

# An urgent crisis of chronic neglect: Lessons on water justice and wellbeing in the time of COVID-19

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## RESEARCH OVERVIEW

The COVID-19 pandemic represents a major disruption to societies across the world, magnifying existing threats to social-ecological resilience. Illustrating these threats are links between inadequate water and sanitation services, climate stressors, and the challenge of coping with a global pandemic. In an urban context, water services are an intermediary between the built and natural environments, making sustainable water management a crucial aspect of cities' resilience and efforts towards sustainable development. Global crises like the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing water crisis threaten wellbeing beyond disease risk, highlighting the need for a broader understanding of the risks that make a city's residents vulnerable to such crises.

This research examines the connections between water services and health impacts in Cape Town communities both before and during the pandemic. The city has begun to feel the impacts of climate change, such as drought and flooding, while disadvantaged communities also experience basic service inequities. Existing problems include leaking pipes, blocked drains, water contamination, and limited access to water services, which include sanitation, drainage, drinking water and flood protection. A free basic allocation of water of approximately 6000 litres per month is only available for indigent households. This allocation is managed by water management devices (WMD) and is influenced by water service provision.

To understand how water issues could impact people's wellbeing directly and indirectly, this study analysed the perspectives of 311 community members from across Cape Town. Using the SenseMaker tool, participants had been asked to share stories about the general water issues that they experienced. Identifying water-related risks through people's lived experiences is important for developing shared meanings of resilience for communities and the city as a whole. The stories were collected by members of the Western Cape Water Caucus and the respondents spoke of obstacles to daily tasks like cleaning and practicing basic hygiene, which are essential for disease prevention during a pandemic. The responses indicate that water issues can lead to psychological stress, social conflicts, and food insecurity, further threatening wellbeing in less visible ways.



## KEY FINDINGS

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted existing inequalities in residents' access to water services.

In low-income areas, access to water services such as sanitation, drainage, drinking water and flood protection is sometimes limited.

When water services are inadequate, people's mental and physical wellbeing is affected and their capacity to cope with shocks, such as a pandemic, is reduced.

Although community initiatives can help people respond immediately after a crisis, partnership with local authorities is important in the long term.

Low-income areas are at higher risk of being negatively affected by climate related shocks due to existing problems with water services that are aggravated by environmental crises such as drought or flooding.

### Full paper:

Humphreys, K. 2020. *An Urgent Crisis of Chronic Neglect: Lessons on Water Justice and Wellbeing in the Time of COVID-19*. Masters thesis in Sustainable Development at the University of Uppsala. No.2020/59, 42pp, 20 ECTS/hp.

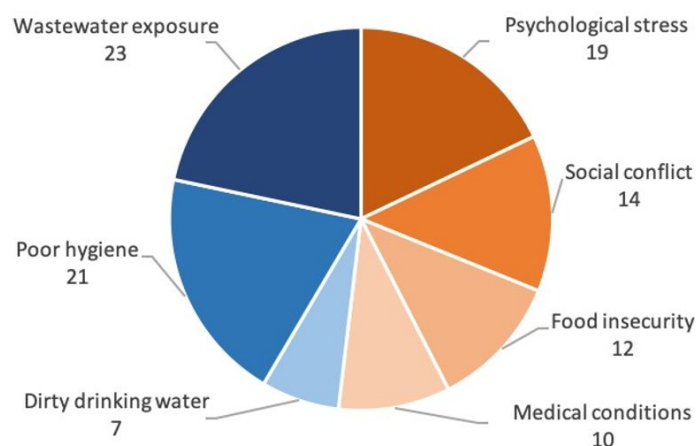
**Keywords:** Sustainable development; water justice; urban resilience; wellbeing; COVID-19.

## UNPACKING THE RESEARCH

Participants described their experiences of general water-related issues. The Cape Town study shows how when water services are inadequate, people's health and wellbeing are put at risk, limiting their capacity to cope with stressors and shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Below | Threats categorised into direct (blue) and indirect (orange)

### Water-related threats to health and wellbeing



**“You can’t address the development of ... a community without addressing the impact that water has on their health issues... So you can’t address water issues without addressing the wellbeing of that person.”**

Trauma counsellor, Cape Town

## CONSIDERATIONS FOR POLICY, PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

- It is important to actively manage chronic stressors in order to help enhance wellbeing, sustainable water management and the capacity to cope with crises. Water issues should be viewed as risks to quality of life that lessen the capacity of individuals, communities and cities to live with or adapt to a new crisis.
- Understanding community water challenges and addressing people's rights to water services that support wellbeing should be priorities.
- Community support networks can help to address the immediate impacts of a crisis such as a drought or a pandemic. However, that community level initiatives develop out of crises demonstrates why assistance and collaboration with government resilience efforts in the longer-term are also needed.
- Crisis management should consider viewpoints from local residents and community organisations in order to target each area's main risks.

Several stressors were highlighted in the study. These included: exposure to water contaminated by sewage or pollution; daily hygiene routines (e.g. cleaning living spaces, bathing, etc) being disrupted by insufficient or non functional water services; and unsanitary drinking water. Indirect threats were also impactful, including: the risks and challenges of sharing taps and toilets; a lack of water services restricts residents' capacity to prepare food, cook and irrigate food gardens; concerns that water supply will be cut off if leaks and problems with water services made water use measurements inaccurate; and difficulties around caring for people with medical conditions. Keeping people safe during the pandemic requires good basic hygiene, which is difficult to implement when households may have inadequate access to water services. Despite a government directive to increase water service provision, many households in low-income areas continue to experience a general lack of functioning water services and are frustrated by the lack of help given to address the issues. The crisis has created indirect threats to wellbeing too, including psychological stress and social conflict due to inadequate water services, food insecurity and medical conditions. Many communities formed solidarity networks in response to the crisis, demonstrating that communities often take on an active role in working towards solutions to such problems..

## FURTHER READING

Enqvist, J.P. et al. 2020. [Informality and water justice: community perspectives on water issues in Cape Town's low-income neighbourhoods](#). *International Journal of Water Resources Development*. 2020.

Jones, L. and Tanner, T. 2017. 'Subjective resilience': using perceptions to quantify household resilience to climate extremes and disasters. *Regional Environmental Change*, 17(1), 229-243.

Ziervogel, G., Pelling, M., Cartwright, A., Chu, E., Deshpande, T., Harris, L., Hyams, K., Kaunda, J., Klaus, B., Michael, K., Pasquini, L., Pharoah, R., Rodina, L., Scott, D., Zweig, P. 2017. [Inserting rights and justice into urban resilience: a focus on everyday risk](#). *Environment and Urbanization*.

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Published by the African Climate and Development Initiative,  
University of Cape Town  
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