

# Why treating water scarcity as a security issue is a bad idea

By [Joelien Pretorius](#)

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Helen Zille, premier of the Western Cape in South Africa, has made two startling claims about the [water crisis](#) in the province. She says there will be anarchy when the taps run dry, and that normal policing will be [inadequate](#).



By Cpl. Jad Sleiman, US Marine Corps, public domain, [Wikimedia Commons](#)

She stated this as fact. Neither claim has any basis in truth. But they reflect an [“elite panic”](#): society’s elite’s fear of social disorder. We see this when public officials and the media draw on stereotypes of public panic and disorder, or, in Zille’s words, “anarchy”.

Research [shows](#) that mass hysteria and lawlessness during disasters is actually remarkably rare. Yet elite panic can lead to security taking priority over public safety. Preventing criminal activity is then treated as more important than protecting people from harm.

The more society’s response leans towards security, the closer the situation gets to “securitisation”. In the field of security studies, securitisation is the notion that nothing is a threat until someone [says](#) it is. This “framing” happens in many ways, including the words politicians choose to describe a situation. A militarised response, for example, can be triggered by an issue being portrayed as a threat so severe that it requires extraordinary measures beyond normal political processes.

Zille’s characterisation of the water crisis is a classic example of this process. A major part of her communication about the preparation for Day Zero has been about securing the province and outlining the police and military strategy [to prevent criminal activity](#).

This approach gets in the way of more constructive responses to disaster. It can even trigger the very disorder it seeks to avoid. In other words, a self-fulfilling prophecy occurs which has serious consequences for a community and the humanitarian response to a disaster.

## False framing

According to Zille, the day Cape Town runs out of water is a [“disaster of disasters”](#). It

*“ exceeds anything a major city has had to face anywhere in the world since the [Second World War or 9/11](#). ”*

The panic in her tone, and her choice of examples, are telling. The Second World War and 9/11 were not natural disasters, they were consequences of war and terrorism. By invoking these national security events she frames the threat as one that needs to be managed using extraordinary means.

Zille imagines

*“ many other foreseeable crises associated with dry taps, such as conflict over access to water, theft of water, and other criminal acts associated with water, not to mention the outbreak of disease. ”*

She has asked President Jacob Zuma to declare a national state of disaster. It would enable the country's intelligence agencies, the South African National Defence Force and the South African Police Service to make a shared plan with the province and the private sector

*“ to distribute water, defend storage facilities, deal with potential outbreaks of disease, and keep the peace. ”*

## **Military and disaster**

It's not uncommon for the military to get involved in disaster relief. During the Fukushima/Daichi disaster following the tsunami that struck Japan in 2011, the Japanese military played a critical role in providing aid and relief. But they were not there to [defend or guard](#) people and property.

The South African National Defence Force played a similar role during [serious floods in Mozambique](#) in 2000, and again during flooding [in 2015](#).

But Zille's intention to involve the military and State Security Agency in Cape Town's disaster management is different.

They won't be there in a humanitarian capacity, such as setting up infrastructure or distributing water, but to guard against anarchy. Her aim is to legitimise security measures, or, more bluntly, the use of force.

Her approach should be resisted.

## **Lessons from Hurricane Katrina**

Author and humanitarian worker Malka Older, who studied the disaster response in the US to [Hurricane Katrina in 2005](#), found that an obsession with security was legitimised through unsupported claims of widespread violence and looting.

She writes:

“ *The story of Hurricane Katrina is one of security overtaking and overriding disaster management from preparedness through response.* ”

She concludes that the shift from safety to security – where armed guards were sent to shelters and distribution points – actually reduced the city’s capacity to respond to the disaster. The security emphasis tied up human resources. And the focus turned away from helping those affected by the flooding to controlling them.

On top of this, the securitised response reflected prejudices about race and class. Jamelle Bouie, chief political correspondent for *Slate Magazine* and a political analyst for CBS News, has [argued that](#):

“ *Black collective memory of Hurricane Katrina, as much as anything else, informs the present movement against police violence, ‘Black Lives Matter.’* ”

## Thinking differently

Water scarcity, like any issue, can be thought of in several ways.

It can be imagined as a hardship that many Capetonians in poor, black townships have [endured all their lives](#).

People can consider staying calm and being resilient and resourceful as they make plans to source and store water. They can even imagine a new community spirit as they find ways to [share this scarce resource](#), help the most vulnerable and receive help from around the country.

Part of this imagining depends on leaders staying level headed. Citizens need public communication, not scaremongering that equates the worst case scenario with objective reality. They don’t need to be paralysed by a mindset of suspicion and dread.

Cape Town’s leaders should remain calm and help the people to act collectively in a democratic spirit.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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