



Impact showcase

Accelerating nature-based development in African cities: Showcasing the UNA project's impact



URBAN NATURAL ASSETS FOR AFRICA
Embedding and sharing for scaled impact



SwedBio
A programme at Stockholm Resilience Centre





PURPOSE OF THIS DOCUMENT

This report presents the key impacts and learnings from the Urban Natural Assets (UNA) project, funded by SwedBio and implemented by ICLEI Africa. Spanning more than a decade and engaging eleven cities across Africa, the project unfolded in four distinct phases. Throughout its evolution, the UNA project remained firmly rooted in a process-driven approach that prioritised ongoing reflection, adaptation and deep engagement. By tailoring support to the unique realities of each city, the project enabled diverse and context-specific forms of impact.

This *UNA Impact Showcase* distils the project's outcomes into seven core impact areas, spotlighted through selected case studies, project tools and resources, and milestone achievements. It also offers six key lessons for future initiatives seeking to place nature and people at the heart of sustainable urban development.

WHO SHOULD READ THIS DOCUMENT

This document is intended for local government officials, city leaders, NGOs, CBOs, funders, researchers and practitioners working in urban development, nature-based solutions (NbS) or participatory governance. It provides practical insight into how impact can be achieved through people-centred, nature-integrated approaches, and what conditions enable or constrain such change. Whether you're planning city strategies, designing projects or advocating for new ways of working, this document serves as both a source of inspiration and a possible roadmap for scaling action.

HOW TO READ THIS DOCUMENT

The document is structured around seven thematic impact areas, each paired with real-world examples from cities involved in the UNA project. These are followed by a section on key resources, tools and platforms developed through the project, and finally, a set of lessons for future initiatives. You may choose to read it cover to cover, or dip into the sections most relevant to your work.

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Forewords



Kobie Brand, Regional Director: ICLEI Africa & Global Director: ICLEI Cities Biodiversity Centre

The Urban Natural Assets (UNA) project holds a special place in ICLEI Africa's biodiversity journey. As one of our earliest and most enduring projects, I've had the privilege of being involved since its inception in 2014. What began as a modest initiative has since grown into a transformative, decade-long endeavour, spanning eleven African cities in nine African countries and delivering meaningful, long-term sustainability impact. None of this would have been possible without the generous support of the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) through SwedBio, whose belief in the UNA vision has remained steadfast since day one.

Africa's urban population – already numbering hundreds of millions – is projected to nearly double by 2050, reaching approximately 1.4 billion people. This dramatic shift demands a fundamental rethinking of how we plan and govern our cities. The pace of urbanisation means that cities are expanding faster than infrastructure and planning can keep up, increasing the risks of uncontrolled sprawl, inadequate services, and deepening climate vulnerability. Left unaddressed, this trajectory accelerates biodiversity loss and ecosystem degradation, with the heaviest burden falling on the most vulnerable communities.

Yet cities are also our most powerful engines of growth and innovation, holding immense potential to develop and implement solutions to some of humanity's most complex challenges. The need for integrated approaches that build climate resilience while protecting biodiversity has never been more urgent. This is precisely why the UNA project matters: it demonstrates that when we meet cities where they are, co-create solutions, and honour both people and nature, we can achieve real impact.

The adoption of UNEA Resolution 5.2 on nature-based solutions (NbS) in 2022 elevated the global use of NbS to address environmental and urban challenges. And the

UNA experience revealed something vital: many African cities have been practising the principles underpinning NbS for generations, woven into their cultural fabric and way of life. Through a deeply innovative, collaborative, and rights-based approach, the UNA project worked to nurture and amplify these efforts, supporting cities to translate local and indigenous knowledge into policy levers and partnerships that drive sustainable local action.

The UNA project did not follow a linear programmatic approach but was intentionally designed to be process-driven, allowing us to build authentic relationships and walk alongside our partner cities, adapting and evolving together. This approach provided the time and flexibility to understand local realities and deepen relationships with both city and national governments, enabling us to better support them in responding to the complex and shifting challenges African cities face at the critical intersection of nature, urbanisation, and climate change.

This document brings together the key learnings and outcomes from over a decade of work through the UNA framework. We offer it as both legacy and invitation, inspiring city leaders, practitioners, and partners worldwide to embrace sustainable, inclusive and climate-resilient urban futures. UNA's success demonstrates a profound truth: when we partner with communities and invest in nature, we don't just create better cities, we create cities that truly thrive.

Let this be a celebration of what has been achieved, and a call to action to protect our natural assets, restore our ecosystems, and reimagine what our cities can become. The future of Africa's urban communities, and indeed all urban communities, depends on the choices we make today. By acting together with passion and purpose, we can build a future where every city is resilient, liveable and equitable.



Erika Hermansson, Senior Adviser, SwedBio at Stockholm Resilience Centre

The Urban Natural Assets (UNA) project led by ICLEI Africa was SwedBio's first urban collaborative project, enabled by funding from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida). Two years earlier, in 2012, the Cities Biodiversity Outlook – the first global scientific assessment of biodiversity in cities – had been released. The assessment identified an urgent need for mainstreaming nature into urban planning for the benefit of people living in cities. Important for cities worldwide, but crucial for urban areas in sub-Saharan Africa experiencing both rapid urbanisation and severe effects of climate change.

Strategically designed to target these challenges, the UNA project has over the years developed into a rich, diverse and constantly relevant project, the latter thanks to its adaptive management approach. With implementation activities tailored to the different project cities through the use of a human-rights based approach, the project has also become an effective vehicle for local implementation of the new Global Biodiversity Framework under the UN Convention on Biological Diversity.

ICLEI Africa, the local governments, and a wide spectrum of other key city actors, have together managed to not only strengthen capacity and improve coordination within the cities, but have also created important and long-lasting impact at multiple levels.

This report tells the story of an exciting journey that hopefully will inspire other cities, funders, private businesses and practitioners in their endeavours, further leveraging the potential of integrated approaches for more inclusive and sustainable cities by addressing the increasing pressures cities face worldwide, anchored in local realities.

The UNA project has to date been funded by Sida through SwedBio for eleven years. We are convinced that long-term support of projects like UNA is an important factor for creating long-lasting and sustainable impact that matters.

