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## Commentary \ **Hello #WaterWars, Bye Bye #DayZero— Where have you gone ClimateChaos old friend?**

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**Larry Swatuk, Associate Researcher at BICC, comments on ongoing popular debates like #WaterWars, #DayZero. He argues for avoiding alarmism and hyperbole as tools of motivation for human action. Instead, Swatuk reflects on the challenge to ensure adequate amounts and qualities of water for the world's poor.**

As doyens of the water world met recently in Brasilia in their biannual reflection on the state of the planet's most precious resource, I wish to reflect on the perceived value and harm attached to alarmism and hyperbole as tools of motivation for human action. Why over-statement is popular is not a puzzle: People gravitate to the 'man bites dog' form of headline. Why negativity in reporting and possibly also in scholarship generally triumphs—in terms of revenue, clicks, retweets, research funding and policy pronouncements—is also not a puzzle: Humans depend on certainty and predictability for their security, so the prospect of dramatic change due to some ill-advised action or inaction tends to grab our attention. Put differently, we take our successes for granted. That most people on the planet sleep soundly in their beds—be they on bare earth, straw or luxury mattress—is just not interesting to us humans. Ours is a dangerous world, so we are built for fight or flight, always on the lookout for the poisonous snake, the spider, the shark. We are genetically predisposed to gravitate to stories of impending doom. A bigger puzzle pertains to why some claims that 'the sky is falling' drive us to action, while some others do not. Elsewhere, (<https://lswatuk.blogspot.ca/2012/>) I have ruminated on the reasons why it was so difficult to get 'us' to act in a concerted and collective fashion on climate change. In brief, what I said there was that two of the most important factors mitigating against concerted action are: (1) people are differently impacted with some even benefiting from the general impacts (and possibly profiting from the negative impacts); and (2) the time horizons for the world's climate #dayzero differ considerably with decision-makers' (re)election cycles.

### **Alarmism to challenge world leaders to take action?**

Recently, we have seen the re-emergence of the #WaterWars discourse in state houses and think tanks around the world (see <https://flows.hypotheses.org/1126>). One presumes that the motive behind such alarmism is to challenge world leaders to take

action in order to avoid such hypothesized wars. In 1995, then-World Bank vice-president Ismael Serageldin famously stated that if the wars of the 20th century were over oil, those of the 21st would be over water if appropriate measures to avoid such outcomes were not taken. Being Egyptian, one can infer a primary target of his remarks to be the riparian states that share the Nile River Basin, but make no mistake: They were intended to be heard around the world. There have been two principal outcomes of this pronouncement in the intervening 23 years: One, there has been a great deal done in the service of water for peace by states, civil societies and private sector actors. Some of this was new, but much had been on-going, predating Serageldin's statement. Two, there have been a great many commentators who have ignored the latter part of his statement (the call to action), the outcomes relating to that call to action, and who have instead spilled a great deal of ink forecasting water's existing and coming central role in (inter-state) violent conflict. One would be right to suspect that the latest iteration of the water wars narrative is designed to push influential state and private sector actors toward recognition of water's key place in shaping the world's climate, as well as its central role in economic production especially energy and food production. Hence, the World Economic Forum consistently announces water to be one of the top five risk factors to global peace and security, while pressing for policies and practices concerning the so-called WEF-nexus (water–energy–food and climate–security nexus).

#### **Challenge to ensure adequate amounts and qualities of water for the world's poor**

Choosing the high-road of charitable interpretation, one would see these as noble and laudable attempts to shift the world's major water uses toward integrated, efficient and sustainable practices. However, it is equally important, it seems to me, to point out that sounding the alarm about water wars not only ignores the facts of widespread inter-state cooperation (so doing a disservice to all those engaged in fostering cooperation on water resources for peaceful outcomes), but simultaneously gains the attention of the wrong audience (those tasked with preparing and making war, i.e. the military) while distracting us from the greatest challenge related to water, that of ensuring adequate amounts and qualities of water for the world's poor. To the world's poor, water is not only life but too often it is the source of death, e.g., through vector-borne disease, drought and flood. Since those with the guns and the money also have all the water they need, the alarmism surrounding a coming war over water, falls mostly on deaf ears. As research by Aaron Wolf and his colleagues at the University of Oregon shows, the rich fight and cooperate over water all the time. Shooting wars, where militaries are mobilized and deployed, are a fiction of the imagination. To be sure, violent conflict exists, but mostly at the hyper-local level and usually in an unusually extended period of

drought. At the same time, the spectre of a water war between states inevitably sucks up financial resources, human capacity and time—all of which is better used in the service of water, sanitation, health and education (WASHE) programmes everywhere in the world.

