

URBAN RESILIENCE FOR ALL

Promoting gender equality and inclusion in urban planning, decision-making and the design of nature-based solutions

Setting the scene

THE SITUATION PRIOR TO UNA INTERVENTIONS

In recognition of the fact that achieving gender equality is central to building a just, prosperous and sustainable future, much of the world has begun to advocate more firmly for the empowerment of women and girls in recent times.

Gender equality is one of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 5), and in the nature and climate space, several international frameworks, bodies and treaties – including the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) – have adopted gender action plans and established guidelines for the mainstreaming of gender into national biodiversity and climate change strategies and projects.

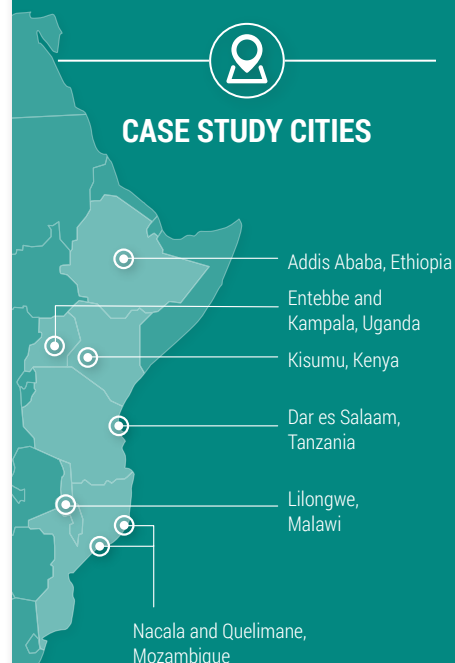


KEY IMPACT

By making gender equality central to our work, the UNA programme has helped to ensure that women can participate equally in urban development decision-making, and actively contribute to the planning and implementation of gender-responsive nature-based solutions (NBS).



CASE STUDY CITIES





HAVING BEEN IN THE FIELD FOR A LONG TIME, I'VE ALMOST ALWAYS BEEN ALONE AMONG SO MANY MEN. BUT IT'S NOT A HEALTHY WAY OF OPERATING ... IN MOST CASES WE FIND THAT PLANS ARE NOT GENDER-RESPONSIVE, BECAUSE THEY ARE SO OFTEN DEVELOPED BY MEN, WITH A MASCULINE MENTALITY – SO MUCH SO THAT THEY DON'T GIVE A LOT OF CONSIDERATION TO ISSUES PERTAINING TO GENDER, TO WOMEN. WE FIND THAT WE ARE PLANNING OUR FACILITIES, OUR INFRASTRUCTURE, OUR RESIDENTIAL AREAS WITHOUT HAVING THE NEEDS OF WOMEN IN MIND.

CATHERINE KULEMEKA: *Chief Town Planning Officer, Lilongwe City Council, Malawi*

This is critical as, due to traditional gender roles in many African cities, women tend to be most reliant on natural resources, most intimately connected to nature, and most vulnerable to the impacts of biodiversity loss and climate change. At the same time, they are also often underrepresented in city planning and decision-making processes.

Considering women's heightened risk, and the pivotal role they play in sustainable resource management, it is imperative that their perspectives, needs and daily realities are considered – and prioritised – when making decisions about city design and the protection of urban natural assets (e.g., forests, wetlands, rivers etc.).

Through work on the ground in Africa, the UNA team has found that local and national government officials in partner cities are becoming increasingly aware of this imperative and are eager to find ways to promote gender equality and boost the representation of women in public processes. As much work still needs to be done in this area, there is plenty of room for experimentation and lesson sharing around alternative approaches that *effectively* promote inclusion and the meaningful participation of women.

Programme intervention

THE COURSE OF ACTION

As a programme that aims to build resilience across multiple systems and urban domains, UNA has made it a priority to ensure that all project activities contribute to the achievement of gender equality. The team has attempted to find highly effective ways to include women in all practices, processes and interventions – to ensure that their voices are not just heard, but valued and embedded in decisions and designs.

More specifically, we've worked to promote gender equality in the nature and urban development space by:

- Prioritising capacity building around gender – and its link to sustainable development – in all engagements and training sessions. In interactions with city stakeholders, gender was profiled as a key principle that must be considered when planning at a local level.

