

# On the record

---

## Talking about Day Zero and beyond: the impact of the water crisis on questions of vulnerability, risk and security

<http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2413-3108/2018/i63a4706>

*Few Capetonians would argue against the claim that the City has been rocked by the current water crisis that many have dubbed the most severe in modern history. Discussions about water saving techniques, membership of the 'Water Warriors' club, dinner party comparisons of family daily usage figures, discussion of toilet habits (to flush or not to flush?) and frenzied buying to secure 25-litre water containers have become part of daily life for those of us faced by the imminent (but previously unconscionable) threat of our taps running dry. Even the 'proudly oily' premier of the Western Cape has boasted that she only showers every three days to help beat back Day Zero. But the water crisis has not only raised important questions about residents' rights to, and responsibility for, the water they use. It has also brought to the surface interesting issues about criminality and crime control, and our individual and collective relationship to water. Stories of violence and incivility at water collection points and in supermarkets have captured attention on social media, and city dwellers have hotly debated the threat of organised crime, laws against rebottling and reselling of municipal water, and the Western Cape government's Water Disaster Plan, which gives the police and army responsibility for maintaining safety and order at water collection points.*

*Of course, while questions of water saving, risk and safety feel quite new to many Capetonians, scholars, activists and policymakers (including criminologists) have been writing about these issues for much longer. The Centre for Law and Society approached two scholars/activists to discuss the water crisis and its impact on questions of vulnerability, risk and security. Nick Simpson, an environmental and human development consultant (and post-doctoral scholar at the University of Cape Town), discussed questions of criminology in the age of the Anthropocene, and Vivienne Mentor-Lalu, a researcher/facilitator for the Women and Democracy Initiative at the Dullah Omar Institute at the University of the Western Cape, spoke to us about the gendered impact of the drought. Nolundi Luwaya, Kelley Moul, Diane Jefthas and Vitima Jere contributed to this piece.*

### **Nick Simpson interview**

**Centre for Law and Society (CLS):** You have been working, with Professor Clifford Shearing (a senior scholar with the Centre of Criminology at the University of Cape Town), on so-called 'green criminology', and in particular on questions of (in)security in the age of the

Anthropocene – an era where humans are impacted by the changes that our civilisation has wrought on the environment. Could you talk a bit about how this area of criminology, and the water crisis, illustrate these questions?

**Nick Simpson (NS):** The argument is that we are now in the Anthropocene [which means

that] we are living in an environment that is unpredictable, unknown and sometimes capricious. Our past modelling systems aren't appropriate [to deal with it]. Therefore, we need to be more aware of how to deal with new shocks and new risks *without* pulling out the guns, [in other words] with a level head. Clifford Shearing and I are currently working on an article [on the water crisis], and you can see how in May last year Patricia de Lille, Cape Town City's mayor, changed the whole framing of the drought. She started talking about it as 'the new normal', which is essentially in terms of the Anthropocene. You can't necessarily use terminology like that in media releases, but the descriptors of it are all Anthropocene. From October last year the Western Cape provincial government also picked up on [this framing] and it's starting to be the discussion from government. But if you talk to one of the engineers in water and sanitation, they are still in denial, thinking that 'it will still rain' ... that this drought is an anomaly and we'll get back to normal.

But just this week Europe is getting a huge wake-up call itself. They are in freezing temperatures, and it's very likely that this is because the polar vortex [which concentrates freezing air over the North Pole, insulating it from warmer temperatures to the south] is splitting, which has caused the North Pole to be 30 degrees warmer this month than it normally is. So I think that the new earth – and what the harms coming from the new earth are going to be – is a really big question. We're not ready to govern it, nor secure it.

**CLS:** Could you give us a sense of what some of the long- and short-term safety and security risks of the water crisis are? We seem to be seeing a lot of the language of crisis, talking about the crisis as a short-term stage of state of emergency that will pass. Like 'defeat Day Zero' – that there is this one thing that we've

got to get through. It is very much the language of the temporary, and it implies that you don't have to change everything about how you engage with resources.

