

THE VALUE OF URBAN NATURAL ASSETS WHEN PLANNING FOR RESILIENT AFRICAN CITIES: CONSIDERATIONS AND DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES

Profiling key lessons learnt through ICLEI's Urban Natural Assets for Africa (UNA) programme



URBAN NATURAL ASSETS FOR AFRICA HANDBOOK SERIES

HANDBOOK 4

Working with formal and informal governance structures:

ICLEI Africa's learnings



HIGHLIGHTS FROM THIS HANDBOOK

- Both formal and informal governance structures exist within city councils in Africa. The former are supported by policies and legal frameworks, and can be easily mapped; the latter are based on unspoken agreements and invisible power dynamics, and are therefore more complex to grasp.
- By having an in-depth understanding of both official (formal) and unofficial (informal) decision-making processes in African cities, external organisations are better able to build relationships with the right contact people, improve communication, avoid conflict and co-create entry points for real change.
- Through the UNA programme and other projects, ICLEI Africa has developed a sound methodology for understanding and working with informal governance structures. Our approach relies on regular face-to-face engagements with key players at various levels, documentation of dynamics through stakeholder and mandate mapping exercises, and a respect for the sensitivity of this information.

WHO SHOULD CONSULT THIS HANDBOOK?



Organisations working on sustainability and development issues in Africa



Academic researchers (and related organisations)

The relevance and significance of this handbook series

The ICLEI Cities Biodiversity Center (CBC), a global centre hosted by ICLEI Africa, developed this handbook series to showcase key considerations for integrating urban natural assets into city planning in sub-Saharan Africa. All lessons profiled were gathered through the implementation of the UNA programme.

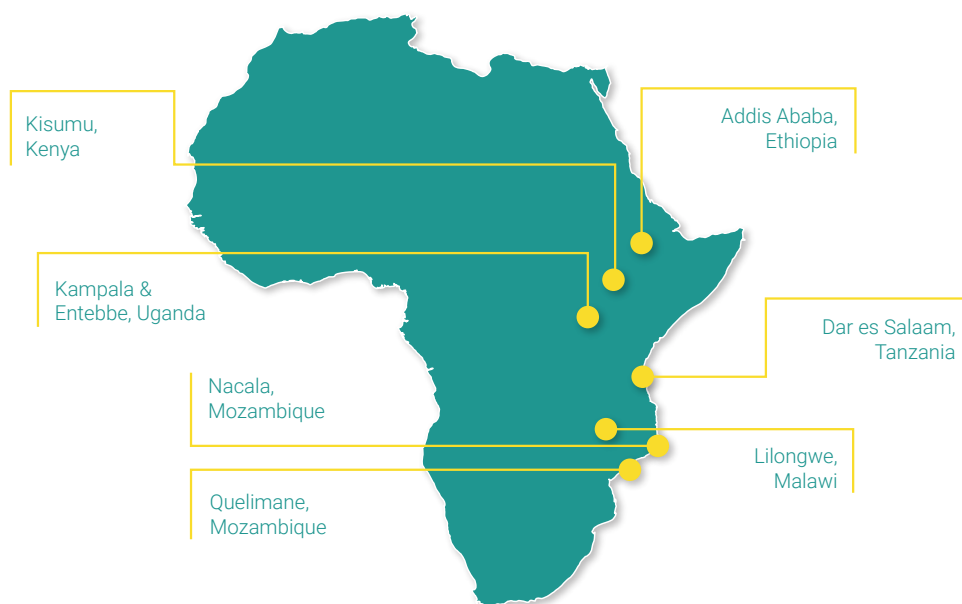
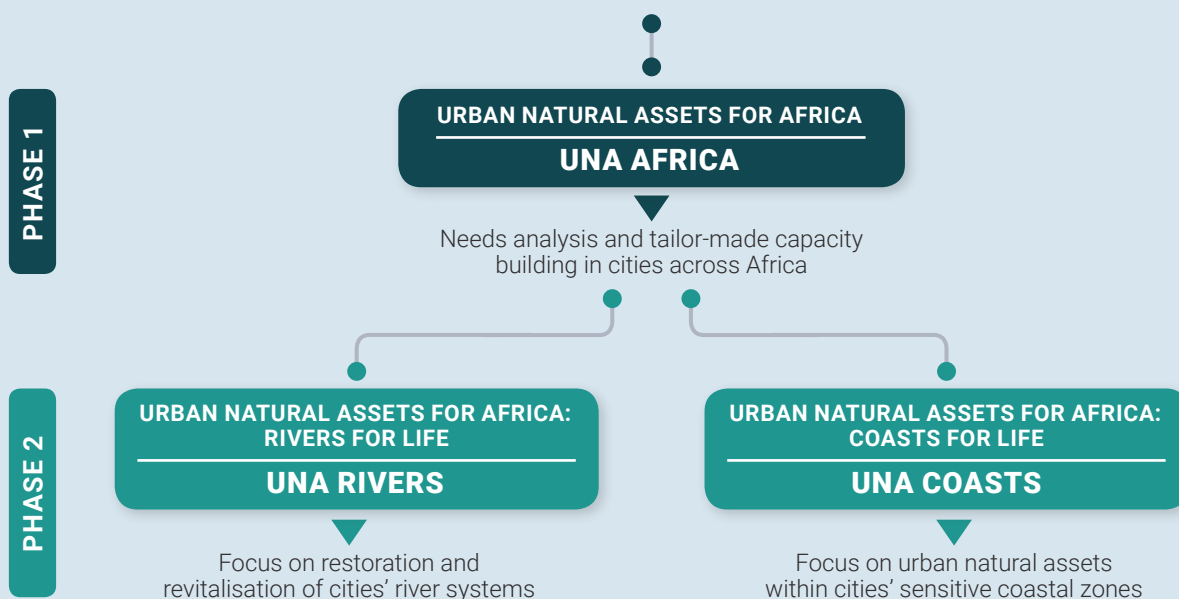
By sharing approaches that have been successfully tailored to African cities, these handbooks seek to support the development of future urban sustainability projects that are both more effective and better suited to the local context. Learnings also shed light on how ICLEI Africa is working with local authorities to ensure alignment with international policies and agendas (like the Paris Agreement). It's imperative that we share Africa's insights and lessons now so these can feed into discussions as the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) work on developing a new post-2020 global biodiversity strategy.

