

Crises, downside up

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Luzuko's words are still ringing in my mind. *I wonder, why crisis now? Why does it need a rich person with garden and borehole to declare a water crisis? There are thousands of people living in Cape Town who are used to get along with 25 liters of water per day. They could have told you about a water crisis already years ago.* That was in September 2018. I spent three months in Cape Town for an ethnographic research on the so-called water crisis. A severe drought had hit Cape Town in 2015, low precipitation dragged on for years and culminated in a water crisis that reached its dramatic high point with the City of Cape Town (CoCT) announcing Day Zero for early 2018, the day when the taps will be shut off for the city. Thanks to drastic water savings by citizens, agriculture and businesses as well as heavy winter rains from 2018 onwards, supplies were sufficiently replenished and Day Zero was averted. The events in Cape Town circulated worldwide as a story of success, in which a city of four million had defeated a major crisis.

The happenings revolving around the Cape Town water crisis can be considered as a forecast for parallel events that might take place during the next challenge, which has already arrived in South Africa: the Covid-19 crisis. Therefore, I would like to look back and pick up on a few considerations on the water crisis narrative in Cape Town that could also be relevant for further crisis-talks.

The questions that shall be kept in mind are: How are deeply entrenched inequities and established ways of categorizing citizens laid bare and challenged during the water crisis in Cape Town? Whose lifeworld and lived experiences are reflected in the narrative of the crisis, and whose are excluded? What is the status quo for crisis production?

I met Luzuko at the Water Collection Point (WCP) in Newlands, a leafy and well-off suburb of Cape Town, where a diverse public comes together to fill up bottles with fresh spring water coming down from Table Mountain. In the wake of the drought, Level 6B water restrictions were set in by the CoCT, prohibiting citizens from using more than 50 liters per person daily. Higher water consumption resulted in high water bills, as the water restrictions were accompanied by steep tariff hikes. Most of the people coming to the WCP – the water collectors – wanted to stock up their water supply and save money by reducing the use of municipal water. Luzuko was a water helper. Together with fifteen others, mostly men, he offered his physical

strength and endurance to relieve those, who became his customers. The water helpers started early in the morning, when the gates of the WCP opened from 5am to ring in a new working day. At that time many of them had already a one-hour bus ride from the Cape Flats to the Newlands suburb. Often, they undertook the whole process of waiting with the empty water containers in the queue, then filling them up at the water faucets, carrying the full containers back to the car only to start all over again. On an eight to ten-hour shift the number of carried water canisters could easily mount up to about 600 liters in total. In exchange for their service they hoped to receive a good tip, as their newly created job as a water helper was their main – if not only – income. It was a job that did not exist to this extent prior to the water crisis. The water helpers *invented* this job due to conditions of water shortage and drought in Cape Town. More and more people joined this activity for whom the current water shortage could be understood as an opportunity rather than a change for the worse.

The first thing that one become aware of, is that the water crisis narrative in Cape Town represents one dominant perspective that neglects a huge part of urban society by overshadowing lived experiences of marginalized and poor residents of the city. The dominant crisis narrative implies that Day Zero is a natural and inevitable surprise, that scarcity is a calculated fact and that running out of water impacts everybody in society equally. Underlying this is an understanding of crisis as a rupture or break separating two states of normality from each other: The established ways of doing things do not work anymore which leads to instability, uncertainty and temporary disorder. Usually the aim is to return to the previous, ‘normal’ living condition. By definition the water crisis narrative leaves out those of society for whom conditions of water shortage is day-to-day reality.

The fear that grew inside the middle-class around the drought and Day Zero is yet very different to the challenges the people in informal settlements are facing. The access to the resource water for many residents in Cape Town is not an evident matter. Especially against the backdrop of a city like Cape Town, where many residents routinely struggle for access to water and electricity and poor and marginalized settlements regularly protest the lack of service delivery, the water crisis also reveals significant inequities that persists along class and racial lines, deeply entrenched in this post-apartheid city. As a positive outcome this obvious unveiling of such inequities might lead to rethinking of the middle-class Capetonian’s idea of water as something self-evident, something that ‘just comes and goes’. Statements of some interlocutors evinced that they started to see their lives in reference to the life of others and became aware of their privilege and of infrastructural disparities that exist in the city.

