

LEARNING FROM CRISIS

A series of modular learnings from the
2017-2018 Cape Town water crisis

THE RESILIENCE SHIFT

THE CAPE TOWN
DROUGHT RESPONSE
LEARNING INITIATIVE

module

2

Data, information, communication, trust

The Cape Town experience showed how severely trust is eroded by the absence of data and information from authorities, and also how this can be fixed by giving citizens clear, regularly updated data and information.

Text component of module 2, accompanying the film www.vimeo.com/cinesouth/ctdrl-trs-lfc-module-2

Duration: 17:59

Data, information, communication, trust

During the early phase of the Cape Town crisis, and up to the end of 2017, data and information from the authorities were insufficient. This severely eroded the trust of households and businesses both in the information that the local government did provide and in the latter's ability to steer the city out of the crisis. The lack of data also contributed to societal friction and tension. The situation around accessibility of data and information changed dramatically at the beginning of 2018, when city authorities made a strategic decision to ramp up citizen access to information. Several communication tools and channels were developed, some of which have been recognised internationally as innovative. A Water Outlook report and a Water Dashboard were developed and regularly updated. This transparency helped people understand the science, government actions, the imminence of the looming disaster, and the urgency of immediate behaviour changes on their part.



It's so important to use salient information to communicate clearly and to engender trust

Prof Martine Visser

Communication builds trust, and more information and knowledge is helpful, rather than trying to keep quiet about it

Dr Kevin Winter

We didn't share as much as, in retrospect, perhaps we should have, initially

Priya Reddy

KEY POINTS

- Lack of data, information and communication from authorities erodes trust; clear, accessible, timely, frequently updated data and information build trust
- During the early phase of the Cape Town crisis and as late as end 2017 there was insufficient information, lots of misinformation, a dumbing down of technical information, and a lot of noise around how the information came across to the public
- As a result, among both households and businesses there was distrust both of the information the authorities did provide, and of the latter's ability to steer the city out of the crisis
- Because people were not fully informed of how dire the situation was, their behaviour was not sufficiently adapted to the reality
- As a result of the lack of data, societal friction and tension between various groupings blaming each other for the crisis was also worse than it could have been had data been accessible
- The situation changed dramatically at the beginning of 2018 when the city government made the strategic decision to significantly improve access to information, with regularly updated communication tools and channels such as the Water Outlook report and the Water Dashboard.
- The city government also developed innovative tools for communicating critical data
- It did become easier for the authorities to communicate as it became clearer they were going to be able to steer the city out of the crisis
- This belated transparency from government lifted the uncertainty from the system
- The cost of the Day Zero campaign, which was substantial – to tourism, to business, to agriculture – could have been much lower had the transparency and access to information been implemented much earlier
- The city government has received recognition internationally for the way it made information available to the public in the later stages of the crisis

Interviewees in order of appearance:

Prof Martine Visser

Professor: School of Economics, University of Cape Town

Dr Kevin Winter

Senior lecturer: Environmental and Geographical Science, University of Cape Town

Priya Reddy

Director: Communication, City of Cape Town

Claire Pengelly

Water programme manager: GreenCape

Dr Piotr Wolski

Research associate: Climate System Analysis Group, University of Cape Town

Full interviews on [Cape Town Drought Response Learning Initiative](#) website

Opinions expressed by interviewees are personal viewpoints
and do not necessarily reflect those of their organisations

STRUCTURE

00:00:05

Hooks:

- Important to use salient information to communicate clearly and engender trust (MV)
- Communication builds trust; more information and knowledge helps (KW)
- City government did not share as much as it should have, initially (PR)

Initially:

lack of trust because insufficient data, information, communication

Later:

rectified, trust rebuilt, people empowered to change behaviour

00:00:57

TO END 2017: COMMUNICATION FAILURE, LACK OF TRUST

- The power of data and transparent, credible information to change behaviour (CP)
- Initially, for both businesses and households, trust in information coming from city government and in its ability to handle the crisis was lacking, because flow of data and information from city government was insufficient (CP, KW)
- Initially, flow of technical information to public from technical officials unsatisfactory because dumbed down and came via politicians (KW)
- Citizens initially in a blissfully unaware state as to the severity of the crisis; joining the dots and pointing out implications of data points was necessary but was not forthcoming initially (MV)
- Societal friction could have been avoided had data been available earlier (PW)

FROM BEGINNING 2018: COMMUNICATION RECTIFIED

- City government made strategic decision to change access to information (MV)
- Specific communication tools implemented: Water Outlook report, Water Dashboard, City of Cape Town's website (CP, KW)
- It became easier for authorities to communicate as it became clearer they were going to be able to steer out of crisis (KW)
- Drought has changed data situation: now lots of data available (PW)

00:15:34

Close:

City government has now received international acclaim for putting out information in the way it did (MV)

