

## **Reflections on Cape Town's water crisis suggest a new way to learn from major shocks**

An innovative online resource sharing lessons from Cape Town's water crisis of 2017-2018 is set to help city leaders around the world to build resilience

Cape Town, 8 October 2020

Two Cape Town citizens have spearheaded a unique initiative to capture learnings from the 2017-2018 Cape Town water crisis. The resource they created is now available for use by decision-makers and urban resilience professionals around the world to reflect on critical infrastructure challenges in their own cities.

Peter Willis, an independent facilitator, and filmmaker Victor van Aswegen collaborated to build a distinctive learning resource through the Cape Town Drought Response Learning Initiative. Over a two-year period they assembled the most comprehensive resource of first-hand reflections on the crisis and distilled key insights and learnings from the material.

The resource offers nearly 100 films on various aspects of the Cape Town water crisis, including 39 in-depth filmed interviews and a 16-module Learning from Crisis series, each module of which addresses one of the major themes that emerged during this period.

“One of the standout characteristics of the crisis,” says Van Aswegen, “was its multifaceted nature, encompassing issues ranging from engineering to communications to public finances, from trust in government to cooperation among citizenry, from restrictions and tariffs to economic fallout. Our aim with the initiative was to contribute to an improved understanding of a complex and often contested and misunderstood event that had far-reaching public-interest implications. We did so by first filming interviews with experts in the various fields, then identifying the central themes, and finally producing films and text outputs systematically dealing with these themes one by one.”

Topics include the role of data and information in maintaining and building public trust; the measures that were effective in bringing about household behaviour change; the role of business; the impact of the Day Zero communication strategy; the limits to large-scale emergency water supply augmentation projects; inequality and social cohesion in a crisis; underlying systemic issues which exacerbated the impact of the drought; the costs to agriculture and agribusiness; the role of politics and leadership.

Willis adds that the initiative has succeeded in providing a very rich and previously unavailable perspective on the water crisis, made possible by the generous support and cooperation of a large number of individuals and organisations. “All our outputs draw on the reflections of 39 leaders from government, business, academia, consultancy and civil society, who gave generously of their time for the filmed interviews. We assembled a broad coalition of corporate and academic partners, including global not-for-profit The Resilience Shift and UCT's African Climate & Development Initiative, as well as many corporate donors, without which the project would not have been possible.”

Globally, the norm for post-crisis analysis of this nature is that it is commissioned and delivered by government bodies, with findings presented in official reports. The fact that this initiative was conceived and undertaken by two private citizens is noteworthy, as is the accessibility of its content due to the emphasis on film. Willis and Van Aswegen embarked on the project with the aim of producing a public

good, out of a conviction that the many lessons learnt during the water crisis in Cape Town were worth capturing and sharing.

“Before Cape Town’s water crisis in 2017-2018 came the crises in São Paulo in 2014, Barcelona in 2008, and Australia’s large cities in the 2000s. Failure to learn from past mistakes is to self-condemn to repeating those mistakes in future,” says Van Aswegen. “Extracting the correct lessons from the experience, and then applying these, is critical.”

According to Siddharth Nadkarny, London-based project leader with The Resilience Shift, the learning outputs are helping to make resilience issues tangible, practical and relevant to city decision-makers the world over. “This project aims to promote systems thinking within cities, water companies and other stakeholders through informed reflection on the Cape Town case study.”

Increasingly, how cities respond to and manage crises – both natural and human-made – will be crucial for their survival and that of their citizens, says Willis. “The Covid-19 pandemic is a vivid reminder of what Capetonians have seared into their memory, namely that even well-run cities are vulnerable to crises. Going forward, the best cities will be those that prepare and adapt well enough to protect their citizens when those crises arrive. We like to think our learning resource can substantially help leaders at all levels within cities understand what it takes to handle a major crisis well.”

The Cape Town Drought Response Learning Initiative resources can be accessed by the public at [www.drought-response-learning-initiative.org](http://www.drought-response-learning-initiative.org).

The sponsors of the initiative are The Resilience Shift as lead partner, and donors Nedbank, Old Mutual, Woolworths, GreenCape, Aurecon / Zutari, PwC, Arup and 100 Resilient Cities.

ENDS

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**About CineSouth Studios**

Founded by filmmaker Victor van Aswegen, Cape Town-based CineSouth Studios makes powerful films engaging the great themes of the age. *Day Zero*, a feature-length documentary for international release on the lessons to be learnt from the 2017-2018 Cape Town water crisis, is currently in pre-production and is scheduled for release in the second half of 2021.

[www.cinesouthstudios.com](http://www.cinesouthstudios.com)

[www.dayzero-themovie.com](http://www.dayzero-themovie.com)

**About Conversations that Count**

Conversations that Count is an initiative started by Peter Willis that facilitates dialogue for problem solving, strategy and system change. Peter is also instrumental in shaping another Resilience Shift initiative to learn from crisis, by following the journey of senior leaders reflecting on the Covid-19 crisis in real-time to gain insights on Resilient Leadership.

[www.peterwillis.co.za](http://www.peterwillis.co.za)

**About The Resilience Shift**

The Resilience Shift was established by Lloyd's Register Foundation and Arup, joining forces to accelerate the resilience of the critical infrastructure that protects us, connects us and provides our essential services. It aims to inspire and empower a global community by providing knowledge and tools for those responsible for planning, financing, designing, delivering, operating and maintaining critical infrastructure systems, contributing to a safe, sustainable and resilient future.

[www.resilienceshift.org](http://www.resilienceshift.org)

**About ACDI**

The African Climate & Development Initiative is a university-wide initiative at the University of Cape Town which supports collaborative research and training in climate change and development.

[www.acdi.uct.ac.za](http://www.acdi.uct.ac.za)