

Cape Town drought: who are the real champions?

We are only a month or two into the rainy season of the greater part of the Western Cape. It is too early to judge whether this will be a good rainy season or whether the drought conditions will persist. But at least the early rains have made a difference. The latest information from the Department of Water and Sanitation (“DWS”) indicates that Theewaterskloof Dam (the most important source for Cape Town) is standing at 26.6% compared to 16.7% this time last year. Clearly there is a long way to go (and still lots of rain needed) before Theewaterskloof will get close to 85% - the level at which DWS will lift water restrictions. This is also the level at which we can again survive two or three years of drought, provided that the dam is managed properly (and that is a critical proviso!). But at least it seems that for 2018, the spectre of Day Zero has faded completely. And as that spectre has faded the City of Cape Town (politicians and officials alike) has been quick to congratulate itself on a “job well done”. It has also received wide international and local acclaim for its efforts and “how much it has to teach the world”. How fickle and vain! Did government (all three spheres acting collectively) beat Day Zero? Definitely not! The collective that has beaten Day Zero are the inhabitants of Cape Town. They are the real champions in this story.

Yes, it is the inhabitants of Cape Town that had to endure the stresses and strains of more than halving water consumption. It is the inhabitants of Cape Town, who had to resort to bucket showers, gardening with buckets, using grey water to flush toilets, not flushing toilets at all, trying to catch every drop of rain and stocking up on bottled water (with prices skyrocketing). This they had to do to survive and to avert Day Zero and the complete disaster that would have spelt. They did it because they realised they have to look after themselves – because government (all three spheres collectively) has proven to be totally inept and offered nothing other than announcing stricter and stricter water restrictions. I believe at some point during 2017, the inhabitants of Cape Town stopped believing the garbage they were fed by the City. They realised that one or two miniature-scale desalination plants would have no effect whatsoever. Grandiose plans of “mining” the deep aquifer for millions of litres of water daily, they realised were just bullshit! This was just garbage-talk by the City (and others) to hide their own planning and management deficiencies leading up to the disaster in the first place.

It comes as no surprise that as the spectre of Day Zero is fading, the City has started discrediting the very measures that it was extolling at the height of the drought. Desalination of seawater and abstracting groundwater? No those are way too

expensive and complicated! But six months ago those solutions were going to save the City? (see News24 <https://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/getting-below-the-surface-of-the-cape-town-water-crisis-20180622>). And through all of this the ordinary citizens of Cape Town had to fight off efforts of the City to make them pay for the water they did not consume! This was justified so that the City could implement these very solutions it is now discrediting? A case of “Heads I win, Tails you lose”! And take note, that battle is not over yet by a long shot.

So yes, the inhabitants of Cape Town can offer the world out there some very good advice ~

1. Never again (fully) rely on government to provide you with essential services. Take care of yourself.
2. If you believe in climate change and its potential devastating effects – which the City is still using as its main scape goat – then you start planning how you will cope because relying on government is just sheer folly.
3. Reassess the value of essentials such as water and sanitation and luxuries such as electricity in your life, as government is totally unable to value and price these services and in this regard fails the first step in planning.
4. Government will try everything in its power to charge you more and more for services while providing less and less actual services. Hold onto your money and invest in your own infrastructure.

And while we acknowledge the ordinary citizens of Cape Town as the true heroes in this saga, spare a thought for all the farmers in the Western Cape who have had their livelihoods destroyed through the ineptness of government. These farmers can add another valuable piece of advice to the world out there: if it becomes clear that government is not performing its duties, don't hesitate to call them to account through the courts. Act sooner rather than later.

Are there any lessons that the City of Cape Town (and other government institutions) can share with the world out there? I believe there are – but it is not the type of back slapping ra, ra, ra that we are seeing at the moment. I believe the true lessons to be shared are ~

1. Long-range planning is not just a matter of drawing arbitrary graphs on a piece of paper and listing possible infrastructure interventions on an ad hoc basis. Long-range planning starts with understanding what drives demand for services and getting real insight as to where that demand is going and how you are going to continue servicing it.

2. Risk is not a few hypothetical events that gets listed in a risk matrix and is never considered again after that. Risk is real and if it materialises it can (and will) have devastating effect(s). You have to constantly monitor for the first, faint signs that a risk may be manifesting and deal with it immediately.
3. It is all very well to defer expenditure on infrastructure to build your balance sheet in order to get better ratings. But the essence of (local) government is the business of building infrastructure and selling services rendered through that infrastructure to your consumers. You get it right, the ratings will look after themselves. You get it wrong and your balance sheet will quickly disappear.

Those of us not living in Cape Town and surrounds should take heed of this advice and the lessons learnt. Hats off to the Capetonians, because tomorrow it is probably our turn.