**NS:** Much of the messaging speaks to the short term – to what we need to do right now, and also through to 2019, when we're hoping for some rain. And we have seen how the issue has been conceptualised in terms of types of safety and security risks, in this case a 'real' security issue [that requires a police or military response]. But if you think of the governance of harm more broadly conceptualised, which is how Clifford [Shearing] and I have been thinking, then you see that there are other obvious risks that are right in front of us. I think, for example, that the number one risk right now might be fire. If there is a fire, how do we deal with it? Do we just spray all of our precious water on the mountain? They can't use salt water for fire systems.

These things aren't hierarchical, but in my mind the next most important thing would be if home water-saving strategies – your household coping arrangements – don't adequately deal with sanitation issues. There is then a real risk of the outbreak of cholera or any number of communicable diseases. Following on from that, food security and food access across the city is already strained in a number of areas, particularly as it relates to nutrition, and if you are taking water away, it changes diets, and it changes fresh produce availability. These are much more long-term risks.

When I was flipping through the World Wide Fund for Nature's water file, they had quite an interesting piece on giving advice to people who might get laid off, addressing questions like 'what does unemployment mean for me now if my employer says we can't afford to keep you'? And they have included some advice for an employer – how do employers facilitate this arrangement [in response to the water crisis] in as appropriate a way as possible? I hadn't heard

that discussion much yet. I think a lot of people were thinking that it's going to hit the GDP, but when you tether it down to people's livelihoods and think about the fact that folks are going to very likely be laid off ... Another example would be the seasonal farm workers who should be working on the farms. This next year, there may be no work for them. To have that number of people without water and sitting on their hands without income is a potential powder keg, you could say, for crime.

**CLS:** And hasn't a lot of the information that has circulated from the city's water crisis plan been focused on securing or policing the provision of water when Day Zero arrives?

**NS:** Joellen Pretorius, a professor in political studies at the University of the Western Cape, recently wrote an op-ed in *The Conversation* saying that to treat water security as a safety and security issue is problematic and dangerous because there are ways of responding within a security frame that might not necessarily be appropriate to the humanitarian type responses that are needed. She pointed to the experience of Hurricane Katrina, in the United States. You send in the army, but it's not necessarily going to do what you need in that situation. In our context, it could possibly lead to a heightened militarisation in vulnerable areas that are already stressed. You don't know whether it is going to make the problem worse or help solve it.

**CLS:** And of course, that raises important questions about how communities will respond, given the already-strained relationships with the police.

**NS:** This speaks quite a bit to Clifford Shearing's work in Australia at the moment, where he is trying to develop the notion of 'resilience policing'. Resilience policing is where the community is working together with security or police or other public safety officials to proactively plan and analyse what risks and threats that community is facing and to work

together with the police [in solving them]. I think this is really a good idea, because it protects against some of the real rhetoric that we have seen already with [Helen] Zille's anarchy-kind of statements that drive elite panic in the city. There has been quite a lot of positive discussion out there on community drives and a discourse of good neighbourliness. People are encouraging each other to form street communities and pull together [for water sourcing and management], to have communication channels already set up in case of an emergency, reminding people not to leave it till the last minute when they have already run out [of water]. Encouraging citizens to make connections so that they can ask their neighbour [for help] if they need to. I think that this is an interesting and cool development, as it speaks to a duty of care in communities, and raises interesting ideas about strategies for resilience. It also raises interesting questions about how this impacts policing, because if we are looking out for each other in communities, this may change the police's role in responding to the crisis.

**CLS:** You raise an interesting point about a more holistic conceptualisation of communities' risks and vulnerabilities, historical and current, and how these factor into plans around the water crisis. Could you say a little more?

**NS:** There is some work being done at the moment to think about where to place water delivery pods, and whether you should map it specifically on [existing] infrastructure, and if so, how that maps against the vulnerabilities within the social geography of Cape Town. The World Health Organization says that if you are setting up a point of distribution it should be 1.6 km or less from the next available point. Because you can't expect someone to walk more than that distance for their water for the day. And 1.6 km is still a long way to go, particularly if you are a youngster, or an older person, or someone with a disability. So [these kinds of groups] are very

much at risk if we end up having to go the way of water collection points.