THE UNA PROGRAMME AND FLAGSHIP PROJECTS



Initiated in 2014, the UNA programme is designed to assist local governments in Africa build climate resilience through addressing the daily challenges they experience around protecting and revitalising their urban natural assets. To date, three flagship projects have been developed under the UNA umbrella. All broadly aim to integrate nature-based solutions into land-use planning for increased climate resilience and enhanced human well-being.

URBAN NATURAL ASSETS FOR AFRICA (UNA) PROGRAMME



All projects are funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) through SwedBio at the Stockholm Resilience Centre, Stockholm University.



WORKING WITH FORMAL AND INFORMAL GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES:

ICLEI AFRICA'S LEARNINGS



ICLEI Africa has been working with local and subnational governments across sub-Saharan Africa on complex issues like climate change for the past two decades. An important part of our role is getting city officials, environmental scientists and community members together to co-create knowledge that can be used to guide municipal decision-making.

We've come to realise, however, that in order to effectively introduce new ideas and approaches into existing systems, we must first fully understand the contexts in which decisions are made in target cities. In other words, if we want to guide decision-making so that nature is prioritised in urban centres, we need to start by getting familiar with how decisions are made, and by whom. This requires knowledge of a city's institutional landscape and power structures.

THE PRESENCE OF FORMAL AND INFORMAL GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES IN AFRICAN CITIES

Through our ongoing work on the UNA programme and other projects, it's become clear that city officials operate within very complex decision-making spaces. Not only do they have to deal with rapid urbanisation, widespread informality and overwhelming service delivery challenges¹, but they also work within a system run by a variety of different, but overlapping, spheres of governance. That is, there is almost always a multitude of ideas, systems of rule and modes of influence within a particular city that tend to merge, mingle and clash².

In particular, in line with the observations of Leck and Roberts (2015)³, we've come to appreciate that both formal (official) and informal (unofficial) governance structures and decision-making processes exist within city councils in Africa. Formal governance is "backed by legal treaties or constitutions", whereas informal governance is "based upon mutual understandings and accommodations, and tacit agreements"².

Formal mandates and official structures can easily be mapped through departmental organograms, but it's not as easy to chart informal processes and relationships. As unofficial structures – or “shadow systems and spaces”³ – reflect the complex inner social workings of governmental bodies, and are based on unspoken agreements and invisible power dynamics, they are more difficult to grasp.

It is, however, imperative that external organisations working in African cities are familiar with the more invisible aspects of governance. This is partly because the informal space tends to impact local governments' decision-making processes quite significantly. What's more, official policies and structures don't always accurately reflect on-the-ground realities. For instance, it's often the case that officials' mandated responsibilities overlap and clash with those of others, which results in confusion and inconsistencies. As a result, a focus on formal governance systems alone would be insufficient.

THE IMPORTANCE OF UNDERSTANDING BOTH FORMAL AND INFORMAL DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES IN AFRICAN CITIES

An in-depth understanding of underlying power and governance structures – knowledge about how decisions are made, how city departments are structured and where responsibilities lie – is hugely beneficial for a number of reasons. It helps project teams to:

