

THE CAPE TOWN DROUGHT RESPONSE LEARNING INITIATIVE

The project

Undertaken in the aftermath of the 2017-2018 Cape Town water crisis by Victor van Aswegen and project partner Peter Willis, in association with a university institute and with corporate and foundation donor support, the Cape Town Drought Response Learning Initiative employed filmmaking tools to capture, distil and make widely available the learnings from the crisis.

The aim of the initiative was to distil the key learnings from the 2017-2018 Cape Town water crisis, as a recent instance of an urban resilience crisis event with global relevance, capable of yielding lessons applicable worldwide and well beyond the sphere of water management.

The initiative delivered on this aim by first documenting observations, insights and reflections on the crisis in in-depth filmed interviews with senior societal actors and experts across a range of sectors who were involved in crafting the city's response to the drought, and then producing an array of film-based outputs encapsulating the learnings. Interviews and learning outputs were made publicly available on the project website, www.drought-response-learning-initiative.org.

During the first phase of the initiative 39 interviews were conducted and filmed, with a total runtime of 43 hours, creating a rich resource, constituting the largest collection of first-hand reflections on the drought and the Cape Town water crisis. Interviewees were deliberately selected to represent a variety of viewpoints, backgrounds and sectors, including government, business, agriculture, non-profit and non-government organisations, research and academia, independent consultancy and civil society. Between them they brought to the project expertise ranging over a widely diverse collection of disciplines and subject areas: bulk water management, communications, climate change, water engineering, disaster management, resilience, system modelling, water tariffs and restrictions, behavioural nudges, catchment area alien vegetation control, business continuity, governance, social justice.

This yielded a wealth of recollections, observations, assessments, reflections, insights and points of view on the subject, capturing thinking shortly after the crisis that would otherwise have been lost, and gathering it all in one place, as the Cape Town Drought Response Film Library, accessible to researchers, the press and the public. With an average

runtime of just over an hour per filmed interview, however, this material is also relatively dense and user-unfriendly.

The essence of the initiative therefore was its second phase, which involved the distillation of key learnings from the raw material in the full interviews, and the presentation of these learnings in user-friendly and digestible format in three series of 54 film-based learning outputs, each with an accompanying text component.

The flagship output of the initiative is the 16-module Learning from Crisis series, which identifies the major themes that emerged from the crisis, and presents on each theme a nuanced consideration of the topic, drawing on a number of interviewee voices, and with an average runtime of twenty minutes.

Two supplementary series, the Spotlight and Viewpoint series, present in total 40 clips running for 5 minutes each on average, offering, respectively, expert knowledge on a particular narrowly defined topic or a personal point of view.

The result is that twenty four months after the crisis a public resource exists that brings rigour, clarity, coherence and perspective to the treatment of a subject of societal concern previously characterised by a large degree of confusion, misunderstanding and factual error.

More than that: an innovative, groundbreaking template for dealing with such multifaceted societal events and challenges has been created, tested and proven, applicable elsewhere, with film in a threefold central role – as capturing device during the shooting phase, far more efficient and less intimidating to interviewees than formal written depositions; as selection, arrangement and conceptual connecting device during the editing phase; as easily accessible presentation and viewing device during the dissemination phase.

Globally, the norm for post-crisis undertakings of this nature is that they are launched and executed by government bodies; in this case, it was undertaken by two private citizens as an initiative aimed at creating public good, in association with a university institute and with the generous support of corporate and foundation donors.

The Cape Town Drought Response Learning Initiative was co-founded and led by Victor van Aswegen and project partner Peter Willis. It was undertaken in association with the University of Cape Town's African Climate and Development Initiative, and funded by The Resilience Shift as lead partner, and donors Old Mutual, Nedbank, Woolworths, Aurecon, PwC, GreenCape, Arup, and 100 Resilient Cities.

Nearly 100 film outputs
More than 50 hours of material
Publicly available on project website

	number	average duration: minutes	total duration: hours
In-depth interviews	39	65	43
Learning from Crisis series	16	20	5
Spotlight series	20	5	1½
Viewpoint series	20	5	1½
Total	95		51

Completed July 2020
English
UHD 4K
16:9 aspect ratio
CTDRLI co-lead: Victor van Aswegen

Director's note

The animating insight underpinning the Cape Town Drought Response Learning Initiative is an ancient wisdom, encapsulated in a familiar parable. Seven blind men encounter something none of them had ever seen – an elephant. Each holds on to a different part of the beast, exploring it through touch alone, and forming an impression of the nature of the animal, each extrapolating from his limited, partial knowledge. What is an elephant? They articulate their conclusions. Not surprisingly, seven widely different, seemingly irreconcilable answers result. Convictions are strong. Opinions differ. Tempers begin to flare. This can get ugly. Some versions of the two and a half thousand year old story end with seven blind men around an elephant in violent disagreement with each other. The moral? Reality is many-sided. Individual knowledge is partial. Truth can be found through the synthesis of the manifold viewpoints.

The relevance is threefold. First, magnitude: the scale of the drought event and the ensuing crisis, stretching over years, impacting a vast water supply system and affecting the lives of over four million Capetonians, was enormous relative to the experience or understanding of any individual observer, even a highly informed or professionally engaged one. Second, its unprecedented nature: the extent of the crisis was new – nobody involved had ever been called upon to deal with a set of drought-related circumstances as severe as this before; the requirements of the situation exceeded the bounds of existing knowledge and experience, necessitating new thinking and understanding. Third, its multifaceted character: by its very nature, the crisis encompassed a large number and a great variety of aspects, from hard questions of water engineering or tariffs and public finances to softer, more intangible issues of public trust in government and social justice and cohesion, from long-term planning of public infrastructure to disaster management, from communication to climate change. A many-sided reality indeed.

