

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

6

Assessing the Day Zero communication strategy

The Day Zero messaging had major negative impacts, including on tourism, investor confidence, and the social fabric of the city. Opinions diverge on whether, in hindsight, it was necessary or advisable.

Text component of module 6, accompanying the film www.vimeo.com/cinesouth/ctdri-trs-lfc-module-6

Duration: 20:03

Assessing the Day Zero communication strategy

Seeing the need to drive down water usage by citizens even further than it had already been by traditional measures of restrictions and tariff increases, Cape Town city authorities used the prospect of a Day Zero scenario – reticulation to be largely turned off and daily rations of 25 litres per person to be collected from points of distribution – as a communication strategy to effect behaviour change. The negative impacts of the campaign are not disputed. Opinions do diverge on the effectiveness of the campaign in reducing water usage, and a quantitative assessment is difficult as several measures were implemented simultaneously. In hindsight and on balance, it is arguable that the costs outweighed the advantages, and that furthermore, if the appropriate steps to drive down water use had been taken earlier, at the beginning of the dry summer months in November 2017, the Day Zero communication strategy – and its attendant costs – could have been avoided.



The Day Zero messaging, even though very necessary, does come with major negative impact

Councillor Xanthea Limberg

That reputational damage was severe for us

Alderman Ian Neilson

It had a huge impact ... both positive and negative, but I can't imagine surviving the drought without it

Claire Pengelly

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The decision by authorities to use the Day Zero communication strategy should be seen against the backdrop of the situation at the time: in order to get through the dry summer months to the next rainy season, water use by citizens had to be driven down even further than it had already been at that point by traditional tools of restrictions and tariff increases – the level of demand reduction required had not been achieved before either in Cape Town or anywhere else in the world
- The strategy consisted in communicating to citizens that under a so-called Day Zero scenario water reticulation to most households would be turned off, and they would have to collect daily rations of 25 litres per person from about 200 collection points to be set up around the city – and that this was imminent
- Opinions diverge on whether this communication did reduce demand
- There is a widespread view among commentators that it drove down demand, and that in reality people must have been scared into behaviour change
- Empirically, however, it is hard to quantify the impact, as several mechanisms were applied at the same time in the early months of 2018: aggressive pressure management, tariff and restriction level increases, and the Day Zero campaign
- This leaves open the possibility that in reality the campaign had a larger effect in the media and on levels of fear and anxiety among the public than on actual water use reduction, and that in reality the bulk of the 70 to 80 million litre a day reduction in use is attributable to aggressive pressure management
- The campaign had major negative impacts: on tourism (at the peak, as much as a thirty percent reduction in V&A Waterfront hotel occupancy rates, compared to what these could have been given the rising trend), on investor confidence levels, on trust in the city government and officials, on the social fabric of the city
- It should be borne in mind that it did play a role in jogging into action disaster relief activities by the national government, and also probably played a role in making clear to the national Department of Water and Sanitation that curtailment of agricultural drawdowns (not enforced the previous year) was unavoidable
- There is a case to be made that the costs outweighed the benefits
- If measures had been taken earlier, at the beginning of the dry summer months, to drive down demand, Day Zero messaging – and its attendant costs – could have been avoided

Interviewees in order of appearance:**Councillor Xanthea Limberg**

Mayoral Committee Member for Informal Settlements, Water and Waste Services and Energy,
City of Cape Town

Alderman Ian Neilson

Deputy Mayor: City of Cape Town

Claire Pengelly

Water programme manager: GreenCape

Craig Kesson

Chief Resilience Officer: City of Cape Town

Dr Piotr Wolski

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

Barry Wood

Manager: Bulk Water, City of Cape Town

Mike Mulcahy

CEO: GreenCape

Dr Rolfe Eberhard

Independent public policy advisor

David Green

CEO: V&A Waterfront

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

STRUCTURE

- 00:00:05 Hooks:
- Day Zero messaging necessary but comes with major negative impact (XL)
 - Reputational damage for the city was severe (IN)
 - Had huge positive and negative impact; difficult to imagine surviving the drought without it (CP)
- 00:00:55 **BACKDROP: NEED FOR FURTHER REDUCTION IN USE**
- The decision to implement the Day Zero communication strategy was taken against the backdrop of a need to induce citizens to reduce their consumption even further than they had already done (CK, CP)
- 00:02:04 **WAS IT NECESSARY? DID IT REDUCE DEMAND? DID COSTS EXCEED BENEFITS? OPINIONS DIVERGE**
- Can't imagine surviving drought without it (CP)
 - Hard to put a number on effect of Day Zero (BW)
 - Did also help to jog into action disaster relief and curtailment of agricultural drawdowns (MM)
 - Avoidable, unnecessary; cost much higher than the benefits (RE)
- 00:11:21 **TOURISM DAMAGED**
- At the peak of the damage the impact was close to a thirty percent reduction of what tourism numbers could have been
 - Tension between economic interest of important sector and need to keep users under pressure to reduce consumption
 - Terminology, language and imagery were negative, with negative consequences for tourism that are hard to reverse (DG)
- 00:15:15 **AVOIDABLE – PROVIDED ACTION TAKEN EARLIER**
All the economic consequences of the Day Zero messaging could have been avoided had the appropriate steps been taken earlier
- 00:15:15 make decisions swiftly, implement restrictions and price increases early, accelerate demand management, to avoid having to communicate such a message (XL)
- 00:18:27 if high tariffs and pressure reduction had been implemented earlier, in November 2017, at the beginning of the summer season, Day Zero messaging would not have been necessary (IN)