INDEX

- 00:00:57 “One of the key lessons that we’ve got out of the drought is the power of data, and the kind of ability for transparent, credible information to really change behaviour”; from around May / June 2017 there was a lot of misinformation, clouded information, and changes in information emanating from the city government (CP)
- 00:01:36 “And there was a lot of noise around how that information came across to the public, particularly initially, going back to August of 2017, there was minimal amount of information that the City was sharing, minimal amount of technical information”; lot of information came via media and social media; great deal of uncertainty; “left citizens feeling like we were going headlong into this crisis ...; very little trust in the technical ability of the city to be able to steer our way out of this”; political voice dominant, and transfer of technical information via politicians dumbed down; we had disparity between what was truth and what wasn’t the truth (KW)
- 00:02:45 Bits of information fed through by city government but it was very murky, “the actual severity of it I think wasn’t really clearly understood or articulated” (CP)
- 00:03:01 “The City had dam levels up and how far we were from exhausting the dam levels, but I think in a lot of people’s minds that wasn’t clearly linked to what did that mean you know for how long before we will run out of water, how much water do we have left per household”; joining the dots necessary for people to understand imminence of crisis and importance of immediate change in behaviour; “the urgency of the situation was perhaps left or made public too late ...; the general public was in sort of a blissfully unaware state to a large extent” (MV)
- 00:03:58 Experience of GreenCape trying to relay information from city government to business sector; “there was a lot of questioning as to really the credibility of that information, and the credibility of the City overall to respond to the crisis; I think there was a real undermining of trust, because there were these big plans being proposed but no details behind them, no real kind of forthcoming project plans etcetera, and real questions around the timelines of it, as well as kind of what the real situation really was”; changed dramatically at beginning of 2018; Water Outlook document released for the first time; released by City of Cape Town’s water department; quite a technical document; lot of detail; very informative; “and I think that in terms of that information flow to businesses, it had a huge impact, because suddenly there was a sense that actually the City had a much better handle on what was going on than people thought previously” (CP)
- 00:05:52 Similar situation for residential users; models within city government that could predict when Day Zero was possibly going to happen were not available to people outside government; outsiders trying to model independently; then beginning of

2018 city government came out with weekly Water Dashboard that provided information; “so suddenly ... this uncertainty was lifted from the system ...; the credibility and trust in the City to manage the crisis was really heightened when people actually had information at their fingertips of what they were doing” (CP)

00:07:42 City became increasingly free in making available information on its website; this became a key reference point for many people; 2 o'clock every Monday the levels of the dams were updated on the website; model that was being used to manage water and steer out of the crisis put up on site; it became easier to share information as time went on because city government became increasingly confident as time went on that it could steer out of the crisis; “building trust and confidence among the public because they ultimately were the most important means by which this water use and demand was going to be controlled, and building up that trust earlier on would have been much more helpful”; eventually scaremongering was needed to change consumer behaviour; “but if I had seen and heard perhaps a more nuanced and more managed and more level-headed approach to the way it was being managed I think the public would have been much more confident that it could be avoided completely”; scaring people did change behaviour dramatically, but “I’m not sure that’s the wisest approach to take from a public response perspective” (KW)

00:10:27 When the crisis started city’s communication department was doing things as they had done them before; “perhaps in retrospect didn’t fully appreciate how much information people and particularly journalists wanted”; water could be very technical; “we didn’t share as much as, in retrospect, perhaps we should have, initially, and there was some criticism about that”; later than should have, set up meeting between key officials and journalists, for officials to share technical information with journalists; “so when I look back on it and if I had to tell this story to someone else who needed advice on how to deal with a similar situation I would say that in this instance more information is better than less; give them a lot and let them choose it, but always get them around a table to explain what can be very technical”; this resulted in better understanding of the complexities city government was dealing with; “so my one sort of, if I could do it all over I would have had those engagements more frequently and sooner than I did” (PR)

00:13:51 “When the City made a strategic decision to change access to information and how much that impacted on people’s behaviour, my strong belief is that all of that should have happened much much earlier, that kind of transparency, not treating the citizens on a need to know basis, but actually giving the tools to the citizens in order to enable them to make the right or responsible decisions”; a lot of the cost of the Day Zero communication – to tourism, business, agriculture – could have been lower if this information flow had been phased in at an earlier stage; “there’s really a big message here that there were too little information, there

was not enough transparency, not enough trust, and by making this information accessible to people you empowered the citizens and they really started to behave” (MV)

00:14:48 A lot of the substantial societal friction during the drought could have been avoided “if we had access to transparent, clearly presented, timely information, data, on rainfall, on state of the dams, on how much water flows where and how and what ...; that access to that information, that access to the data is a very important thing, a very important aspect of building trust between players, between you know parties involved in that whole process, being parts of society, individual people, civic organisations, government, you name it”; that wasn’t happening before the drought; the drought has changed that; “the City’s now sharing the Water Dashboard, it’s a very good step forward, we have timely information, we have relatively transparent information” (PR)

00:16:41 “The City just overall became incredibly more transparent and changed their outlook in terms of making information available to the citizens”; information and reports that came out were hugely beneficial in helping people understand the science behind what was happening, and also understanding the urgency of the situation; “internationally I think the way that Cape Town started communicating to its citizens at that time is now being recognised that this was a really novel and very good approach, and so I think the City has received a lot of acclaims for putting out that information in the way it did” (MV)

Suggestions for discussion:

- What typically – and in your situation – are the barriers to delivering what communities will experience as sufficient information during a crisis? If there are dynamics at work towards transparency on the part of government vis-à-vis citizens, what are the dynamics often driving in the opposite direction? How can an awareness and understanding of the latter help?

Further references:

- For more on the thinking behind the communication by the City of Cape Town, see full interview with communications director Priya Reddy in the Cape Town Drought Response Film Library
- For a description of the Water Map, see interview with Prof Martine Visser

Source material from the Cape Town Drought Response Film Library,
a research resource of the University of Cape Town's African Climate and Development Initiative



The film library was established with the generous financial support of:
The Resilience Shift, Old Mutual, Nedbank, Woolworths, Aurecon, PwC, Arup, GreenCape and 100 Resilient Cities

Produced by the [Cape Town Drought Response Learning Initiative](#) for [The Resilience Shift](#)

Interviewer: [Peter Willis](#)

Film and text: [Victor van Aswegen](#)

26 July 2019