If we get to Day Zero and we are using water distribution points in the way that they are currently designed, they do not map geographically on to gang areas well. Which is why the Disaster Risk Management Group and Safety and Security have chosen to go with pods that are stationary pods, which you can secure in a sort of 'militarised' way more easily than if you are transporting water. The planners are concerned about gangs coming in and hijacking water tankers coming through. A situation like that would be disastrous, [and it] has happened in São Paulo, in their water stressed scenario. So, I don't think you can quantify what the heightened tension and stress across the city is, but it is definitely there, underlying things. Who knows, we might find, looking back, that road rage went up.

**CLS:** Can you talk a little bit more about the impact of the safety and security messaging around the water delivery plan?

**NS:** The city's response at the moment seems to be along the lines of 'the whole city is vulnerable right now [...] any place could flare up in any moment'. Which is a bit of an excessive, scaremongering response. The people who are supposed to be managing the situation right now are a little bit freaked out as to the scale of potential anarchy. And of course, how much that's perceived or real is debatable, but perception can become reality when it comes to safety and security issues. In our observations of the last three months, for example, if you are doing an analysis of twitter influencers on #dayzero or #watercrisis, there are emphases and shifts that ebb and flow, which do affect the way people respond ... do they freak out, or come up with technical solutions, practical solutions? Messaging actually affects the way people act. That being said, though, there is quite a bit of research

out there that shows that mass hysteria and lawlessness during disasters is surprisingly rarer than you would expect. Instead, it shows that people do work together, do get over themselves for the sake of the crisis. And so the degree of fearmongering might actually work that way round – that it is not necessarily going to cause people greater harm, but might bring people together. It just depends on how it is managed, communicated and perceived. So, obviously, we need to be careful about the framing of a security response to water scarcity because there's a good and a bad way of doing that. And if it goes wrong it could go very wrong.

**CLS:** Picking up on that point, what do you think is missing in the public response to the water crisis?

**NS:** One thing I have picked up on only in the last two weeks is 'fake news' and how that can lead to its own harms, which need to be secured, and which we are very unprepared for. People don't know what a reliable source of information for the drought is or how they should respond to the drought. If you're just flipping through Facebook for advice on that, which many people are doing, you could land on something that is really good or land on something that is useless and takes your trust away from people that are trying to help you. So I think fake news is relevant.

I also attended the *Hack the Cape Water Crisis* event that was held [in late February] hoping to find some answers. But I was actually quite disappointed. It turned into more of a community hate-the-city [government] forum than the positive behavioural change and technological solutions that it had been promoted to be. There have been hundreds and hundreds of very innovative things that people are proposing, which is fantastic. But to my knowledge, at the moment, [these innovations] are not being systematically captured, promoted or communicated in a way that actually markets

them for scale. It's more like ... cool, this person has got this little solution and that's great for him, but what about the rest of us?

As a researcher, I think one interesting thing that came out of the hack-a-thon is that one of the engineers there said that he has been doing a bit of analysis of the sales of rain tanks, not as a measure of resilience, but as a measure of how scared the more wealthy Capetonians are of the drought, because they are the only guys who can really afford these tanks. Which is an interesting take on 'how do we respond and protect', because there are folks spending R140 000 putting in a borehole for themselves, when, if they spent that amount of money on rain harvesting for all the houses on the street, they would probably collectively yield more and it would be shared well across that community. So if you want to cut across it, you can look at the private solutions that people are engaging in based on their own ability, compared to improving the public provision of water security and water goods.

There's real flux at the moment – there's a lack of trust in the public provision of the public good of water and there's a huge bun fight already happening between the local government, provincial government and national government over whether they should or can release the funds for [the water crisis]. So people are doing their own thing. But when you're talking about rainwater harvesting solutions, they are not cheap. And so again it's those that can't afford it who wouldn't have access to those types of technological solutions.

**CLS:** And of course, there have been questions raised about who benefits from the crisis. Even just looking at the price of water, there's been a lot of discussion about how in the space of that panic we went from R12 a bottle of water to R25 a bottle of water.

**NS:** The City has just set up a by-law on [selling water] because they realised, a little bit late,

that [people] are going to be like piranhas. The by-law introduces restrictions that prevent people from going to a spring, for example, and putting [the water] in a tank and selling it. The City received 43 000 comments on this by-law in a week, most of which are not commenting on the by-law, but are using that mechanism as a way to vent [their frustrations around the water crisis]. But the City is quickly recognising that this [crisis] is going to harm a lot of folk who are possibly already spending 60% of their salary on transport to work.