This animating insight made clear what our agenda had to be: document individual views, then synthesise these into a coherent view of the whole, distilling the key learnings.

As a first step, we documented the individual perspectives shortly after the crisis had passed, so they would not be lost. This we accomplished in 39 in-depth interviews from September 2018 to September 2019, with interviewees deliberately drawn from many sectors and communities, engaging with each on his or her own terms, mostly spending half a day with each, in some cases much more. The studio space was a download space, an opportunity for the interviewee to reflect, to report on the impressions gained from the intense experience of having had hands on a part of the elephant at the time, and an opportunity for us to capture as much as possible of that individual perspective.

But, with the whole elephant always in mind, we did so in full awareness that each interviewee brought a version of events, an understanding, a conceptualisation and an analysis determined – and limited – by a highly personal vantage point, always driven, constrained, blinkered even, by professional training and background, field of expertise, occupation and organisational position during the period, role in crafting the city’s drought response, area of responsibility and focus, research interests.



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Everybody had a part of the truth. Nobody had the whole truth. All accounts were necessary. None – taken on its own – was sufficient. Even the most senior of officials or the most expert of observers had only a partial view, an understanding, therefore, that could be enriched by other partial views.

The vision was simple: by assembling the collection of individual views, and then drawing on them to gradually build up a richer, more complete understanding, we could create a view of the whole not previously available to any one of them. And by making this synthesised view available we could deliver a public good.

If the film studio space was the download space, the edit suite was the synthesising space, where, as the second, pivotal step, connections were drawn between disparate aspects and points of view, where the overarching themes and their constituent parts came into much sharper focus so the key learnings could be identified, precisely articulated and distilled, where a picture of the whole animal in at least some of its multifaceted complexity started to emerge.

The 16 modules in the Learning from Crisis series constitute the flagship output of the initiative because in these, having identified the key themes, I drew on the many views and voices in the interview material to construct short films, on average twenty minutes in duration, each addressing one of the central themes of the crisis, and doing so in a manner that begins to do some justice to the nuances and complexities within each.

But filmmaking always starts long before the cameras start rolling. By the time we shot the first interview on 28 September 2018 I had already surveyed the literature and documented the scope, themes and questions, constructing a unifying conceptual framework for the enterprise of enquiry to be undertaken through the year of interviews, for

the intellectual engagement with the content that would stretch over two years. Each interview was preceded by reading whatever the interviewee had written that was in the public domain, whether it was eighteen articles or a book, to have a clear sense of the terrain to be covered in the interview and to inform the questions drafted and sent to the interviewee beforehand – which had grown to a nine-page pdf by the time we got to the end.

This was vital. When it came to the editing, I was able to draw on a coherent body of interview material, with many disparate voices, extracted over a twelve-month period, but all talking to the same points, all facing inward onto the same conceptual terrain, as it were, because we had approached the interviews with a clear sense of what the large important themes were and had consistently asked the interviewees to speak to these. The coherence emerging from the editing was possible because of the understanding that had informed the shooting.

Climate change, data, information, communication, trust, behaviour change, operational issues, governance, the limits to emergency build, the tension between water resilience and fiscal resilience, business, agriculture, inequality, social cohesion, collaboration, politics, disaster management, a new relationship with water – one by one each of these major themes of the crisis period could be considered and examined in a short film on each, accompanied by summarising text.

It is worth recalling, after the crisis has passed and now that it is receding into memory, that this was an elephant that had trampled on parts of the village, wreaking considerable damage in the process. The costs to tourism, agriculture, the local economy in general ran into the billions. The costs to the reputation of the city, the social fabric and to individual lives at a domestic level are less easily quantifiable but were nonetheless substantial. And if Day Zero had materialised, the consequences would have been nothing short of large-scale urban catastrophe.

It was against this backdrop, in the hope of making a socially valuable contribution, that we embarked on the undertaking, starting with the filming of the interviews and making these available. It was with this aim in mind that I then conceptualised the suite of learning outputs, identified the major themes and distilled the key lessons, presenting the synthesised views in the Learning from Crisis films I made and then summarised in the documentation accompanying each. It was towards this end that we made more accessible and easily digestible the content of the full-length interviews by means of the 40 short Spotlight and Viewpoint clips I extracted from the 43 hours of interview footage and then summarised in a text component for each. The step forward, the advance we were hoping to achieve, was through contributing to a better understanding of an elephant that might return one day, sooner or later, here or elsewhere.

The hope is that this body of work will contribute by giving users a short-cut into the crucial issues they would not otherwise have had, an overview of these and a sense of how they fit together, a collection of helpful jumping-off points into further research and deeper exploration. At the very least it should give users the benefit of access, of being able to watch and listen to people with first-hand experience. The hope, ultimately, is that this endeavour will contribute to lessons being learnt from the experience, rendering us better prepared, able to muster a much improved response next time around. The resilience of critical infrastructure systems matters.

None of which, it goes without saying, comes with any claims to definitive truth. Quite the contrary. Other conclusions can be drawn from the material. There are voices and views not represented in the material to begin with. Even the synthesised view attempting to consolidate into a coherent framework a great many individual views is, in the end, only yet another individual view, albeit a meta-perspective, consciously aiming to overcome the limitations of any of the large number of individual perspectives it is drawn from. The conversation around the elephant – the research, the debate, the gradual improvement of understanding – will continue, as it must. Such is the nature of reality, that many-sided beast.

Victor van Aswegen