

# EMBRACING INNOVATION AND EXPERIMENTATION

Testing new ways to address old challenges in African cities

## Setting the scene

### THE SITUATION PRIOR TO UNA INTERVENTIONS

Extensive urban sprawl and high levels of informality are major challenges in many African cities. As a result of these factors, urban landscapes tend to evolve at a rapid rate, quickly rendering plans irrelevant and outdated. The UNA team has identified, therefore, a significant need for adaptive policies, systems and approaches that adequately respond to the realities on the ground and incorporate the dynamic energy that's characteristic of so many cities on the continent.

In such a unique context that tends not to abide by the conventions of the Global North, boundaries often need to be pushed through experimentation and innovation in order to find approaches that are more applicable to the setting.

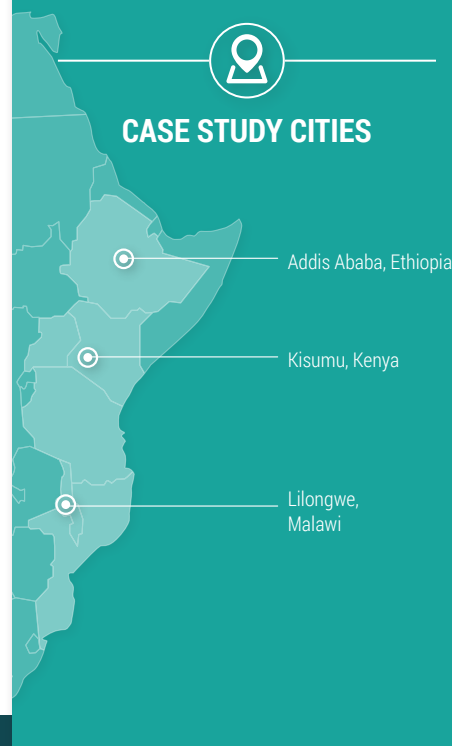


### KEY IMPACT

By testing new methodologies, the UNA programme has established innovative approaches to urban planning and community engagement, while building a municipal culture that allows for adaptability and experimentation.



### CASE STUDY CITIES



Indeed, much of the emerging literature on transformative change acknowledges that to generate long-lasting shifts, a willingness to test “untried beginnings” and explore novel alternatives in a safe-to-fail environment is required.

While the UNA programme is fundamentally needs-based – and aligns all interventions with needs identified by city stakeholders – we’ve found that it’s necessary to encourage a degree of creative “outside the box” thinking so that we can also support municipal officials in important areas that they may not yet have considered. Daily operational challenges can make it difficult to reflect, innovate and plan proactively, so we believe it’s key to assist municipalities to brainstorm outside the constraints of everyday pressures to identify pressing needs that may have been overlooked and find new ways to address them.

### Urban planning and the need for innovation

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In the face of rapid land-use change in African cities, nature and biodiversity have increasingly come under threat. Urban expansion, informal development and waste dumping have degraded green spaces and natural buffer zones, resulting in the loss of many of the essential ecosystem services they provide – including flood control, temperate regulation and access to fresh water – and thereby compromising the resilience of cities.

To effectively bring nature back into cities in the context of rapid urbanisation, there’s a need for creative African-specific approaches to planning. Needless to say, some degree of testing is necessary to find innovative solutions that will help local officials work effectively under these unique conditions to service communities and manage urban natural assets (e.g., forests, wetlands, rivers etc.).

### Community participation and the need for experimentation

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Communities play a vital role in the protection – and degradation – of nature. For this reason, there’s a push to move away from top-down urban planning methodologies to embrace bottom-up approaches that engage residents. Indeed, it’s now widely recognised that community groups need to be actively included in urban planning projects, decision-making and implementation.

What is not widely understood is how to do so effectively, in a way that truly empowers residents to make their voices heard, while preventing some of the tensions that occasionally arise when community members and public officials collaborate.

Again, an openness to test, innovate and adapt is required to find public participation methodologies that deliver value to all parties in a given setting (recognising that there’ll never be a one-size-fits-all approach).



## Programme intervention

## THE COURSE OF ACTION



## AIM



To create the space for flexibility, creativity and experimentation in order to identify alternative approaches that are effective at supporting sustainable development in the African context.



### EXPLORING ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO URBAN PLANNING IN KISUMU, KENYA

The UNA team started by reviewing a range of alternative approaches to urban planning that might have local applicability, ultimately selecting five to showcase in an educational poster for cities. Of all these methodologies, the option that resonated most with local officials was **urban tinkering**, which “tinkers” with what’s already on the ground, making small-scale, low-cost adjustments to existing urban elements to make the landscape more resilient as a system.