“ We are convinced that long-term support for projects like UNA is essential to creating meaningful, lasting, and sustainable impact. ”



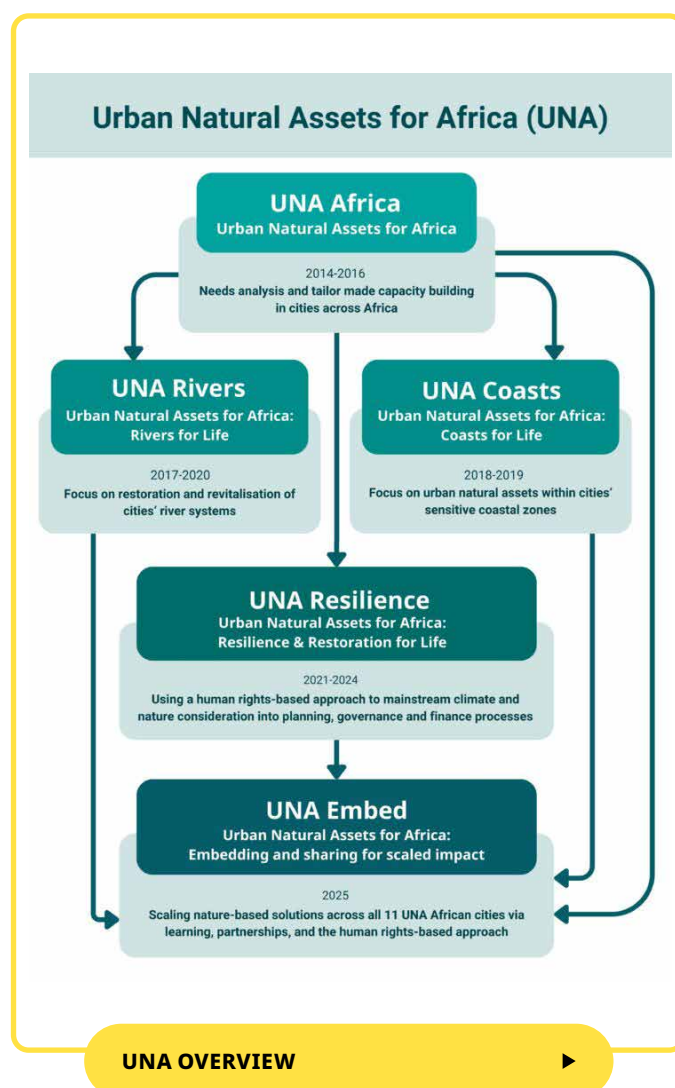


Accelerating nature-based development in African cities: Showcasing the UNA project's impact

Introduction

African cities stand at a crossroads, where rapid urban growth demands a shift towards development that is both people-centred and nature-positive. Nature provides an abundance of contributions to people, including raw materials, fresh water and food – all of which support water security, food security and livelihoods. It also provides medicinal plants, trees and green spaces that lower city temperatures and improve air quality. These natural assets are crucial to the city's economy and the health and wellbeing of its people. Yet these contributions are often undervalued or excluded from planning and decision-making processes.

This Impact Showcase brings together key learnings from over a decade of collaboration, co-design and co-production across African cities. It highlights how collective engagement – by city authorities, local officials, stakeholders and national government – in addressing local challenges and pressures can foster inclusive action, guide policy reform, mobilise finance, encourage innovation and strengthen local leadership and agency. Together, these efforts help to progressively protect and restore urban natural assets while safeguarding the rights of people and addressing urban challenges. Alongside stories, tools and first-hand accounts from partner cities, this showcase page and the associated report will highlight creative entry points, resources, lessons and case studies to inspire more action and inform future efforts across the continent, and beyond.





About the UNA project

Since 2014, the UNA project – funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) through SwedBio at Stockholm Resilience Centre – has supported cities and helped shift development narratives by positioning nature as an essential asset and part of urban infrastructure. Over the years, the UNA project supported 11 cities across nine countries in their transition towards a more sustainable development trajectory. Through the UNA project’s five flagship projects – Urban Natural Assets for Africa (UNA Africa: 2014-2016), Urban Natural Assets: Rivers for Life (UNA Rivers: 2017-2020), Urban Natural Assets: Coasts for Life (UNA Coasts: 2018-2019), Urban Natural Assets: Resilience and Restoration for Life (UNA Resilience: 2021-2024) and Urban Natural Assets: Embedding and Sharing for scaled Impact (UNA Embed: 2025) – the project facilitated the integration of NbS into governance, planning and later finance. In doing so, it built urban resilience and generated sufficient agency and momentum to support an ongoing process of transformative change.





What makes the UNA project impactful?

The UNA project prioritised building the capacity of city officials and local stakeholders. It also explored and critically assessed alternative approaches to planning that better suit the African context, paying specific attention to the key role of nature-based solutions (NbS). By placing nature at the forefront of its approach, the UNA project supported the improved integration of nature into decision-making and city planning processes. It also built momentum and agency

for a continuous transformative process and fostered a culture of caring for nature through inclusive approaches to a diverse range of stakeholders, including youth, women, Indigenous peoples and vulnerable communities. Through this ongoing process of transformative change, the UNA project supported cities in working towards more nature-positive development, where ecosystems are restored, regenerated and connected for continued recovery.

The UNA project in numbers



100+
multicity
dialogues



2500+
stakeholders
engaged



100+
knowledge products
developed

The UNA project's approach

1 Bringing nature back into cities: Advocating for the integration of nature and NbS into city planning and decision-making processes as a pathway to resilient, nature-sensitive development.

2 Co-producing with city knowledge holders: Recognising that a successful nature-based project centres people fairly and inclusively and ensures that it incorporates all types of knowledge.

3 Incorporating creativity and innovation: Using experimentation and innovation as opportunities to integrate social learning dimensions into the “science”, and as a tool to tap into indigenous and local community knowledge and wisdom while solving current challenges.

4 Embedding a human rights-based approach (HRBA): Promoting social equity and the recognition of human rights obligations in all facets of the project and how cities respond to development challenges.

5 Documenting for future showcasing and scaling: Documenting project processes through lessons and on-the-ground impacts to increase visibility of African experiences in NbS and support peer learning for wider global uptake.