Luzuko's words also imply the question of why it has not been reason enough that many people in Cape Town (or entire villages in South Africa) have already been living their whole lives without basic access to water in order to declare a water crisis. Secondly, one should therefore be aware that crisis is not an ontological term and is not simply a description of an event but instead it is produced and used as a narrative device (mainly in politics). Crisis claims have a normative dimension. When in a crisis, normality is turned upside down, then the question appears: What is the normal state? Crisis compared to what? We should not disregard the fact that media coverage on the circumstances in Cape Town were mainly based on the lifeworlds of rather affluent citizens, or at least those who have adequate access to water.

Among the measures to be taken by citizens to combat the crisis were "taking short showers, 'neither fill the pool, water the garden nor wash the car with municipal water', operate the toilet flush based on the motto "If it's yellow, let it mellow, if it's brown, flush it down". Those recommendations by the CoCT were not at all relatable to people who share a public standpipe with 20 other households and already gave up relying on government to get basic service delivery. The way the CoCT went about reporting on the crisis therefore uncovers their target audience categorized as Capetonians.

Thirdly, whatever temporal brackets crisis comprised for this or that group, be it the current water shortage or else their life being in a constant shortage of basic needs, the way people cope in uncertain settings is characterized by improvisation, ingenuity and finding makeshift solutions, aimed to recreate a new order again or any kind of stability. The emergence of new fields of activity and practices, like the job of the water helpers can be seen as an outcome of their experiences with living in and with fluctuations and their know-how to identify and embrace any given opportunity within a volatile life. In this specific context of the WCP, it enabled them to turn the crisis of others into their own advantage and to benefit from the water crisis as 'innovative small entrepreneurs', if only temporarily.

Thereby the water helpers also helped to stabilize the processes at the WCP, especially for the water collectors, for whom the sudden conversion and the need for flexibility and improvisation produced rather stress and panic. For the latter, the way to the spring was indispensable since getting along with only 50 liters posed a significant challenge. Many of their new practices and behavioral strategies were on the one hand aimed to save water in any possible way but on the other hand also to become more independent from the municipal water grid as much as possible. Whereas for example the water helpers tried to get access to the municipal water grid, many middle- or upper-class families frequently voiced the wish of going 'off-the-water-grid'. Augmenting the private water supply through boreholes, water tanks, rainwater harvesting,

wells and reusing grey water represented a way to become a more ‘water-wise’ and solidary citizen.

The brief insight into the dynamics at the WCP in Newlands and the way how the CoCT coped with the water crisis underlines that crisis narratives often ensure that the attention on supposedly urgent events supplants a whole range of other phenomena. Before taking crises as a starting point for further discussions or critique, we should therefore question the matter itself and challenge the status quo for crisis claims. If one recognizes that crisis narratives are always directed toward a norm, it is possible that they lay bare injustices and challenge prevailing power dynamics. Yet, there is often the wrong assumption that a prolonged crisis or a condition that has been in poor state for a long time becomes normal at some point for those experiencing and living with it. As a result: nothing changes, or nothing is changed. To highlight situated practices of often marginalized people as an equivalent voice within crises is core for a more holistic and inclusive approach to crises.

South Africa recently declared the next national state of disaster. This time, it is, among other things, the inequity regarding access to healthcare that the coronavirus crisis lays bare in Cape Town as well as worldwide. It also reveals that those declared measures to curb the further spread of the virus – self-isolation, *social distancing*, home-office and washing hands regularly – are only realizable and practical for well-off people with sufficient space and infrastructure. Many people in the world cannot relate to this particular living standard.

It also reveals what measures can be taken at once, what funds can be mobilized, how quick decisions can be made or how regulations can be repealed. The current global crisis narrative on the coronavirus emphasize again the importance of challenging the crises’ inherent normative dimension. It is very different in what way people are affected by the pandemic, depending on class, race or gender, religion or political orientation. Challenging the status quo of crisis production is prerequisite for ensuring a more holistic, equal and inclusive debate on crises.

I take up Luzuko’s issue again and ask: Besides the obviously existing circumstances of people for whom crisis has become routinised and the background of their lives, what else needs to happen to recognize the obligation to work against societal imbalances, hardship and injustice? Are we going to wait for people in privileged positions, until a long-lasting crisis affects them personally and then they officially declare it a crisis, before we really do anything? What needs to happen so that the status quo, the normal condition, is not always assumed and defined by the lifeworld of privileged people, but gets finally turned downside up?