As a result, we decided to test this technique in Kisumu by bringing together a diverse group of stakeholders – local decision-makers, national officials, community members and scientific researchers – to participate in an urban tinkering walking workshop along the Auji river.

Throughout this exercise, we paused regularly to discuss key challenges in the area – flooding, illegal waste dumping and security for women, for example – and explore possible ways we could tinker with pockets of the landscape in a safe-to-fail way, using nature-based solutions (NBS) to address issues. Idea generation, discovery and creativity were at the heart of the process.

In 2021 (there was a delay due to the global COVID-19 pandemic), we will start implementing some of the innovative solutions that emerged from the workshop discussions.



### TESTING NOVEL APPROACHES TO COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN ADDIS ABABA, ETHIOPIA AND LILONGWE, MALAWI

In partnership with UN-Habitat and the Addis Ababa City Administration, the UNA programme trialled the use of a version of the **Minecraft** computer game to involve citizens in the planning of a new riverside public park in Ethiopia. Women, vulnerable youth and others from the community worked alongside municipal officials and used the software, which works like a digital Lego, to map out their visions for the site. At the end of the exercise, 12 designs for the park were combined into one detailed final plan, which community members reviewed and approved.

Similarly, in Lilongwe, we tested the **Photovoice** methodology to engage community members over the course of a waste management and river revitalisation project at an informal market. A group of composters were given disposable cameras and asked to take photographs of the pilot site on a weekly basis for two months. The printed photographs were used not just to document change over the project period, but even more importantly, to stimulate discussion between community members and municipal officials around the challenges and opportunities of the site. Residents drew on the images to tell their story and keep the conversation with the city council going throughout the duration of the initiative.

## Evidence of change

### KEY OUTCOMES



#### EXPLORING ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO URBAN PLANNING IN KISUMU, KENYA

Participants in the urban tinkering walking workshop verbally acknowledged that this was a highly effective and contextually relevant way to brainstorm small-scale solutions that have the potential to make a real difference, even in the context of rapid change.

City officials noted that this methodology relieves them of a major burden by helping to make on-the-ground interventions doable. Large-scale implementation in informal areas is an extremely daunting task, especially considering budget and capacity constraints. Urban tinkering, however, creates space for small-scale, cost-effective tweaks to be made that collectively could have a significant impact.

This activity yielded the important outcome of building actors' willingness to embrace experimentation because they had seen the value of it in practice. Several decision-makers expressed an eagerness to continue to use such approaches, and in fact, in several UNA cities, we've seen the emergence of more adaptive work plans, like the Nacala Coastal Natural Asset Management Plan and the Lilongwe Ecological Corridor Restoration Plan, which both allow for a range of possibilities and create space for learning.

Implementation along the Auji river in 2021 will also bring valuable results: NBS will be used to service the area, restore biodiversity and tackle issues like flooding and security. As the approach works off the existing landscape, interventions can also easily be adapted as the site evolves in future.



OUR BIGGEST LEARNING TO DATE FROM THE URBAN TINKERING APPROACH IS THE APPROPRIATENESS WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF THE COMMUNITY. THE APPROACH IS FAIRLY SIMPLE TO UNDERTAKE. IT IS FAIRLY EASY TO INTEGRATE COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION, WHICH IS MOST IMPORTANT BECAUSE THEN YOU ADDRESS THE PROBLEM FROM THE UNDERSTANDING OF THE WEARER OF THE SHOES. AND IT'S QUITE AN EXCITING EXPERIENCE BECAUSE, UNLIKE MANY PLANNING PROCESSES THAT ARE DONE ON DESKTOP, THIS ONE ACTUALLY TAKES YOU TO WHERE THE PROBLEMS ARE, TO WHERE PEOPLE ARE MOST AFFECTED, AND YOU ENGAGE WITH THE PEOPLE MOST AFFECTED, AND THE SOLUTIONS ARE BOTTOM-UP. THIS HAS TAUGHT US A LESSON, SO GOING FORWARD A LOT OF OUR NATURAL RESOURCE-BASED PROGRAMMES AND ACTIVITIES WILL EMBRACE THIS APPROACH.