AIM



To ensure that urban development decisions and practices adequately take into account the concerns and perspectives of women, and that NBS successfully address their needs and reduce vulnerabilities.



- Being sensitive to gender balance when organising and running events, with the aim of increasing the number of women participating in discussions, planning and decision-making processes.
- Creating neutral platforms for joint learning, knowledge construction and reflection, using approaches that disrupt power dynamics and put everyone on an equal footing.
- Using innovative methodologies to actively involve women in the design of urban green spaces and NBS that address their needs and deliver tangible benefits.
- Making use of novel methods, like walking workshops, that encourage city officials to engage with women in their communities – in the spaces where they live and work.
- Considering gender disparities when designing project activities, and ensuring women are given the space to share their experiences and points of view.
- Empowering women through skills development and capacity building to enhance their ability to handle risks, and to create women champions for future sustainability work.
- Selecting and running interventions that adequately take women's concerns into consideration and address the needs of all of society, not just select groups.
- Supporting local service providers that have already taken steps to address gender inequality.
- Creating enabling environments that go beyond mere gender inclusion and allow women to thrive.



ADDIS ABABA, ETHIOPIA

The computer game Minecraft was used as unique participatory planning tool to involve community members in the redesign of a rundown riverside plot in Addis Ababa. Gender representation was carefully considered, and ultimately, just under 50% of the participants involved in the workshop were women. As they used the game, which functions like a digital Lego, to plan the new public park, their visions were automatically given equal weight to those of men and public officials, and their ideas were legitimised and visualised through tangible designs.



LILONGWE, MALAWI

As part of a river revitalisation project at an informal market in Lilongwe, a group of over 10 women volunteers were trained to turn organic waste into compost that could be sold for income or used on their own crops. Aside from being equipped with new skills, participants were also provided with tools and a building was constructed for the storage of their equipment and for protection against harsh weather conditions while working. Notably, only women were engaged in this composting initiative.



GENDER-SENSITIVE DIALOGIC ENGAGEMENTS IN 8 AFRICAN CITIES

Across all partner cities, the UNA team has facilitated capacity-building events that take the form of interactive engagements that promote the inclusion of all groups. Recognising that formal workshops tend to only bring out the voices of those in positions of power, we used stimulating games, role-play and experiential learning activities (see [UNA Handbook 8](#) for examples) to neutralise differences and support the active participation of women.

Evidence of change

KEY OUTCOMES

The UNA programme's gender-sensitive interventions and engagements were largely effective in putting the spotlight on women's needs, perspectives and daily realities, and ensuring their voices were given weight in planning processes and the design of NBS.

Several women approached the UNA team and noted that they felt empowered and valued during project activities – that for the first time, they had the sense that they were really being heard.

We also saw fundamental shifts in men's perceptions and outlooks. Input from women was regularly recognised by men as being extremely valuable, and the insights they shared encouraged new ways of thinking about urban design. There were a number of instances when women raised points that men acknowledged they would never have considered themselves. In Kisumu, for example, women participating in walking workshops flagged that overgrown vegetation along the Auji river presented a safety risk for women walking to and from work – a concern that may have gone unrecognised had women not been present or empowered to speak up.

Another significant outcome of UNA's efforts in this area is that ICLEI Africa has collected a number of invaluable learnings around how to promote gender equality in nature-related work. We walked away with a bank of lessons on what effective gender mainstreaming looks like in practice, how to design gender-inclusive processes, and how to ensure women aren't just *included*, but are *enabled* to participate.



ADDIS ABABA, ETHIOPIA

Unexpectedly, we found it was, by and large, the women participating in the Addis Ababa planning workshop that took control of the Minecraft tool and drove the design process – this despite most never having used a computer before. City officials noted that the site plans produced by these residents were among the most practical, innovative and cost-effective of all, likely because they reflected local knowledge.

Core elements of the final plan have been implemented, and the result is an inclusive urban park that attracts many women with children, offering them a safe space to play and spend time in nature.