**CLS:** This leads nicely into our last question, which is: how do we collectively – that is, government and communities – respond to and plan and address the issues that are related to the crisis?

**NS:** I think most important is that the City of Cape Town desperately needs national government to release sufficient funds to push through the water augmentation strategies. If government, like it has been doing, relies on their green bonds to finance a couple of hundred million rand here, and if they stick within their normal funding cycles, and only do a project that operates within a three or five year cycle, the response is so short term. Their plan to build temporary desalination plants, and then return the sites to how they were after the crisis, is not a long-term solution. And all of [these strategies] are aimed at trying to get out of the environmental impact assessment regulations that would demand a fuller, longer process. If you think of the Japanese education policy shifts in 1920, they set an 80-year plan ahead of them. And that's how we have got to start thinking about water in Africa ... if we are just thinking that we're going to deal with this [problem] this year, and then we can just dismantle that infrastructure because we can't afford it ... we are mistaken. And I understand that national government's water budget is broke. There are billions of rands missing there.

And I don't know, perhaps they're hoping Cape Town can just pull itself up by its own bootstraps. But there's nowhere in the world where a local government has the financing capacity – maybe London does – to deal with what's required here. So, putting pressure on national government would be very useful.

### **Vivien Mentor-Lalu interview**

**CLS:** Vivienne, could you highlight some of the specific and particular challenges and burdens that you think the drought and the water crisis places on women? The kinds of impacts that are invisible.

**Vivien Mentor-Lalu (VML):** I remember when we were having the rolling power failures a few years ago and we had outages all the time, I saw this newspaper article from Gauteng recommending that the use of washing machines and ironing and all of those household tasks happen at midnight or the early hours of the morning. And I thought, 'Oh my God! What does that mean for women?' What does that mean for women who do that work? There is no regard for the impact on women. So it's all very 'practical'. Governance, crisis management and planning are very male, masculine and patriarchal, and sometimes even machismo kind of spaces. When they plan and when they make these recommendations, there is no regard for women's lived realities. And so these plans are made so blithely. That's the thing that has struck me, even about the water restrictions, and the adjustments that households have already had to make to save water. Water usage largely goes around cooking and cleaning, and the people who carry the burden for that already in the household are women.

When the crisis was still at its worst and we were expecting Day Zero to happen imminently, it struck me that public schools can't afford the kind of water-saving technologies and strategies that private schools can afford, like boreholes and whatever else rich parents can supply.

Which means that it is going to be *mothers* that are going to be struggling to figure out how to keep their kids going to school if there is no water at schools. And so a picture forms about how things connect – education, and the under-resourcing of public education – and where that burden falls and how women especially are affected by these multiple layers of problems.

**CLS:** And this raises additional safety and security risks – if you're a man going to stand in the queue to fetch your 25 litres of water versus if you are a woman who has additional security concerns.

**VML:** 'Intersectionality' is that word that has become like the word 'empowerment' ... it almost doesn't have a meaning anymore because it's used so much. But I think that a crisis like this unpacks vulnerabilities ... makes them real and visible. People living in urban-poor spaces are already struggling for access to basic services. Water collection points are not a new thing for poor people ... having to walk to taps, or having to have buckets in the house. Figuring out how things are going to be kept clean, how to do the cooking and laundry and all of the work of a household without water on tap. This is not a new thing. I think what is new is that the middle classes are beginning to feel those burdens.

**CLS:** So, Vivienne, do you have any thoughts on how one foregrounds this kind of gendered analysis? How do you make these kinds of conversations – thinking about these kinds of issues in these particularly gendered and intersectional ways – how do we make that the mainstream?