- **Identify who holds responsibility** for certain tasks, so that relationships can be built with the right contact people at the right levels of government. This streamlines activities and makes communication more efficient.
- **Pinpoint opportunities that can be capitalised on** for sustainable change, and facilitate shifts that'll allow for the **co-creation of “entry points”** so that new nature-related information and processes can be mainstreamed (see more about the concept of co-creating “entry points” in Handbook 7).
- Properly **assess a city's needs** (see Handbook 1).
- **Follow the right procedures so that goals are achieved and conflict is avoided.** Local governments may have strict processes in place that external project teams are required to follow. Being familiar with internal protocol and etiquette helps to ensure that no toes are stepped on. This, in turn, assists with building strong, lasting relationships (see Handbook 7).
- **Identify effective ways to include representatives from national government** in engagements. It's almost always necessary to involve authorities from national departments in order to secure buy-in at a local level – project teams need to know how best to support strong multi-level governance (see Handbook 11).
- **Identify and work around gaps and inconsistencies** in the system (for instance, cases when roles and responsibilities overlap or contradict each other).
- **Adjust to sudden changes in governance structures** quickly and effectively.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

When analysing decision-making processes in city councils in Africa, it's important to remember that:

- a) No two cities are the same – every city-region has its own unique institutional landscape, structures, procedures and departmental make-up.
- b) Governance structures at different levels (municipal, subnational, regional and national) are typically closely interlinked. Power tends to travel up or down in the system (and often into more informal and disguised forms)². It is, therefore, necessary to analyse and understand processes, mechanisms and links across levels of government.
- c) Change within formal and informal power structures in African cities happens frequently and often for reasons that are difficult to determine.

Lilongwe, Malawi. By engaging with representatives for the local community on a site visit, the informal government structures as well as the local context and landscape are better understood.



CASE STUDY



ICLEI AFRICA'S METHODOLOGY FOR UNDERSTANDING AND WORKING WITH INFORMAL GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES

Through our work on the continent, we at ICLEI Africa have gathered a number of insights on how best to unpack and engage with both official and unofficial spheres of governance in African cities – something that's essential for project success. In particular, we have developed a sound methodology for understanding and working with informal governance structures. Our approach relies on:

Developing close working relationships with key stakeholders:

In order to fully understand the invisible aspects of municipal governance, strong relationships need to be built with key players (see Handbook 7). Developing meaningful connections with stakeholders requires constant engagement – face-to-face interactions are especially valuable, as are informal conversations that allow for openness and honesty. ICLEI Africa has found that it's particularly important to develop relationships with multiple stakeholders across departments and government levels, and not to restrict contact to only one focal person. This way, work on projects can continue even when the dynamics change in informal networks (as they so often do).

Deep-scaling and significant time investment:

Understanding how decisions are made takes time. Building relationships also takes time. For this reason, it's best to deep-scale – to build on groundwork that has already been laid – and to work with the same project city for multiple years, over multiple project periods. It can also be beneficial to partner with an organisation that has already been working in a particular region for quite some time.

Asking the right questions:

We've found that asking the right questions during needs assessment sessions and other face-to-face meetings can help to pinpoint who holds the 'power' and knowledge in cities, who has access to information and what strategies are currently in place that could serve as entry points for bigger change. Questions like "Who holds the information used to integrate nature into planning?" and "How do you collect data?" are especially useful. Over time, and with experience, we at ICLEI Africa have refined the specific questions we ask to unpack dynamics and power relations.

Documenting dynamics visually:

As information is obtained about roles, responsibilities and processes, it can be helpful to depict these details visually through stakeholder and mandate mapping exercises. Doing so helps to capture information in a format that can be referred to time and again. Maps should, however, be seen as “living” documents that need to be regularly updated as new insights emerge.

Respecting the sensitivity of information:

Information about cities' power dynamics and decision-making processes is extremely sensitive. It should, therefore, be handled with care, kept within the confines of a project and used only for the purpose of guiding the project's activities.

Kisumu, Kenya. It is crucial to work with local communities, such as this informal trader selling art from his cart in different locations in the city.





Lilongwe, Malawi. The Tsoka (top) and Lizulu (bottom) markets, located on opposite sides of the Lilongwe River, served as pilot sites for waste management initiatives within an informal government structure.



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ABOUT ICLEI AND THE CITIES BIODIVERSITY CENTER



ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability

ICLEI is a global network of more than 1,750 local and regional governments committed to sustainable urban development. Active in 100+ countries, ICLEI influences sustainability policy and drives local action for low emission, nature-based, equitable, resilient and circular development. ICLEI's members and team of experts work together through peer exchange, partnerships and capacity building to create systematic change for urban sustainability. ICLEI Africa serves the organisation's African members, working with cities and regions in more than 25 countries across the continent.

ICLEI's Cities Biodiversity Center (CBC)

ICLEI's Cities Biodiversity Center (CBC), which is located in Cape Town, South Africa, recognises the crucial role that cities and subnational governments play in the pursuit of a sustainable future, through efficiently integrating urban development and biodiversity management at the local level.

Through its programmes, ICLEI CBC seeks local solutions to the complex issues surrounding natural capital and the degradation of ecosystem services in a rapidly urbanising world. ICLEI CBC offers cities across the globe a broad portfolio of supportive services through a dedicated team of passionate, skilled and dynamic biodiversity and urban development experts.

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