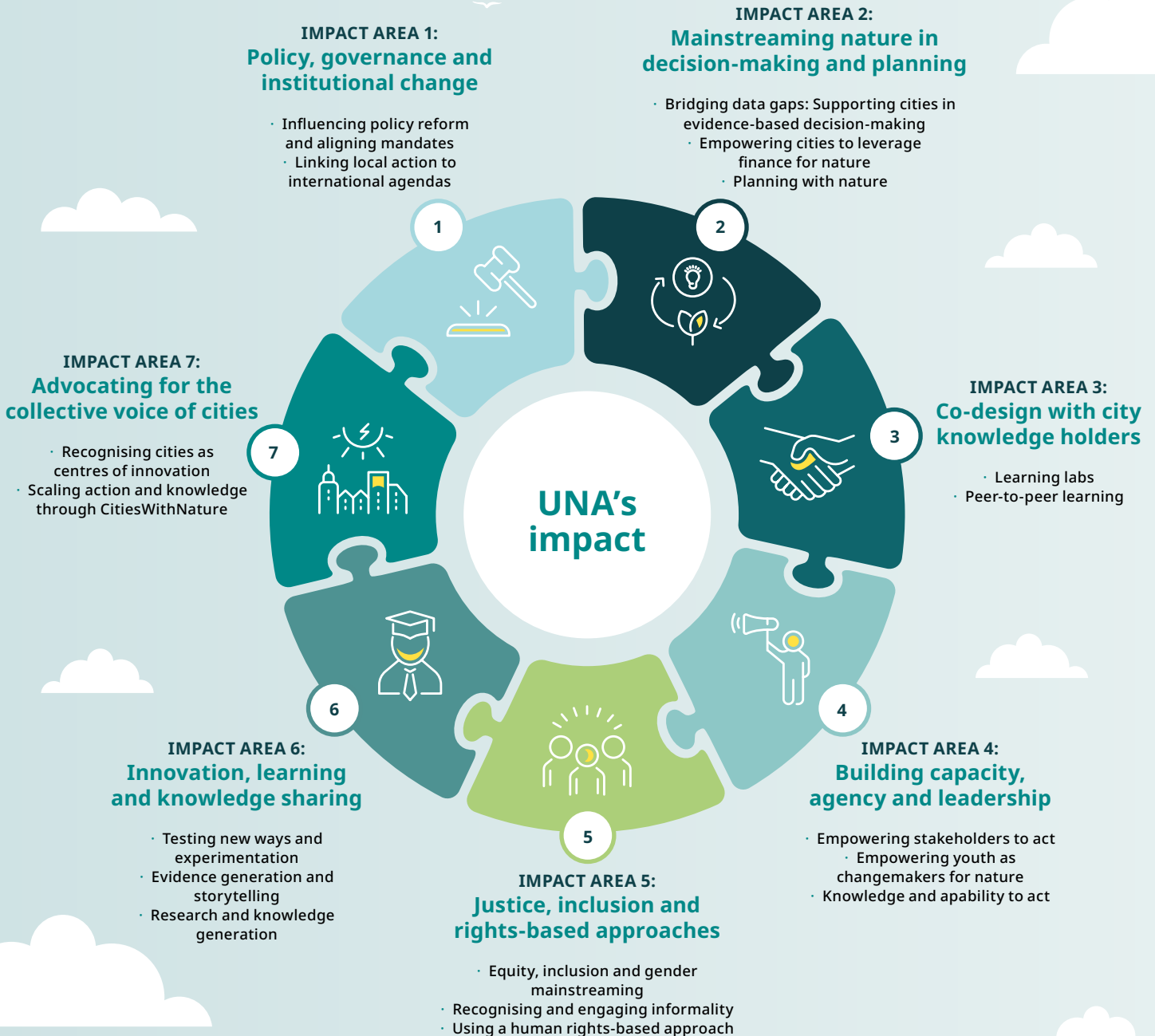
Watch the video below for a quick glimpse into the UNA project's journey and scroll down to explore the seven impact pathways in more depth.

VIDEO





Our impact areas



Through a deeply innovative, collaborative and HRBA, the UNA project supported cities across **seven interconnected impact areas**. The seven impact areas have been the basis for sustainable, resilient urban development that considers the complexity of urban systems. The impact areas encourage holistic and

adaptive thinking to help the UNA project achieve its goals. This approach enables cities to progressively address the realities of rapid urbanisation, climate risk and biodiversity loss. It transforms urban development trajectories and strengthens cities' interconnectedness with their natural systems.



IMPACT AREA 1: Policy, governance and institutional change





Nature-based solutions are gaining traction in national policy; however, many local governments across Africa still face significant barriers to implementing them. While cities are responsible for critical decisions regarding land use, infrastructure and service delivery, they often lack the mandates, resources, and institutional capacity and coordination needed to integrate nature into their governance systems and across sectors and levels of government. Strengthening local governance – through policy reform, institutional capacity and cross-sector collaboration – is essential to create the conditions that allow NbS to deliver their full benefit where they are needed most: in cities and communities.

The UNA project worked directly with local practitioners, communities and government stakeholders to improve the governance systems shaping urban development. Through targeted support for policy reform, mandate alignment and institutional coordination, the project helped cities address disconnections between departments, sectors, and levels of government, mainstream nature into decision-making and policy reform and better link local actions with national and global agendas. By investing in governance that centres both people and ecosystems, the UNA project helped lay the foundation for more inclusive, climate-resilient urban futures.

1a. Influencing policy reform and aligning mandates

As cities face the urgent task of rethinking urban development to centre both people and nature, the UNA project helped them reassess current policies, reform systems and clarify institutional mandates. This approach elevated nature from a peripheral consideration to a central pillar of urban governance. As a result, cities were able to integrate sustainability and nature considerations into planning and decision-making, foster alignment across departments and enable coordinated, cross-sectoral action.

[SEE CASE STUDY ON PAGE 12](#) ▶

1b. Linking local action to international agendas

By aligning city-level action with national priorities and global frameworks such as the [Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#) and the Kunming-Montreal [Global Biodiversity Framework](#) under the Convention on Biological Diversity, the UNA project helped bring global sustainability agendas closer to the realities of African cities. This localisation helped cities translate global commitments into practical, place-based solutions that reflect local contexts and priorities.

[SEE CASE STUDY ON PAGE 14](#) ▶





CASE STUDY

Dar es Salaam: Embedding nature into urban policy

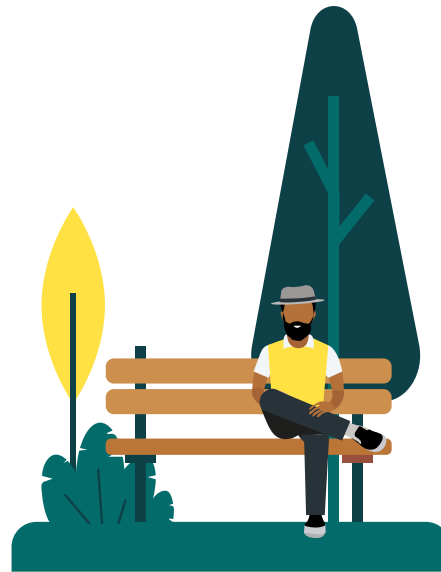
Through the UNA Rivers for Life project, officials in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, took part in hands-on workshops and multi-level dialogues that highlighted how NbS can improve climate resilience, water security and public health. This process revealed key gaps in Tanzania’s 2007 Urban Planning Guidelines, which largely overlooked nature and climate concerns. With support from the UNA project and local partners, the City co-developed clear, actionable recommendations to update the guidelines. These were formally submitted to the national Ministry of Lands, Housing and Human Settlements Developments, which committed to implement them. Since then, Dar es Salaam began allocating budget and planning resources to protect natural assets, and city officials report a renewed understanding of nature’s multi-sectoral benefits. Through subsequent work alongside ICLEI, they developed a Thematic Atlas – a digital tool that links spatial data of urban challenges with natural features and their ecosystem services. This tool helps city officials strategically invest in green infrastructure. The City has also dedicated resources to strengthen development control and improve land use planning at a national level.



Learn more about how the UNA project helped unlock policy reform in African cities:

[IMPACT STORY](#) ▶

[ARTICLE](#) ▶



“UNA and ICLEI has helped us to prepare a city biodiversity action plan... Of course. We have been using that biodiversity action plan to reestablish tree nature and also... to improve the management of the environment of Dar Es Salaam greening activities. We are making the environment green. And also, we make it better for people... to live because the trees... reduce the winds and also the health problems which we're facing, especially in cities... ”

– Amani Kavishe, Principal Wildlife Officer, Dar es Salaam






CASE STUDY

Entebbe: Linking local action to national and global goals

The UNA project’s work in Entebbe, Uganda began with national–local dialogues that brought government stakeholders together to co-design interventions with strategic impact. National officials emphasised the need for scalable projects, which led to plans for a social-ecological buffer zone around the Namiiro wetland, including the planting of 400 native fruit trees. When flooding and the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted this plan, the UNA project and city actors adapted by shifting focus to community resilience. Using Nbs, the project built skills in permaculture, water harvesting and sustainable resource use, and developed a mobile app, THRIVE, to support this learning. This locally grounded work directly contributed to Uganda’s

commitments under the SDGs and Sendai Framework. It also strengthened coordination between different levels of government, advancing a whole-of-government approach to urban planning and decision-making.