**VML:** Even this word, 'mainstreaming', is another one of those words that I struggle to make sense of, and rather try not to use it. It's being co-opted so much by government that it's lost all meaning. But I have recently been in spaces where women have come together to specifically talk about this issue, and talk

about it from an unashamedly feminist position. And these women brought in other layers of experience – the issue of rural poor women, the issue of land, dispossession and water rights. Encouraging us to look at these issues historically – not just looking at the drought that’s been coming on for the last couple of years, but looking at the history of colonialism and being in a post-apartheid society. Asking what it means in terms of the land issue and how that links to access to water and who has rights and ownership of water. These discussions really deepened and broadened the debate to levels that I hadn’t even thought about. I have found those spaces quite useful. But, as always, it’s very difficult to think about questions about ‘what do we do’ and ‘what is needed’? And the thinking there was that we needed two things: first, we need to push a women’s agenda in the crisis committees and water committees that are emerging. Second, women do need a women’s space, a specific space where women are coming together to talk and strategise.

**CLS:** I suppose this raises tough questions. Technically, you almost want sort of a combination between government taking the lead in a way that foregrounds these issues, but you also obviously want the bottom-up approach, where communities and the women themselves are foregrounding their lived experiences. And so it really is a bit unfair to expect this thinking to come from just the one side – from communities.

**VML:** You’re pointing to a bigger problem around the lack of political will ... another one of those words! But I am referring to the lack of political will around women and the issues that women face in the country generally. A lot of us working in this sector feel that we need to go back again to look at budgeting – trying to see where we can apply pressure to move the state to respond more decisively around issues

that affect women. Gender-based violence is an obvious example here. I think that the issue of water, and how women are affected by water, is situated in that broader debate around a lack of real political will to tackle and to shift the structural issues that face women in South Africa. The state is happy to talk about women as victims, and ‘rescuing’ women. They are happy to engage in 16 Days of Activism, and say ‘we must protect our women’. They are quite happy with that language. But when it comes to talking about structural issues that women face, and addressing women claiming power? You don’t find spaces in government where you can have those conversations.

**CLS:** Are there any sort of specific, gender-sensitive responses, or at least, responses that are sensitive to the gendered impact of the crisis with water coming from citizens or government? Perhaps women having a presence on committees, but is there anything else even in people’s neighbourhoods that they could do that responds to the crisis in a way that is cognisant of its gendered dynamics?

**VML:** How does one deal with addressing the practical ‘here-and-now’ issues while at the same time trying to fight to dismantle this patriarchal system or society? On the one hand, people have been speaking about being mindful that women can’t carry these heavy water drums, or how do you get water if you’re a single mom, for example. There is obviously a range of those kinds of practical questions. And there may well be practical solutions, but like I said, that obviously does not dismantle that this burden falls on women. It just gives you a little bit of a crutch. Someone is going to design a water drum on wheels so women can then push these things and they don’t have to lift the drums up and carry them. But it’s still women’s responsibility to have to figure out how to get the water. That innovation doesn’t shift the gendered responsibility. I think we need a

balance – yes, obviously you want to deal with the practical issues, the real concerns around safety and how women access the water. But we should not lose sight of the fact that we are also fighting and trying to create a different reality that recognises women’s contributions but also tries to shift that burden of unpaid labour that women carry.

**CLS:** I suppose that is a really tough challenge – the tension between the present and having your eye constantly cast on the future. Reflecting on the ease with which we say: the best we can do right now is make it easier...

**VML:** It is important – you can’t discount that you need to make people’s lives easier and you have to respond to women’s practical needs. These are the same tensions we face around women and violence. Women should be able to walk around at night, but we don’t because we want to be safe. And so it becomes an issue around how women constantly have to negotiate that space.

As activists we need to think about what we are doing next around the water crisis. The immediate crisis may be gone, but even if the Day Zero crisis has been pushed back and averted, that fact hasn’t changed the kind of difficulties and struggles that women face. The cost of water has now gone up significantly, and we know that these water usage devices that the City is putting in homes are largely affecting working class homes where you have extended families living in the same house. I think that for the middle classes the crisis has been averted for now and people aren’t so anxious anymore. But the reality is that for poor, working-class, black people the crisis is very much still alive. The commodification of water and the increase of the cost of water is sort of sneaking in as a result of the water crisis and I think it’s going to have a real impact on people’s quality of life.

## Note

- 1 A Trench, ‘I only shower every third day’, says proudly oily Zille, *Times Live*, 20 September 2017, <https://www.timeslive.co.za/politics/2017-09-20-i-only-shower-every-third-day-says-proudly-oily-zille/> (accessed 2 March 2018).