In stark contrast, regular water shortages among the world's poor and marginalized are a daily reality, yet this segment of global society is too lightly regarded by policymakers everywhere, from Canada and the United States (in relation to First Nations people) to large swaths of the global South—from Brazil to Botswana—where indigenous people are still regarded as 'backward'. Where is mobilization in support of their struggles? As Vandana Shiva has pointed out, this is tantamount to a water war of the rich against the poor, one lately manifest as water-grabs and land-grabs not only in Brazil, Indonesia, Ethiopia and Mozambique, but along the shores of North America's Great Lakes, all in service of multinational capital and justified in terms of 'jobs' and 'economic development'.

#### **Food for thought: #DayZero and the #CapeTown water crisis**

Which brings me to #DayZero and the #CapeTown water crisis. I have also recently written about this particular water crisis (<https://lswatuk.blogspot.ca/2018/01/>), and it strikes me as a fundamental mistake that the government of the Western Cape and the municipality of Cape Town have abandoned their #DayZero campaigning. This campaign was designed to mobilize the greater metropolis's nearly four million people in a grand water saving scheme so that they might stave off the day when the city would not be able to supply any water due to low levels in the networked system of dams and one groundwater aquifer. The Western Cape has suffered an on-going drought which appears to have finally broken. Some early rains suggest that things may be back to 'normal', though one should point out that both drought and flood are normal—something that people seem to always forget once the rains have come, or the floodwaters have receded. The city made several announcements pushing back day zero, from April to June to August and has recently announced that it has 'defeated day zero', at least for this year. Thus, the decision was taken to abandon the #DayZero hash-tag and pronouncements as it had resulted in a loss of business investment and tourism revenue. This, to me, is a mistake.

Let's review: In the case of climate change, impacts are highly unevenly felt across society, and major negative impacts seem to be on some far horizon. In the case of impending water wars between states, well, there is just no evidence in support of such a proposition. Day zero is very different. People of all walks of life occupy the greater metropolitan area. Dam levels have been dropping and are empirically verifiable.

Legitimate projections can then be made stating for a fact the date when the city could no longer supply an essential service. In addition, examples of other cases, such as Barcelona, offered not only evidence of collapse but also effective measures to be taken to address the issue. Make no mistake, Cape Town is an unequal society. People are differently empowered socially, economically and politically. Millions have long suffered chronic water scarcity and insecurity across the greater metropolitan landscape even when the dams were full. And plenty of people are profiting—politically and economically—from the crisis. So, what's the important difference with the other two alarmist approaches to mobilization? There are three:

- \ Everyone, from the rich to the poor, is negatively affected;
- \ The challenge is empirically verifiable with a demonstrable date of impact;
- \ There is empirical evidence of methods to be taken to successfully delay or avert the disaster, and these methods vary from the most basic (grey water reuse) to the most complex (desalination plants).

It is not easy to get fractured and fragmented societies to pull together, or, perhaps more accurately stated, to pull in the same direction so instilling a feeling of common purpose and the building of social capital. When intense storms hit some few weeks ago, there was a palpable sense of relief among Capetonians. While the rains did not mark the end of the drought or an end to the challenge, they did provide residents with a feeling of hope that collective effort would be rewarded. The efforts taken have empowered citizens. Rather than succumb to fatalism, they could help themselves and reap the rewards. Longer-term solutions will require technology, capital and human resources, so alerting residents that individual efforts do add up, but will have to take different forms through time. In my view, this is a successful first step among many that must be taken to ensure water security for the city, the metropolitan area and the region. Capetonians need to see that #DayZero is still somewhere on the near horizon, that it has not magically vanished to never come again. As stated earlier, drought and flood are extreme but normal events. Climate change is hypothesized to make these more frequent and more intense. There is a saying in the water policy world: A drought is a terrible thing to waste. Capetonians have not wasted their drought. They have taken action and proven to themselves that despite their myriad differences they are capable of banding together in a common purpose. The #DayZero campaign, it seems to me, should be thanked for both enabling and proving that a specific sort of crisis can mobilize people for positive outcomes.

I am not convinced that such a campaign can work with either climate change or poor water use practices for the reasons stated above. But the three bullet points above should provide some food for thought about what it takes – short of war and short of climate catastrophe – to get us to do the right thing.