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- 00:00:55 “We had been battling to break through the sound barrier with Capetonians on getting them to reduce their water consumption. It was remaining static at around 680 megalitres a day. And so I think that from what I understood of the contours of the decision making there was something that was needed to jolt people out of their comfort zones. And you must remember at the time that this was introduced Capetonians had been on water restrictions technically for ten years. There had already been behaviour change over time. And something more was needed.”
- 00:01:36 “The kind of demand reductions that were needed from the city’s citizens to be able to get through the summer had not been achieved anywhere in the world, and had not been achieved to date within the city either. So there seemed to be kind of quite a hard threshold of around 600 megalitres per day, we’d been trying to push it down to 500 for a number of months and just not getting anywhere, it was not budging. So the need to be able to push that demand, it just felt like we won’t be able to get to it.”
- “I think the concept of Day Zero ... is an interesting thing to reflect on because in some ways it was almost a concept and campaign that generated a life of its own, and it was almost like the City initially resisted it, and they didn’t like the term, they understood that it would have an impact in terms of the brand Cape Town, as well as investor confidence, they understood those implications.”
- “And then I think the key shift was really when they understood where you could utilise Day Zero as a behaviour change campaign, and really trying to link the water usage now to a potential date in the future as to when we could possibly run out of water, and quantifying that.”
- “Day Zero has had obviously some negative implications ... the kind of social fabric of the city, I guess the credibility of some of the government officials ... it obviously has impacted on investor confidence and tourism numbers, but it did a number of really important things that perhaps without that level of drama it would have been difficult to achieve.”
- “It drove down consumption significantly within the city of Cape Town”; it also became clear to the national Department of Water and Sanitation (which had to curtail agricultural consumption) that this curtailment had to happen for the city to avoid Day Zero.
- “So I think it had a huge impact ... both positive and negative, but I can’t imagine surviving the drought without it.”
- 00:04:14 Day Zero was the day the city authorities would shut down supply to most individual households and start distributing water in a different way, not through

the reticulation system any more, but manually through the water distribution points.

“In my opinion it wasn’t a particularly good idea as a solution to water shortage – it was a very powerful communication message, it was a very powerful message to communicate the need to reduce water use, because ... at this stage ... the reduction of water use was the only way we could get out of that predicament.”

00:05:25 The city authorities published its critical water shortages plan and created a mock-up of what the water distribution points would look like; “I think that did scare a lot of people ... not that it was the intention, but it did, in reality it must have.”

00:05:53 “You can talk about a percentage of dams or so many megalitres a day, you can throw ... much data around, even there’s so much left in the dam – well, so what? what does that mean? Something that people really do understand is a date. And I think for that reason that was the one piece of data that stuck in everyone’s mind. We were putting out lots of data, but that’s the one that became focused on.”

“The mayor then made the announcement that it was ‘almost inevitable’ that we would get to the Day Zero scenario, and that was during January 2018. That created significant concern, panic ... Certainly one can say that it probably did contribute towards people focusing their minds on getting the consumption down, it contributed together with all the tariffs and the pressure reductions etcetera.”

00:07:38 “It’s hard to work out what drove what, but certainly around January / February [2018] consumption started falling, from around 600 million litres a day down to around 530, sometimes ... down to 520, and it kind of stayed there. And at that time it was the Day Zero campaign but it was also pressure management that was being implemented in a big way ... and then it was the tariff increases as well ... So there were three things playing themselves out and that’s why it’s hard to put a number on Day Zero.”

00:08:41 “The question is: was it necessary? If that announcement had not been made, could we have still achieved our reductions?”

00:08:53 “Day Zero was a captivating message, that I think really captured not only the imaginations of Capetonians but the global community ... So certainly as a communications and imagination capturing device it was extremely effective. Day Zero I think also increased the realisation of the population in South Africa, the severity of the crisis. It also would have jogged into action several of the disaster relief activities and responses that are available through the national government, and it certainly would have increased pressure on the national Department of Water and Sanitation to curtail some of the agricultural drawdowns, which in previous drought years hadn’t necessarily been applied.”