 **Learn more about how the UNA project connects local actions to national and international agenda:**

IMPACT STORY 

UNA RIVERS FOR LIFE CASE STUDY 





Pathway resources

IMPACT STORY 1: POLICY REFORM
Integrating nature and climate change considerations into urban planning policies in African cities

KEY REFINC
Through context-specific policy reforms, the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) and partners have supported African cities to integrate nature and climate change considerations into their urban planning policies.

Setting the scene
The situation prior to UNA interventions

CASE STUDY CITIES

ICLEI Local Government for Sustainability, CBC Citizen Biodiversity Center, SwedBio Swedish Biodiversity Centre

IMPACT STORY 1: POLICY REFORM

IMPACT STORY 5: LOCAL ACTION AND GLOBAL AGENDAS
Led to international agendas through on-the-ground implementation in African cities

KEY REFINC
The implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in African cities is supported by the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) and partners.

Setting the scene
The situation prior to UNA interventions

CASE STUDY CITIES

ICLEI Local Government for Sustainability, CBC Citizen Biodiversity Center, SwedBio Swedish Biodiversity Centre

IMPACT STORY 5: LOCAL ACTION AND GLOBAL AGENDAS

CASE STUDY: WORKING WITH NATURE TO REDUCE DISASTER RISK IN AFRICA
Working with nature to reduce disaster risk

MAINSTREAMING BIODIVERSITY INTO AFRICAN CITIES LAND USE PLANNING | 2018
URBAN NATURAL ASSETS FOR AFRICA: RIVERS FOR LIFE

KEY REFINC
Nature and trees provide healthy ecosystems and knowledge being integrated into national and regional disaster risk reduction (DRR) strategies.

Setting the scene
The situation prior to UNA interventions

CASE STUDY CITIES

ICLEI Local Government for Sustainability, UNA RIVERS FOR LIFE, CBC Citizen Biodiversity Center

CASE STUDY: WORKING WITH NATURE TO REDUCE DISASTER RISK IN AFRICA



VIDEO: WASTE IS WEALTH



VIDEO: MINECRAFT IN ADDIS



IMPACT AREA 2: Mainstreaming nature in decision- making and planning





Across Africa, cities face the dual pressures of rapid urbanisation and climate risk, which place a growing strain on ecosystems and people. Yet, nature provides essential services, such as flood mitigation, cooling and water regulation, which are critical for long-term urban resilience. Historically, nature's contributions to people have been undervalued or overlooked in core city planning systems and decision-making processes.

The UNA project helped shift this narrative by positioning nature as essential urban infrastructure and promoting nature-positive urban development. Through planning tools, spatial data integration and cross-sector collaboration, cities were supported to embed nature into land use planning, governance and decision-making. This mainstreaming approach helps cities design for resilience, reduce biodiversity loss and align with broader sustainability agendas.

2a. Bridging data gaps: Supporting cities in evidence-based decision-making

Many cities in Africa lack the data needed to inform data-driven policies and make informed decisions related to biodiversity, city planning and climate action. Throughout the UNA project, great efforts were made to close this data gap and provide cities with the information they need to make informed decisions. By co-producing products such as natural asset maps, climate risk assessments, roadmaps and socio-economic assessments with city stakeholders, the project equipped cities with practical resources to guide data-driven, contextually relevant actions and investments.

[SEE CASE STUDIES ON PAGE 18 AND PAGE 19](#) ▶

2b. Empowering cities to leverage finance for nature

Central to mainstreaming nature into decision-making and planning has been the project's targeted support for developing financial capacity. By adopting a whole-of-society approach that actively involves city officials,

technical practitioners, communities, researchers and traditional leaders, the UNA project equipped local actors with the tools, knowledge and confidence needed to access and mobilise funding for NbS. This ensures that resources reach the areas where they are most needed to address locally identified priorities.

[SEE CASE STUDY ON PAGE 20](#) ▶

2c. Planning with nature

Through the UNA project, cities moved beyond seeing nature as an add-on to urban development and embedded it directly into planning systems, spatial frameworks, governance systems, decision-making and resource mobilisation. From coastal zones to wetlands, municipalities have been supported to identify, map and integrate natural assets into local development plans in ways that are inclusive, strategic and actionable. This approach empowered diverse stakeholders to co-design shared priorities for managing and protecting ecosystems, while aligning local planning with resilience goals.

[SEE CASE STUDY ON PAGE 21](#) ▶





CASE STUDY

Kampala: Mainstreaming biodiversity into land use planning

Through the UNA Rivers for Life project, Kampala, Uganda embedded nature into its urban planning systems by co-producing natural asset hotspot maps with local and national stakeholders. These maps identified key areas that need protection based on their vulnerability to climate risks and urban development pressures, as well as the essential ecosystem services they provide, such as flood regulation, water purification, and biodiversity support. They are now being used in everyday decision-making. The process built cross-departmental relationships and clarified institutional roles, improving coordination and trust. The maps and resulting recommendations have been integrated into

the City's Resilience Strategy, influencing planning, water management and climate adaptation efforts.



Learn more below:

