



Synopsis

When a modern city of four million people teeters on the brink of running out of water, many valuable lessons are learnt. With climate change concerns rapidly rising up the global agenda and looming ever larger in public awareness, this timely, topical film presents an authoritative and instructive report from the frontlines, lucidly setting out the learnings from the 2017-2018 Cape Town water crisis. In production; international release in 2021.

What lessons are learnt when a modern city of four million people comes to face the prospect of running out of water?

In 2017-2018, in the third consecutive year of an unprecedentedly severe drought, the water shortage in Cape Town escalated to a full-blown water crisis, posing a near-existential threat to the city. Residents faced the unthinkable prospect of a disastrously disruptive 'Day Zero', when dam levels would be so low that reticulation to most households and businesses would be switched off and they would collect their daily water rations of twenty five litres per person from central distribution points.

In the end, catastrophe was averted. But how did it come to this? How did government and citizens respond to drought conditions, water shortage, and finally water crisis? How did the city manage to avoid going over the precipice? Most importantly: what were the lessons learnt from the experience?

Cape Town's water crisis had precedents: São Paulo 2014, Barcelona 2008, Australia's large cities in the 2000s. Far from being an event of merely local significance, the Day Zero story is an instance of two of the defining, coincident challenges of the 21st century: rising demands by human populations bumping up against resource availability limits, and the urgent need to adapt to a rapidly changing climate.

What can be learnt from this searing and costly narrowly averted disaster? Faultlines were exposed. A harsh light was thrown on an array of

uncomfortable truths. And some notable successes were achieved. What should be done differently in future? What can be emulated elsewhere?

The lessons that were learnt in Cape Town resonate with relevance far beyond the sphere of water management, applying to urban resilience challenges broadly and to other cities globally. As climate change brings disruption through extreme events, it becomes ever more urgent that we distil and apply the lessons that can be learnt from these periodic crises.

Building on the work he did as co-lead of the Cape Town Drought Response Learning Initiative for which he made nearly 100 film outputs with accompanying text components, director Victor van Aswegen draws on extensive, in-depth filmed interviews to present a lucid, comprehensive exposition of the lessons learnt in a 100-minute documentary – the capstone of a multiyear undertaking of enquiry and learning.

Interview material with the leading experts and senior officials involved in the crisis is intercut with striking footage of the city, its water supply system and the drought period, and combined with animated graphics encapsulating the facts, figures and key learnings.

The film tells the riveting story of a brush with contemporary urban catastrophe, and sets out an authoritative account of the lessons learnt with clarity and dispassion, articulating sharp, actionable conclusions – invaluable around the world today, as water supply systems globally come under strain, buckling under the combined impact of inexorable population growth and increasingly frequent extreme climatic events.

Principal photography commenced in September 2018, and the film is scheduled for international release in 2021.

Documentary

100 minutes

In production

English

UHD 4K

2.39:1 aspect ratio

Director: Victor van Aswegen

Director's note

In the work over the two-year period dedicated to the Cape Town Drought Response Learning Initiative, I was limited in the production of the film outputs to drawing from our interview material only. With the exception of some images of Theewaterskloof dam and Cape Town in a title sequence and some social media clips, all of the nearly 100 film outputs I made for the CTDRLI, with a total runtime of well over 50 hours, consist solely of talking heads.

Moving to the production of the *Day Zero* documentary feature, this constraint falls away, and the full array of filmmaking means becomes available to tell this gripping story and deliver the critical learnings from the crisis in a visually striking manner: archive footage from the drought period, footage of Cape Town and the Western Cape water supply system, music, static and animated graphics to make dramatically visible the movement and stark implications of some of the pivotal numbers – a key aspect of the story – and also to crystallise and land the lessons learnt in succinct, sharp, on-screen conclusions.

Not only does the full, powerful array of filmmaking tools become available, but the canvas also widens significantly at the same time. Whereas the longest of the learning-output films in the CTDRLI was just over twenty minutes, here we have the full duration of the feature-length format – 100 minutes in which justice can be done to the multifaceted nature of the event. For the first time the story can be told rewardingly and satisfyingly in its many aspects. Clear, actionable learnings can be delivered without having to gloss over – in order to stay within the bounds of a limiting format – the many interesting nuances, complexities, contrasting viewpoints, and real-world constraints.

I was drawn to this narrative and subject matter from the start because it manages to be both of this moment and ancient at the same time.