“More broadly than that, Day Zero came with a few negative consequences. The perception of the region, a range of travel advisories for tourists that would come into Cape Town, resulting in some hotel nights lost, or bed nights lost.”

00:10:16

“A key effect of Day Zero was reputational damage to the city. Tourist numbers were significantly reduced, investments were put on hold, and Cape Town became known as the city that would run out of water. This was a fear-based strategy, with the intention of scaring people into reducing consumption. In my view, Day Zero was unfortunate and unnecessary for two important reasons. The first reason is, if the system had been managed effectively in the early stages of the drought the threat of a Day Zero would not have existed. And secondly, it was not necessary because there were effective mechanisms in place to reduce demand, namely the pricing and pressure management. Those two mechanisms proved to be effective because demand has remained low even though Day Zero became cancelled.”

“If you were to do a cost/benefit analysis of the Day Zero strategy, I think one would come to the conclusion that the costs of the strategy were much higher than the benefits.”

00:11:21

“The peak of the damage, the impact on tourism numbers – this is international tourism and we’re measuring this by the occupancies in the fifteen hotels in the Waterfront – it was between fifteen and twenty percent reduction. Now that is against the background of Cape Town over the last three/four/five years following 2010, tourism numbers had grown by eight percent. So at the peak of the damage you’re close to thirty percent reduction. So this was quite damaging to a valuable part of the economy.”

“Unfortunately the impact of the Day Zero messaging was incredibly strong internationally, and tourists felt a moral responsibility to avoid coming to Cape Town because they didn’t want to drink Capetonians’ water. There was a point where the realisation in the tourism industry was that the bigger crisis was the economic crisis that this Day Zero messaging was going to have. So there was a conflict between the messaging which the City and the Province were putting out, understandably, with a view to holding down and keeping people pressurised to reduce their water consumption, but that was playing out internationally as affirmation of the likelihood of this crisis, and this was exacerbating the potential economic damage that would be suffered.”

“There was tension building between the longer-term economic interest – here you had a growing business, industry, providing jobs, economic growth which is absolutely needed – which was being throttled by possibly over-zealous publication of plan B, and Day Zero.”

“The Day Zero messaging was a plus and a minus. It was definitely a very strong catalyst which led to dramatic and rapid reduction in the consumption which

allowed us clearly to have averted the crisis. But, on reflection, the terminology, the language, the imagery used was negative, and has left a negative impression internationally which is very difficult to move on. And I guess on reflection perhaps other terminology, other messaging could have been used which would have achieved the result of reducing consumption but would not have had quite such a negative impact internationally.”

00:14:37 “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 all our services, was a very severe knock on our credibility of being a city that’s able to supply services to everyone, and to supply them at a good level. So that reputational damage was severe for us, with the belief got out there that we were going to run out of water.”

00:15:15 “The Day Zero messaging, even though very necessary, when you are facing the very real possibility of water scarcity, does come with major negative impact that you will have to contend with, during and after the crisis. It does have a major impact on confidence levels within the city, trust, all of these things you’re going to have to re-invest a significant amount of time, resources, to repair and undo. It had a major impact on tourism as well, and given that that’s quite a large economic sector we are having to try and deal with the impact of that, and we have already started doing so.”

“When you’re in a situation where there are limited alternatives and the very real risk of a large city running out of water, the Day Zero messaging was probably very critical to communicate. And that had a major role to play in how consumption dramatically reduced. However, I think prior to getting to that point it’s about making decisions that are informed, and making those decisions swiftly, so you can move into implementation, and so that would in hindsight always be the option that I would suggest, and ensuring that simple things such as restrictions are adopted far sooner, not hesitating to make adjustments from a financial mechanism point of view, not placing all of your hopes on one option, but diversifying your options so that you can minimise your risk.”

“So it’s about balancing the risk depending on where you are, and what options you have available, but I would always opt for doing the less extreme thing, which is communicating a message like that, which is obviously going to generate a lot of anxiety and fear, and opting to accelerate demand management, water conservation, financial remodelling of cost of services, implementing augmentation or whatever the case may be, cutting back on those not so significant projects and programmes, taking the political risk for greater good and for water sustainability and water security, before having to communicate that very honest and what is quite a scary message.”

00:18:27 “I certainly believe that if we had implemented the extreme measures of high tariffs, pressure reduction, etcetera, earlier on, in November, at the beginning of

that summer season, it wouldn't have been necessary. I think those would have been adequate measures to focus people's minds, to achieve it, I don't think we should have got to the stage of this general belief that Cape Town was going to be, as it was said, the first city to ever run out of water, I don't think that's a correct statement, but that was what was being said, going out on international media, and I think we could have avoided that, there could have been lower economic consequences if that statement had not been made, but contingent on us having acted earlier to get the consumption down."

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

Interviewer: [Peter Willis](#)

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

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