IMPACT STORY



CASE STUDY



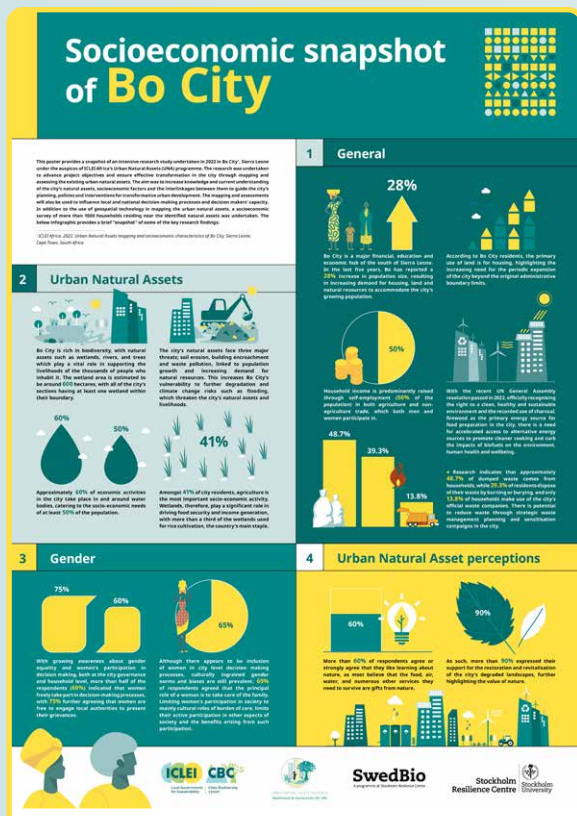


CASE STUDY

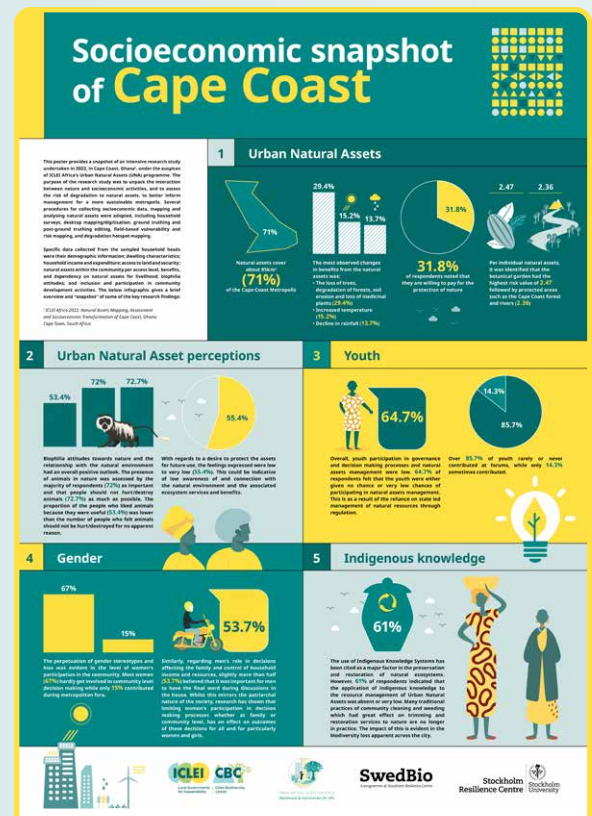
Bo City and Cape Coast: Socio-economic studies

Between 2022 and 2023, the UNA project invested in city-wide natural asset mapping in Bo City, Sierra Leone and Cape Coast, Ghana. This process enabled cities to answer four key questions: (i) Which natural assets exist? (ii) Where are they located? (iii) What condition are they in? and (iv) What threats are they facing? This information helped facilitate informed planning, decision-making and financing. To give cities a more holistic picture of the socio-economic dynamics and their implications on livelihoods and natural assets, mapping and data collection was extended to the socio-economic landscape. The socio-economic survey undertaken in both project cities

focused on understanding the socio-economic landscape and assessing the interlinkages between people's day-to-day activities, the economy and the environment. The survey focused on several different thematic areas, including household characteristics, economic profiles, gender dynamics, attitudes toward nature and people's relationship with nature. This deeper understanding helped shape contextually relevant strategies and actions in both cities.



SOCIO-ECONOMIC SNAPSHOT OF BO CITY



SOCIO-ECONOMIC SNAPSHOT OF CAPE COAST

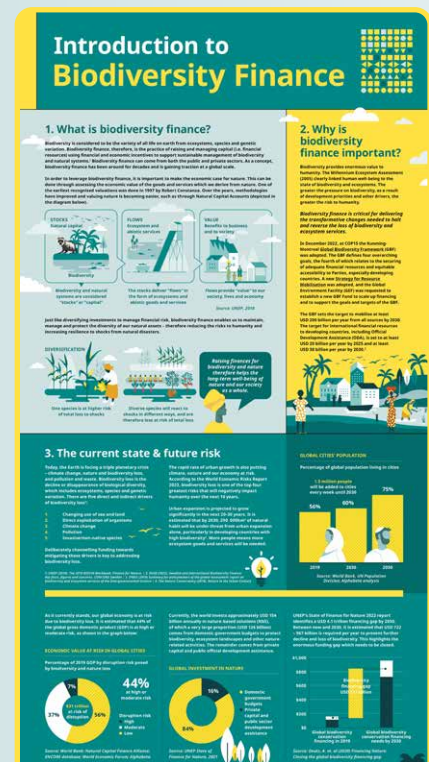


CASE STUDY

Bo City and Cape Coast: Strengthening access to finance

Under the UNA Resilience project, Bo City and Cape Coast received support to strengthen their understanding of biodiversity finance and explore pathways to access it. Tailored in-person learning labs, detailed finance flow assessments and co-created finance training modules helped more than 80 stakeholders understand and apply biodiversity finance concepts effectively. Resources such as a finance handbook, infographic and guide were developed to support this learning. As a result, both cities are now better equipped to align urban planning with nature and design and implement sustainable finance strategies that benefit people, ecosystems and local economies. This work

was carried forward into the next phase, UNA Embed, which included all cities from prior projects. A key focus was helping cities refine strong concept notes for investment in NbS and providing further capacity-building to support access to finance.



INFOGRAPHIC: INTRODUCTION TO BIODIVERSITY FINANCE



CASE STUDY

Nacala: Co-producing a coastal plan for climate resilience

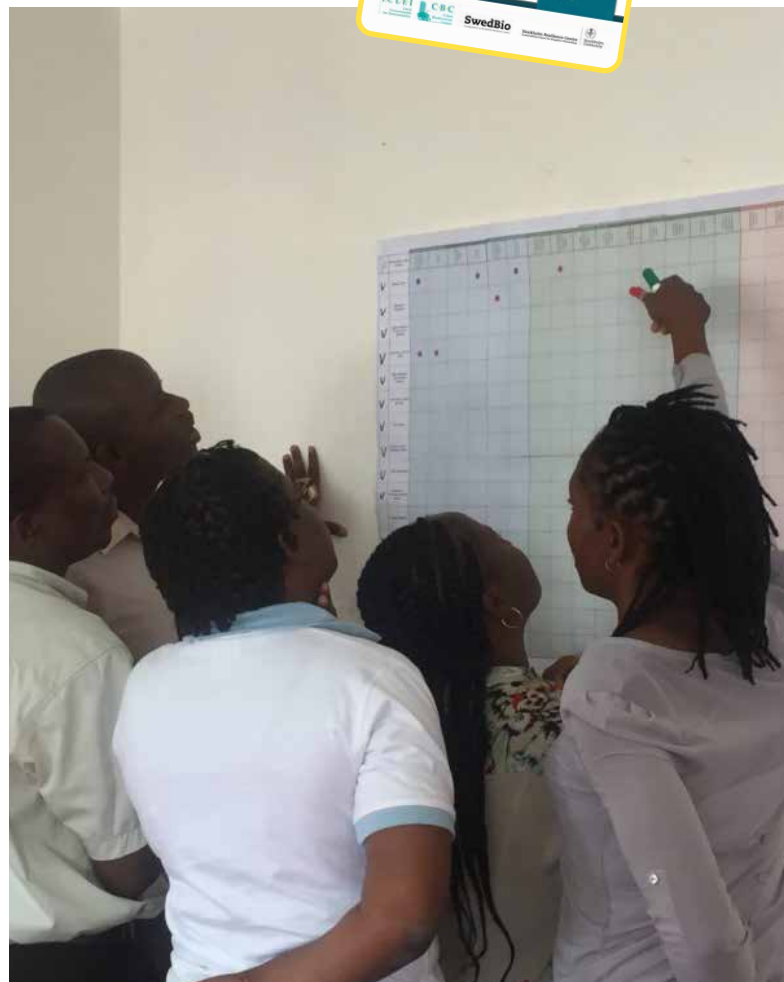
In Nacala, Mozambique, the project brought together city officials, technical departments and community representatives to co-develop a Coastal Natural Asset Management Plan (CNAMP). This inclusive process identified key coastal assets, outlined their benefits and threats and set out clear goals, actions, responsibilities and financing options. The plan is more than a policy tool; it's a shared roadmap that empowers local actors with the knowledge and agency to manage their coastline sustainably. Because it was built collaboratively, the CNAMP helped to foster more coordinated, cross-departmental engagement on nature-related initiatives.