JOHN SANDE: *Environment Officer, Kisumu City, Kenya*







## TESTING NOVEL APPROACHES TO COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN ADDIS ABABA, ETHIOPIA AND LILONGWE, MALAWI

The Minecraft and Photovoice methodologies proved effective in ensuring that local community voices were heard, loud and clear. This is because residents didn't just offer input; they actually drove the processes and played a central role in designing and reporting on interventions. These novel approaches also neutralised differences and disrupted power dynamics as all visions were given equal weight.

A notable outcome of these community engagement exercises is that they emphasised for city officials a) that it's entirely possible to successfully include residents if you use the right participation methodology, and b) how remarkably valuable it can be to embed community members in decision-making and draw on local insights.

In Addis Ababa, city officials remarked on how community members' plans for the public park were among the best, most functional and most cost-effective of all, so much so that they could have been designed by a senior urban planner. The council was able to experience, first-hand, the value of local knowledge in urban planning, and also recognised that public participation can help to support, not complicate, their roles by reducing their workloads.

In Lilongwe, through the Photovoice initiative, local officials were able to see the pilot site in an entirely new way, through community members' eyes. This process gave them additional insight into on-the-ground challenges, and helped to improve working relationships between the council and civic groups. What's more, as composters were constantly giving feedback to officials through their weekly photographs, the local council learnt how to adopt a more adaptive approach to project management, which is critical for relevance and lasting change.

## LONG-TERM IMPACTS AND SIGNIFICANCE

Thanks to UNA's creative urban planning interventions, municipal officials are better equipped today to work effectively under challenging conditions – in the context of constant change, rapid urbanisation and widespread informality – to design sustainable urban landscapes and protect the natural asset base. That is, decision-makers in partner cities are now aware of **alternative planning approaches** that are better suited to the African context, and, importantly, that also make room for nature to be brought back into cities (by prioritising NBS).

What's more, as local officials have witnessed the benefits of flexibility, they've demonstrated increased confidence in **their own capacity to be adaptive**. That is, the UNA team didn't just explore new possibilities; we helped to build a culture in partner cities that **embraces adaptability, experimentation and innovation**, so that new possibilities can continue to be explored. This is significant: a community of decision-makers who are eager to test, adapt and test again opens a window for many more effective context-specific solutions to be



THIS KIND OF WORKSHOP [MINECRAFT] HELPS THE COMMUNITY TO GET INVOLVED AND PARTICIPATE FOR A SUSTAINABLE ENVIRONMENTAL SITUATION. THOSE PEOPLE WHO ARE INVOLVED IN THIS WORKSHOP CAN ALSO GET MORE INFORMATION ON HOW THEY CAN KEEP THEIR ENVIRONMENT MORE CLEAN, CLEAR AND COMFORTABLE FOR THEIR LIFE.

MOHAMMED HUSSEIN: *River and Riverside Development, Addis Ababa City Government, Ethiopia*



discovered in future. Ultimately, this could positively impact the way African cities are planned, tomorrow and beyond.

The potential impacts also extend beyond Africa. Novel approaches to old challenges could have relevance for other developing countries – for a whole world, in fact, that's hungry for new ways of thinking and doing. By testing concepts like urban tinkering, UNA has influenced the theoretical and practical development of **new knowledge areas**, potentially leading the way for many others across the globe.

Finally, effective methods of community engagement open the door for **improved collaboration between city officials and public groups** in the long term, which is fundamental for real change. There is, undoubtedly, great power in city councils and communities working together toward a sustainable future.



## KEY LEARNINGS

- In order to mainstream NBS for improved resilience, it's critical to address structural conditions in cities first (i.e., how planning is conducted and communities are engaged).
- Before advocating for experimentation in partner cities, time needs to be invested in building relationships and fostering trust.
- To build an adaptive culture, capacity building is required to help stakeholders grow comfortable with a degree of uncertainty, the possibility of failure and the process of learning by doing.
- As important as community engagement is, the process is often complex and challenging, even when implemented effectively.

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## About the UNA Programme

Implemented by ICLEI's Cities Biodiversity Center, the UNA programme is designed to support local governments in Africa in addressing the daily challenges they experience around protecting and revitalising their urban natural assets. It specifically seeks to improve human well-being and build climate resilience through integrating nature-based solutions into land-use planning.

To date, the UNA programme supports three flagship projects; **Urban Natural Assets for Africa (UNA Africa)**, **Urban Natural Assets: Rivers for Life (UNA Rivers)** and **Urban Natural Assets: Coasts for Life (UNA Coasts)**.