In public perception globally, when the Cape Town water crisis made headlines around the world, it hooked into pervasive and escalating concerns about climate change. The term “new normal” was much bandied about, with a question mark appended to it. The story always resonated with a relevance originating in a simple, nagging realisation: if it happened to them, it could happen to us. In a century in which climate is going to be changing and extreme weather events become more frequent, could this be the face of the future for rainfall-dependent cities the world over? The story, and the way it was often framed and presented – as a cautionary tale for the 21st century – has always had a premonitory aspect. It was instinctively read as a story of our time, and the times to come.

But perhaps it also resonated globally because it is such an ancient story.

Indeed, many of the difficult questions grappled with in Cape Town at the time are as old as human settlement and irrigated agriculture, and would also at times have been burning issues in the city-states of antiquity. For example, in times of shortage, how do you decide the allocation between the competing needs of farmers and city-dwellers, when, after all, everybody needs both water and the food grown by the farmers, who need water to do so? In a stratified society, where power and access to material resources are unequally distributed, how do you ensure that everybody has enough water, a basic necessity of life?

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Even more ancient than that, though, it is a story as old as humanity itself, far predating our settlement twelve thousand years ago. Because it is the story of our ultimate vulnerability – all ingenuity and engineering acumen and social cooperation notwithstanding – to forces of nature, environment, weather, climate, all beyond our control. The story in Cape Town during that period was the timeless one of our relationship to the sky. It was a time of looking up, day after day, viscerally experiencing our powerlessness, utter dependence, our existence in a world crushingly indifferent to our needs or survival – the simple, primal awareness that defines our condition.

Fascinatingly, though, it is an old story also in another sense. One of the most striking features of this narrative is that, for a sequence of events in recent history, it conforms remarkably closely to the mythic story structure we all know from a thousand books and films.

This is a timeline that can be reconstructed by lifting a series of cuttings from press reports of not that long ago. It is anchored in hard facts and key dates. It is, indeed, a “true story”. Yet the contours of the narrative hew surprisingly closely to the stages of the classic hero’s journey, the voyage and return story.

We all know it. It always begins from a point of departure in the ordinary world, where normality is upended somehow, leading to an increasingly persistent call to action, at first ignored or resisted. The initial reluctance to change is followed eventually by a separation from the ordinary world and a gradual, steady descent into a special world, disturbingly different

from the one from which the protagonist had set out and which has now become inaccessible. Here we had water restrictions and tariffs being ramped up initially, necessitating some adjustments, then followed by steady deterioration of the situation, finally escalating to the very real prospect of dry taps and an utterly strange, nightmarish special world looming, a radical disruption of normality: an urban dystopia of manual water collection points; the spectre of everybody queueing day after day under police and military protection for small daily rations of water that we cart away in containers.

The protagonist encounters a great many tests on the way, along with allies, enemies and mentors. All these abound in the Day Zero story, punctuating its many twists and turns.

There is, finally, the climactic ordeal, a potentially existential threat to the protagonist, requiring the summoning of hitherto unknown inner resources. There is a thrilling escape from death, followed ultimately by a return, in this circular journey, to the ordinary world -- with the reward, the elixir.

And as we know, from those stories, looking back, what it was all about turns out not to have been the external threat after all. Because what was gained from this momentous journey is the inner transformation of the protagonist. The initial state is now revealed as having been a condition of limited awareness; the elixir brought back from the special to the ordinary world is an expanded awareness, a deeper understanding, a new-found wisdom. The reward, wrought by the experience, is the lessons learnt -- this is what the protagonist brings back; this is how the journey can bring renewal to the world, can bring an extension into the future of the continued possibility of the life of the community.

In this mythic structure, elixir and ordeal stand in a crucial relationship to each other. At the heart of the voyage and return story is a warning: the protagonist who fails to learn from the experience is doomed to repeat the ordeal.

Whether the lessons from the Day Zero story are clearly -- and correctly -- understood is all-determining. Do uncertainty, confusion, misstatement and disagreement continue to swirl around them? Or are they grounded in rigour and research, tested by scrutiny, carefully weighed, put in proper perspective, authoritatively articulated, clearly and dispassionately set out, comprehensive, accessible, applicable?

The learnings are centre-stage. They encapsulate the transformation. They are the elixir. And that, in the first instance, is what *Day Zero* is about.

Victor van Aswegen