LILONGWE, MALAWI

During the course of the composting initiative in Lilongwe, women volunteers were able to draw income from their activities. Most used the compost on their own crops, which improved output and they were able to sell fruit and vegetables at a higher price. One participant noted that she went on to buy herself a mobile phone with her earnings. They now also all have waste management skills that they can draw on to generate a livelihood in future.

Unfortunately, the fact that we *only* included women in this initiative did create some tension in the community that had to be managed carefully. This yielded important learnings for the UNA team (see "[Key learnings](#)" below).



GENDER-SENSITIVE DIALOGIC ENGAGEMENTS IN 8 AFRICAN CITIES

UNA's interactive engagements proved effective in levelling the playing field and ensuring that women felt safe and comfortable enough to actively contribute to discussions and activities. We successfully created a space that limited the impact of traditional gender power dynamics, and encouraged all participants to partake equally in co-learning and the co-production of knowledge. Importantly, we found that having multiple different perspectives and insights in one room gave rise to conversations and tension points that actually unlocked new opportunities for nature to be effectively mainstreamed in decision-making (see [UNA Impact Story 3](#)). The presence of women was instrumental in the co-creation of entry points for the integration of nature-based considerations that are also fundamentally inclusive.

LONG-TERM IMPACTS AND SIGNIFICANCE

The UNA programme's emphasis on gender equality has supported partner cities in taking steps towards both achieving SDG 5 and localising the gender-based action plans developed under the CBD and UNFCCC. In the case of the CBD's *Guidelines for Mainstreaming Gender into National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs)*, for instance, we've driven city-level action in this area and helped municipal governments to integrate these recommendations into local plans. This in turn supports – city by city – a countrywide shift towards gender inclusion in national biodiversity frameworks and plans.

Essentially, we've helped to ensure that women have more than just one token place at the urban planning table in UNA cities – that they're not just better represented in numbers at meetings and conferences, but that their insights, concerns, needs and daily realities are better represented in decisions, plans and policies.

There is evidence that our work has helped to inherently embed gender considerations and principles in the fabric of partner cities. Many public officials now fully recognise the value of empowering women and are determined to design better processes that amplify their voices. Together, we've also co-produced concrete tools and methodologies that municipalities can use to do so going forward. What's more, we've built champions for gender equality among men. This hopefully marks the start of a significant long-term shift in planning culture.

Ensuring that women can fully contribute to nature-related planning also has knock-on effects in other development areas, including health and safety. In this way, work in this field can help to improve conditions for women across various spheres.

Notably, all of ICLEI Africa's many learnings around how to effectively promote gender equality in African contexts can be shared with others working on sustainability and development issues. We've also captured many of the rich gender-based insights and discussions that emerged from our



engagements, and we plan to present these to local and national decision-makers during the forthcoming review of important documents, such as countries' NBSAPs and Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), so that these considerations can be taken into account and potentially integrated into these plans.

Taken together, this will all ideally go some way towards building a world that promotes urban resilience for all, not just for one portion of the population.



KEY LEARNINGS

- Simply including women in planning, decision-making and implementation isn't enough to promote equality. It's vital to create an enabling environment within which women can thrive. This requires taking social norms and traditional gender roles into account, and working closely with men so that they can help lay the foundation for women empowerment. In Lilongwe, Malawi, for instance, the fact that we didn't engage men – particularly the women's husbands – in the composting initiative, and run capacity building exercises with them, made it difficult for the women to flourish, despite being given new skills and tools.
- Processes focused on experiential learning, knowledge co-production, reflection and relationship building can be used to disrupt power dynamics on many levels (see [UNA Handbooks 7, 8 and 9](#)). They are most effective, however, at addressing power differences rooted in gender.
- It's important to formally document all the gender perspectives and insights that emerge from interventions so that they can guide future practice.

CONTACT

Jessica Kavonic

E: jessica.kavonic@iclei.org

T: (0027) 021 202 0381

ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability, Africa Secretariat
Century City, Cape Town,
South Africa

DATE PUBLISHED

November 2020

*UNA was funded through
The Swedish International
Development Cooperation Agency
(Sida) through SwedBio at the
Stockholm Resilience Centre,
Stockholm University*

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)**.