

# WORKING WITH INFORMALITY

Promoting collaborative efforts to service informal settlements with nature-based solutions

## Setting the scene

### THE SITUATION PRIOR TO UNA INTERVENTIONS

Due to rapid urbanisation and high levels of inequality, informality is an integral part of many African cities. In fact, in some areas, significant portions of the urban landscape are entirely unplanned.

As informal development is not authorised and competes with formal land-use plans, the UNA team found that some municipal officials are, understandably, hesitant to operate in informal areas. Servicing planned areas already requires much time and effort, and so extending service delivery on a mass scale to unplanned parts of the city is challenging.

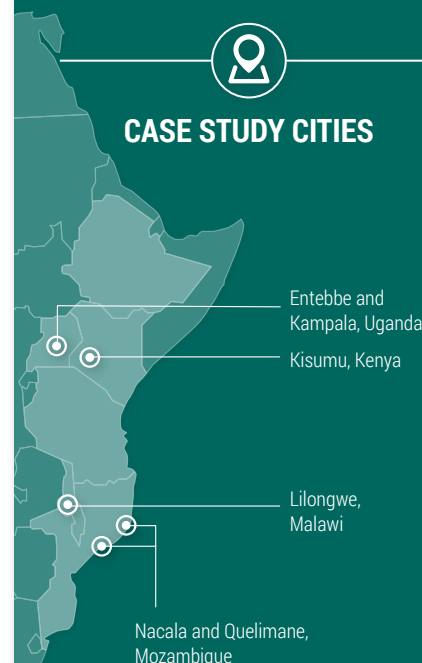


### KEY IMPACT

Through various interventions, the UNA programme has helped to establish mechanisms for collaboration between city officials and informal communities, and has showcased how informal settlement upgrading schemes can be strengthened by integrating nature-based solutions (NBS).



### CASE STUDY CITIES



The truth is, though, informality is a key part of the way development tends to unfold in African cities – it’s not a temporary reality that can be overlooked without posing a serious threat to urban sustainability and human well-being. Urban sprawl is a major contributor to biodiversity loss and nature degradation, and residents in informal settlements face higher risks from the impacts of climate change. If unplanned areas aren’t factored into decisions and incorporated into city plans, it becomes almost impossible to sustainably manage cities’ urban natural assets (e.g., forests, wetlands, rivers etc.) or address the needs of their most vulnerable groups.

Working in informal areas is also a matter of principle: The pledge contained in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is to “leave no one behind”. To build a just and inclusive world, it’s imperative that inhabitants of informal areas are “brought along” in the design of future cities.

In some cities, a growing recognition of the importance of servicing these areas *has* spurred local and national governments to respond with extensive informal settlement upgrading schemes. Often, though, these programmes tend to be complex and difficult to implement, while following a top-down approach that doesn’t always include residents in the process of developing solutions. It’s not always clear what best practice is when it comes to addressing informality – sometimes it’s tricky to know where to even begin.

Considering all of the above, the UNA programme identified a need to assist partner cities to establish strong working relationships with informal sector representatives and find effective ways to service these parts of the urban landscape, while protecting and restoring natural capital. The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic has only highlighted the importance – and the urgency – of this work. It has put a spotlight on significant vulnerabilities in African cities linked to structural inequality, emphasising the need to address risks and challenges that disproportionately trouble informal communities.

#### AIM



**To support engagement and collaboration between city officials and informal settlement residents, and establish NBS as an important part of a broader strategy to upgrade unplanned areas and service vulnerable communities.**

#### Programme intervention

#### THE COURSE OF ACTION

Across UNA cities, the team concentrated on facilitating a mind-set shift among city officials, encouraging them to see informal areas as “unserved” rather than as “unplanned”. We wanted to alter perceptions so that the focus was no longer on the illegitimacy of informal settlements, but on the fact that they – as real parts of the city that aren’t going anywhere – lack services. From this foundation, we could then help build connections with stakeholders in the informal sector and start to co-design effective methods for providing government services to these areas – methods that are also imperatively rooted in restoring and protecting nature.



## LILONGWE, MALAWI

The UNA team encouraged the city council to select an informal site – once demarcated for formalisation – for a river restoration project, with the aim of using this as an opportunity to shift officials' perceptions and yield learnings about how best to work with informality to better manage urban natural assets.

The Tsoka-Lizulu informal markets, which produce a fair amount of waste that ends up in the adjacent river, were chosen as implementation sites. We then embarked on an extensive process of relationship and trust building with city officials and informal traders. Through multiple site visits, in-person engagements and discussions, we encouraged municipal officials and representatives from the informal markets to interact with each other on a level playing field, listen to each other's views and concerns, and work to collectively develop ideas on ways to manage waste at the site and restore the river system.



## ENTEBBE, UGANDA; KISUMU, KENYA; NACALA, MOZAMBIQUE

In a number of UNA cities, the programme used the methodology of urban tinkering – an approach that works with what's already on the ground and adjusts existing urban elements to enhance resilience – to highlight ways that informal settlements can be upgraded using small-scale “tweaking” interventions.