Nacala City is currently prioritising coastal mangrove restoration and capacity-building, particularly for municipal officials, to enhance coastal natural assets to support climate change mitigation and adaptation, in line with the CNAMP.



Learn more below:

IMPACT STORY 

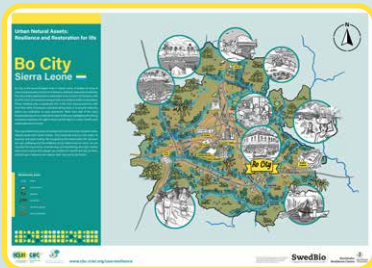




Pathway resources



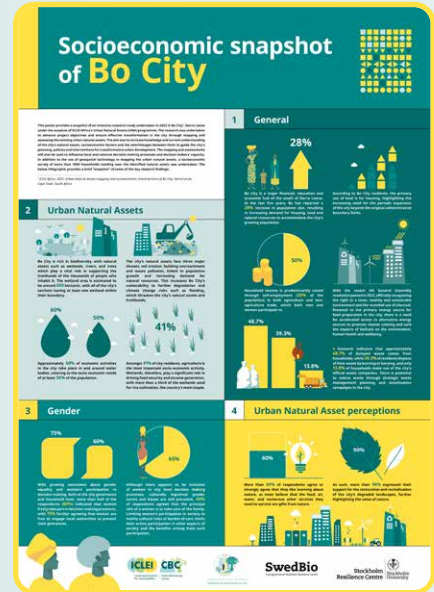
ILLUSTRATED MAP - CAPE COAST



ILLUSTRATED MAP - BO CITY



SOCIOECONOMIC SNAPSHOT - CAPE COAST



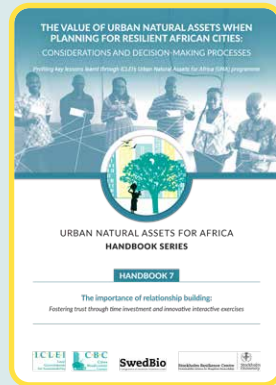
SOCIOECONOMIC SNAPSHOT - BO CITY



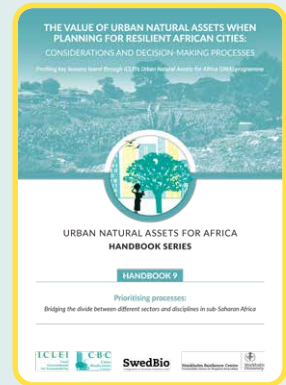
IMPACT STORY 2 - PRACTICE REFORM



IMPACT STORY 3 - MAINSTREAMING IN PRACTICE



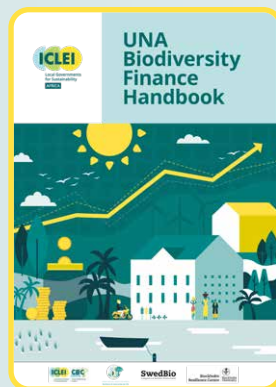
HANDBOOK 7: THE IMPORTANCE OF RELATIONSHIP BUILDING



HANDBOOK 9: PRIORITISING PROCESSES: BRIDGING THE DIVIDE BETWEEN DIFFERENT SECTORS AND DISCIPLINES



FINANCE GUIDE



FINANCE HANDBOOK



CASE STUDY: WORKING WITH NATURE TO REDUCE DISASTER RISK IN AFRICA





IMPACT AREA 3: Co-design with city knowledge holders





For nature-based solutions to be effective, they must be rooted in local realities. In many cities, past approaches excluded communities from shaping the very plans that affect their daily lives. This lapse limited buy-in and overlooked valuable lived knowledge. Since 2014, the UNA project has placed co-design, co-production and collaboration at the heart of its methodology. The project brought together city officials, traditional leaders, community members and technical experts to design solutions collaboratively. These multi-actor processes improved legitimacy, strengthened relationships and ensured that interventions are more inclusive, context-sensitive and widely supported.

3a. Learning labs

The UNA learning labs are a cornerstone of the project. These multi-directional workshops were held in each city, ensuring that nature-based planning and decision-making reflected local priorities and lived experiences.

Participatory engagement brought together communities, practitioners, and decision-makers to unlearn, relearn and co-learn, creating inclusive processes that build trust and strengthen institutional capacity. This collaborative approach enhanced the legitimacy of decision-making while fostering ownership of the process, increasing the sustainability and scalability of nature-based interventions.

3b. Peer-to-peer learning

Peer-to-peer learning created a powerful platform for cities, stakeholders and partners to share experiences and practical solutions for advancing NbS. By exchanging lessons across contexts, cities built capacity, accelerated innovation and avoided common implementation pitfalls.

[SEE CASE STUDY ON PAGE 26](#) ►





CASE STUDY

RISE Africa Masterclass Series

From 26 to 30 May 2025, cities from all past phases of the UNA project took part in a curated learning experience at the RISE Africa 2025 Urban Action Festival in Cape Town, South Africa. This event marked the very first time all UNA cities were brought together to reflect on project learnings and impact in person. The week-long programme combined immersive learning workshops, peer exchanges and working sessions, all grounded in the challenges and opportunities of implementing NbS in African urban contexts. Throughout the festival, participants engaged in UNA-led sessions, interactive workshops, site visits, networking opportunities and the broader RISE Africa project to learn, share insights and build local government connections across the continent. Activities during

this in-person gathering were designed to (i) deepen participants' knowledge of NbS and urban resilience; (ii) foster collaboration across the UNA network; and (iii) equip city representatives with practical tools and partnerships to advance nature-based resilience efforts in their home cities. By blending reflection, technical learning and real-world exposure, the experience strengthened both individual and collective capacity to integrate nature-based approaches into urban planning and policy.



Read more here:

UNA IMMERSIVE LEARNING ▶

“What I've learned from this gathering is that community participation is very important. Accountability is very important. And the resources to implement projects are key if you want to implement projects.”

