the research chair at the UCT African Climate & Development Research Initiative, which focuses on urban climate adaptation, and was appointed to a water advisory committee for the City of Cape Town.

"I felt that the citizens of Cape Town deserved to have more insight into what happened behind the scenes and that it was essential to examine how Cape Town's municipal government responded to the crisis so as to share the lessons we have learned with other cities," says Associate Professor Ziervogel.

"Cape Town's mayor at the time, Patricia de Lille, helped to create the Water Resilience Task Team: a group of water technicians, environmental experts and public officials appointed by the City Council to try and manage the water crisis," she explains.

According to Associate Professor Ziervogel, one of the patterns she observed over the course of the water crisis was a shift from a technocratic approach to a more collaborative one. But that transition was not easy to achieve. "The drought taught us that in a time of crisis, we need specialists and experts who have a deep technical understanding. But that these experts have to work collaboratively and quickly to be effective and that often the mechanisms for them to do so aren't in place."

While conducting interviews on how politicians responded, for example, she observed that at the beginning of the crisis, they were still motivated by a political agenda, but that as the crisis deepened, there was a collective realisation that they needed to gain a more technical understanding. "Engagement between politicians and technocrats is challenging, but their collaboration is essential in the face of such a crisis," she says.

When there is enough water, the role of the water manager is almost invisible, and the water system can be managed using a technical approach with water infrastructure alone. "However, when there is a drought and the system is under stress, you have to pull in other mechanisms like reductions in water usage, partnerships and collaborations, which require different and often quite unfamiliar skills," she explains.

The water crisis has prompted changes in the way the City works and responds to crises. "During the crisis, officials within the City of Cape Town worked together in ways that they hadn't before. The City's water department also now has a clear understanding of the need to engage more with its customers – water-users – and it is setting up a customer relations unit," says Professor Ziervogel.

During the crisis, the City took ownership of issues that prior to that had been the domain of national government, explains Associate Professor Ziervogel. "This is a trend you see all over the world: how the role of cities is changing. But there are questions about whether this is a sustainable approach, which have yet to be answered."

Associate Professor Ziervogel also points out the structural irony inherent in the way cities finance water provision. "When there is no crisis, you have people using and paying for more water, which cross-subsidises water for the poor. But when you have a crisis, you want people to reduce their use which also means less revenue, and yet, infrastructure still needs to be financed."

If there is one lesson to take away from Cape Town's response to the crisis, Associate Professor Ziervogel believes, it is the understanding that we need to adapt to climate change now to better deal with climate extremes in the future. "A lot of energy went into dealing with the water crisis, and this has naturally faded somewhat. But consciousness has changed."

Video

[Watch the video](#) that describes the circumstances that took Capetonians on the road to Day Zero, as well as the kind of unprecedented responses and novel collaborations that were needed to avoid it.

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Issued by: UCT Communication and Marketing Department

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