City officials and members of the informal community came together to participate in walking workshops, during which they walked through parts of the settlement and identified ways they could tinker with the landscape to address challenges and provide key services. All along the way, the UNA team positioned NBS as a key part of the answer, emphasising, for instance, how the planting of indigenous trees can be used for flood control, or how urban agriculture can support food security. We also put the focus on the value of a bottom-up approach that actively involves informal area residents in the process of brainstorming solutions.

In Entebbe, in particular, we aimed to show city officials and residents how NBS can be used to enhance the resilience of the Namiro wetland informal community and address the vulnerabilities that became so apparent under COVID-19.

## Evidence of change

### KEY OUTCOMES



## ENTEBBE, UGANDA; KISUMU, KENYA; NACALA, MOZAMBIQUE

The walking workshops in Entebbe, Kisumu and Nacala were successful in showing city officials that there are effective ways to service informal areas that a) don't require significant top-down investment, b) work with the existing conditions on the ground, and c) encourage community buy-in.

More specifically, city councils have learnt that they don't have to rely exclusively on hard infrastructure to reform informal areas – that instead, they can capitalise on the free services provided by NBS to do so in a more feasible, cost-effective manner. That is, they've seen the value of integrating NBS in all future informal settlement upgrading schemes. They've also witnessed the importance of a bottom-up approach that actively engages community members.

What's more, the programme effectively positioned NBS as being critical not just for restoring biodiversity and offering key services, but also for addressing specific challenges facing vulnerable groups (like those living in the informal settlement sprawled across the Namiro wetland in Entebbe).



## LILONGWE, MALAWI

The trust-building engagements between city officials and informal market traders in Lilongwe helped to establish a mutual respect and a deeper understanding of the other party's perspectives, concerns, challenges and priorities.

The experience also revealed that fairly formal governance structures and processes exist within the informal sector – every section of the market has its own leader, for instance. The identification of these clear entry points for communication made it much easier than anticipated for the city council to work with the informal community. Today, public officials have the contact details of key community decision-makers, and have established good working relationships with them. This development lays the foundation for seamless future collaboration.

Ultimately, the informal traders and municipality worked together to co-produce a master landscape plan for the rehabilitation of the site that all parties agree to. They also collaboratively implemented a composting initiative and taught thousands of residents in the informal settlement about effective waste management.

Perhaps the most important outcome was that the city council saw first-hand that it is both possible and valuable to work with informality. Officials even asked the UNA team to write up concept notes about the waste management methodology employed at Tsoka-Lizulu so that it can be replicated in other informal areas in the city.

## LONG-TERM IMPACTS AND SIGNIFICANCE

Thanks to the UNA interventions, municipal officials in several partner cities now have the working relationships, tools and tactics they need to work with informality and upgrade these areas using sustainable means.

There is evidence that city councils are now not just better equipped to operate in informal areas, but also more willing to do so – and more accepting of the fact that informality is likely a long-term reality. Ideally, then, we'll see more unplanned areas being incorporated into development plans, and more African cities embracing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development principle of leaving no one behind.

If NBS are being used as an integral part of upgrading schemes, this will go a long way toward ensuring that urbanisation unfolds in a more sustainable way and nature is brought back into African cities. The implications for improved urban resilience are significant: informal landscapes that are upgraded with nature are inherently more tough and adaptive, and their inhabitants – the most vulnerable of all – will be better protected against the risks brought on by climate change.

Finally, the UNA team is able to use nature-based work in informal settlements as an opportunity to collect critical data and evidence on the value of natural capital and the success of nature-based interventions. We can then draw on this data to build a stronger case for NBS to be used globally to improve the well-being of the poor and marginalised, and boost their ability to cope with major shocks, like pandemics, in future.





## KEY LEARNINGS

- Capacity building is often required in cities to help change perceptions of informality and reduce discomfort around working in unplanned areas.
- Relationships are key agents of change. It's therefore critical to first and foremost invest time in building collaborative relationships between city councils and informal communities. This can be achieved by creating space for engagement and encouraging regular site visits and in-person interactions.
- The most effective solutions for upgrading informal areas are those that are co-designed by local community members and municipal officials.
- Well-defined leadership structures often exist within informal sectors, which makes it easier than expected to collaborate with representatives from unplanned areas.
- It can be helpful to partner with civil society organisations that focus on upgrading urban areas using community-driven approaches.
- Nature-based upgrading work in informal settlements presents the opportunity to collect data that backs up and quantifies how integral nature is for building urban resilience. Such evidence can be used to make the case for nature (something that's been historically difficult to do) and motivate for investment in larger NBS programmes in future.
- Residents in informal settlements have a multitude of unmet needs that need to be considered when working in unplanned areas. It's important to manage expectations and be transparent about objectives and what can (or can't) be achieved. It's also key to be flexible and to prioritise alternatives like NBS that offer an array of benefits and meet multiple needs simultaneously.

## 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)**.



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