*– Henry Powell, Chief Administrator,
Bo City Council*







CASE STUDY

Cape Coast: City-to-city Exchange

As part of the UNA Resilience project, the Cape Coast Metropolitan Assembly (CCMA), in partnership with ICLEI Africa, hosted a city-to-city exchange in Cape Coast, Ghana in October 2023. The exchange included a learning lab, the launch of a creative exhibition and a site visit, with a specific emphasis on the inclusion of women and youth voices. The overarching purpose was to exchange knowledge, voices, opinions, ideas, perspectives, experiences, learnings and skills, targeting UNA cities and partners from across Ghana and beyond. Using imagery, stories and narrative, as well as immersive on-site experiences to elicit responses from the viewers and stimulate discussion, the event allowed for peer-to-peer learning. City officials, community stakeholders and project practitioners and funders shared

their commitments to nature. A core outcome of this event was the CCMA's commitment to continue using the Cape Coast Biodiversity Centre as a dedicated space for nature and biodiversity education and awareness-raising. This outcome ensures that these capacities and skills continue to be built in the city.





“ The UNA approach benefits African cities in terms of community-based approaches and the collaboration and sharing amongst cities.”

- Eduardo Pelembe, Senior Professional Officer at the Council of Environment and Climate Change, Quelimane Municipal Council

Pathway resources



READ MORE ABOUT UNA AT RISE AFRICA 2025 ▶





IMPACT AREA 4: Building capacity, agency and leadership





Many African cities face institutional constraints that limit their ability to take action, even when the political will exists. Without the skills, confidence, resources or tools to drive change, efforts to mainstream nature often stall.

The UNA project invested in people as much as in plans. Through learning labs, mentorship and tailored training sessions, the project supported government and community actors to develop the leadership, technical know-how, skills, improved understanding and the confidence to take action. This human-centred approach laid the groundwork for more resilient, locally led governance.

4a. Empowering stakeholders to act

By supporting training, mentorship and on-the-ground technical support, the UNA project built confidence and leadership among both officials and community members. This helped cities create a cohort of changemakers who can drive urban resilience from within.

[SEE CASE STUDY ON PAGE 32](#)

4b. Empowering youth as changemakers for nature

Youth are vital changemakers in urban development, bringing innovation, energy and fresh perspectives to shape nature-positive and inclusive cities. With over 60 per cent of Africa's population under the age of 25, empowering young people in planning and governance helps ensure resilient and inclusive urban futures. By recognising youth as active partners in planning and decision-making, cities can drive inclusive transformation and unlock a resilient and nature-positive urban future. From participatory visioning to artistic expression and on-the-ground pilots, the UNA project actively engaged youth as drivers of change. It leveraged their fresh perspectives, innovation and drive to build more inclusive, nature-positive and resilient cities.

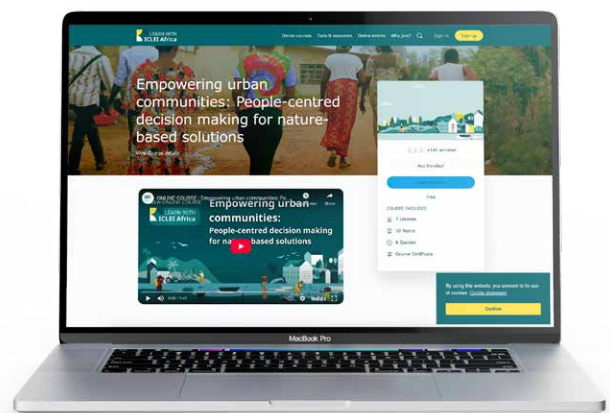
[SEE CASE STUDY ON PAGE 33](#)

4c. Knowledge and capability to act

The UNA project developed a wide range of accessible learning tools and facilitated knowledge exchange across cities. These resources made complex concepts easier to understand and gave cities the practical capabilities needed to take action. The project developed a facilitated training course to build capacity around alternative approaches to planning. It also developed a closed training series on rights-based approaches, planning, finance and governance for NbS. This was expanded into a free, self-taught online course geared towards city officials, hosted on the Learn with ICLEI Africa platform, focused on people-centred design for NbS. The course helps cities reflect on the deeper values that drive their work and make more ethical and inclusive choices.



[UNA ONLINE COURSE TRAILER](#)



[ENROLL FOR THE UNA ONLINE COURSE](#)



CASE STUDY

Quelimane: Building capacity through dialogue and co-creation

In Quelimane, Mozambique, city officials struggled to make the case for nature. They lacked the tools, confidence and institutional support to integrate natural assets into planning and investment decisions. Through the UNA project, they took part in a transformative learning process that prioritised dialogue over instruction. Officials participated in learning labs, co-creation sessions and mentorship that focused on unpacking biodiversity finance, developing pre-feasibility studies and crafting fundable project ideas. This approach transformed how departments work together, building both technical capacity and confidence. The dialogic, hands-on method employed in learning labs is a hallmark of the UNA approach. It is applied across all partner cities and tailored to

each context’s specific learning and capacity needs. Today, Quelimane’s officials are not only better equipped to plan with nature; they’re leading that conversation. Working with communities and stakeholders, they are restoring the city’s mangroves to reduce risk, safeguard nature and people, and improve livelihoods in vulnerable neighbourhoods.



Explore the UNA Handbook Series to learn more about how this approach can be applied:

UNA HANDBOOK SERIES



“In Quelimane, we... are restoring mangroves in the biggest settlements that are inside in the risk area of wetlands... We work with the community to adapt, as a neighborhood, with the risk of climate change, to relocate their structures in order to build their house(s) accordingly with climate efforts.”

- Eduardo Pelembe, Technician: Quelimane Composting Centre, Quelimane Municipal Council





CASE STUDY

Cape Coast and Bo City: Empowering youth as changemakers for nature

In Cape Coast and Bo City, the UNA project created meaningful spaces for young people to engage with urban nature and envision more resilient cities. Through intergenerational learning labs, youth activation days and creative workshops, local students explored the value of natural assets and shared bold ideas for the future through drawings and dialogue with decision-makers. These participatory experiences helped shift perceptions, empowering youth to see themselves as future leaders and inspiring city officials to take their voices seriously. The UNA project partnered with youth organisations to run educational and tree-planting exercises in the city, incorporating youth voices throughout the

conceptualisation of the Preserve, Conserve and Tinker exhibition. This initiative invited youth to envision their city's future and make commitments for nature.

