

Drought to Disparity: Political Injustice in Cape Town's Water Crisis Mitigation

12th October 2023

AP Seminar Mock IRR

Word Count: 660

Political Injustice in Cape Town's Water Crisis Mitigation

In 2018, the city of Cape Town announced that, after three years of drought, the city would be heading toward “Day Zero”, where all water supply within the city would be shut off and its 3.7 million residents would be left without water. Throughout the next six months, this situation, said to “surpass anything a major city has faced since World War II or the Sept. 11 attacks” (New York Times 2018), was narrowly averted through a combination of stringent water restrictions, global support campaigns, and fortunately, increased rainfall. However, although the crisis was successfully mitigated, it uncovered many social disparities and systemic issues ingrained within the city's water governance and allocation strategies. Dr. Catherine Grasham, a professor at Oxford University who specialises in water security in Africa, outright stated that “events like droughts... impact people differently depending on structural reasons such as class, gender, and historical legacies of discrimination and segregation” (Enqvist 2; Grasham 8). This paper explores how the city of Cape Town, already plagued with severe wealth disparity and racial segregation from the apartheid era, inequitably imposed water restrictions and infringed upon the rights of its people to avert its impending water crisis.

Racially Segregated Groups

South Africa's apartheid history, where institutionalized racial segregation and discrimination systematically marginalized the Black population and forced them into inferior living conditions, played a pivotal role in shaping the injustices perpetuated by the Cape Town government in their attempt to mitigate the water crisis. During the apartheid, most public services were primarily developed for White residents, while Black citizens struggled with overcrowded neighbourhoods, mismanagement of resources and blatant corruption (Smith 382). Even today, with policies of socio-economic integration, the “social status of Capetonians

continues to be deeply intertwined with race, [where] more affluent neighbourhoods remain predominantly white” (Savelli 5). During the 2018 water crisis, the city’s primary approach to reducing water usage was to impose a block tariff, where residents paid for excess water usage based on household consumption. However, since a large proportion of Black Capetonians resided in underdeveloped municipalities, where water infrastructure was poorly maintained and leaky, many “household water meters registered extreme usage levels adding further debt to thousands of households” (Enqvist 4). While these residents suffered through water shortages, privileged White households simply paid for additional consumption or relied on alternative sources. Evidently, this disproportionate vulnerability to the crisis “results from (post)colonial, (post)apartheid and poverty discrimination that is at the core of unequal provision of formal piped networks, water quantity, and quality” (Grasham 8).

Low-Income Groups

Similarly, Cape Town’s strategies towards drought mitigation also disproportionately affected low-income households within the city. Although the tax policy was initiated to help poor residents, charging for water based on household usage did not account for households with larger families. When two dozen people lived together, like in many impoverished households, “even a very low capita water use [added] up to an above-average household consumption, resulting in a higher [tax] rate” (Enqvist 9). Poor households, already using precariously low amounts of water, had less opportunity to reduce their water consumption compared to rich people with pools and gardens. Furthermore, if Day Zero occurred and the government cut off water supply, low-income households that would have been unable to pay significant sums in taxes would have been the people who would be most drastically impacted by the water crisis.

Socio-Political Roles in Cape Town Water Governance

Although Cape Town successfully mitigated the grave water crisis, it is evident that the demand management approaches utilized disproportionately burdened racially segregated and impoverished households. The infringement of water rights and the unfair treatment of poor Capetonians highlights the remnants of the city's apartheid legacy and the immense economic discrimination in the city's water governance strategies. While water restrictions are still necessary for drought prevention, the city's government needs to recognize its demographic diversity and understand the negative effects of its water governance strategies on already underprivileged communities.

Works Cited

- Enqvist, Johan P., and Gina Ziervogel. "Water governance and justice in Cape Town: An overview." *WIREs Water*, vol. 6, no. 4, 26 May 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1002/wat2.1354>
- Grasham, Catherine F., et al. "On considering climate resilience in Urban Water Security: A review of the vulnerability of the urban poor in sub-saharan Africa." *WIREs Water*, vol. 6, no. 3, 31 Mar. 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1002/wat2.1344>
- Onishi, Norimitsu, and Somini Sengupta. "Dangerously Low on Water, Cape Town Now Faces 'Day Zero.'" *The New York Times*, 30 Jan. 2018.
- Savelli, Elisa. "US and them: Privileged emotions of Cape Town's urban water crisis." *Geoforum*, vol. 141, 12 Apr. 2023, p. 103746, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2023.103746>
- Smith, Laila. "The murky waters of the second wave of neoliberalism: Corporatization as a service delivery model in Cape Town." *Geoforum*, vol. 35, no. 3, 23 Jan. 2004, pp. 375–393, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2003.05.003>

Works Referenced

- Millington, Nate, and Suraya Scheba. "Day zero and the infrastructures of climate change: Water governance, inequality, and infrastructural politics in Cape Town's water crisis." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, vol. 45, no. 1, 30 Mar. 2020, pp. 116–132, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.12899>.
- Rodina, Lucy. "Water resilience lessons from Cape Town's water crisis." *WIREs Water*, vol. 6, no. 6, 4 Aug. 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1002/wat2.1376>.