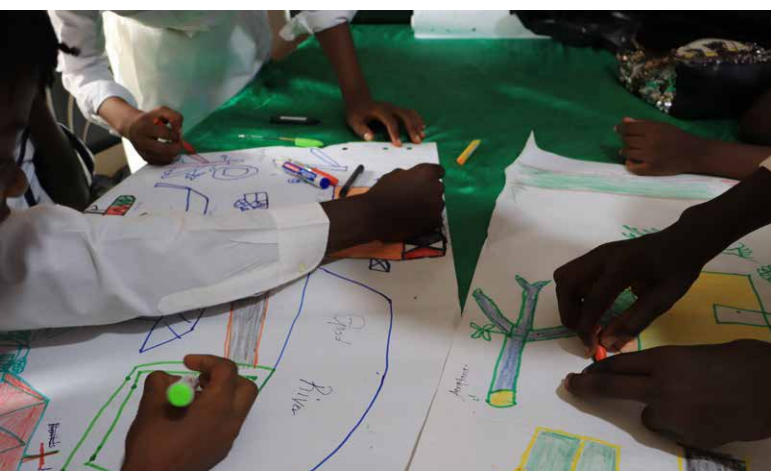
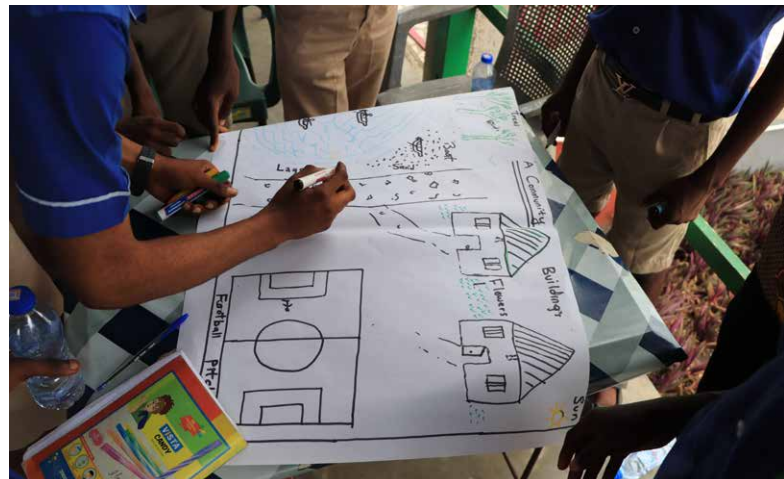


Read more about how youth were engaged in UNA cities:

YOUTH INCLUSIVITY IN UNA ▶

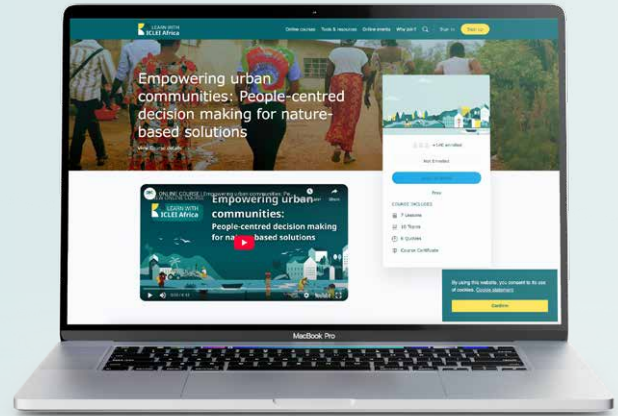
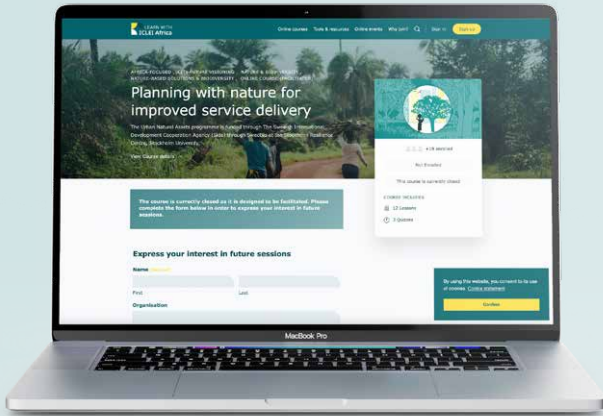
YOUNG PEOPLE ARE SHAPING SUSTAINABLE AFRICAN CITIES ▶

CREATIVE YOUTH-LED VISION UNVEILED ▶



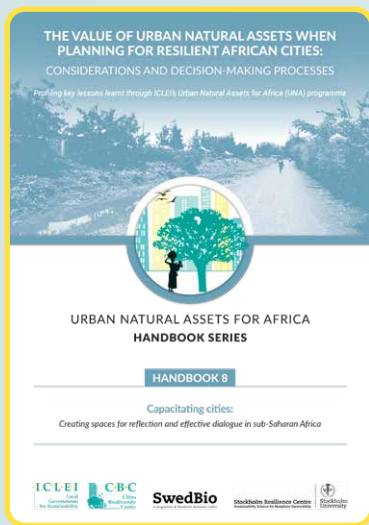


Pathway resources



ONLINE FACILITATED COURSE - PLANNING WITH NATURE FOR IMPROVED SERVICE DELIVERY ▶

ONLINE COURSE - EMPOWERING URBAN COMMUNITIES ▶



HANDBOOK 8: CAPACITATING CITIES ▶



INCLUSIVE PRACTICES FOR NATURE: THE VITAL ROLE OF THE YOUTH ▶





IMPACT AREA 5: Justice, inclusion and rights-based approaches





Urban environments reflect and often reinforce social inequalities. Poorer communities are more likely to reside in areas prone to risk, with limited access to natural spaces and decision-making opportunities. This compounds the vulnerabilities experienced by women, youth, people living with disabilities, the elderly and residents of informal settlements.

The UNA project demonstrated that urban resilience is impossible without justice. By adopting an HRBA, the project helped cities reframe nature as a foundation for wellbeing, linking ecosystems to health, safety, dignity and opportunity. Anchoring the project approach, an HRBA is based on international human rights standards and addresses the inequalities at the core of development challenges. Through the UNA Resilience project, this approach integrated human rights into every aspect of project development. It ensured that all processes, policies and decisions protect and promote the rights of all people, especially marginalised and vulnerable groups. By embedding HRBA principles, the UNA project shifted who is included in urban sustainability conversations, whose needs are prioritised and documented and how decisions are made. These shifts highlight the critical role of equity and justice in how we think, plan and make decisions about our cities.

5a. Equity, inclusion and gender mainstreaming

The UNA project embedded inclusion at every level, from planning to implementation. It helped cities apply gender-sensitive approaches, consider who benefits from nature-based interventions and prioritise fairness in how resources and risks are distributed.

[SEE CASE STUDIES ON PAGE 38 AND PAGE 40](#) ▶

5b. Recognising and engaging informality

Instead of treating informality as a problem to be fixed, the UNA project recognised it as an existing reality to be engaged with. The project facilitated collaboration between cities and informal actors, particularly in areas such as

waste management and land use, to develop solutions rooted in everyday lived experiences.

[SEE CASE STUDY ON PAGE 41](#) ▶

5c. Using a human rights-based approach

The HRBA lens introduced by UNA Resilience made it clear that nature and human wellbeing are interdependent. By grounding NbS in rights, cities were able to reframe resilience as a justice issue. It also helped them conceptualise how current and future NbS interventions could be environmentally sound and socially fair and equitable.

[SEE CASE STUDY ON PAGE 42](#) ▶





CASE STUDY

Addis Ababa: Designing inclusive public space through Minecraft

In Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, the UNA project used the *Minecraft* computer game as a creative tool for participatory planning, bringing together community members – nearly half of them women – to redesign a neglected riverside area. Even though many participants had never used a computer before, women led the design process and contributed practical and inclusive ideas that reflected lived experience. Several of their proposals were integrated into the final plans, resulting in a safe and welcoming public park that meets the needs of women and families. The project demonstrated how digital tools can level the playing field and amplify diverse voices in urban design. Today, Ras Mekonnen Urban Park is an inclusive space that offers a varied nature experience to the citizens of Addis Ababa.



Read more about the Ras Mekonnen Urban Park redesign:

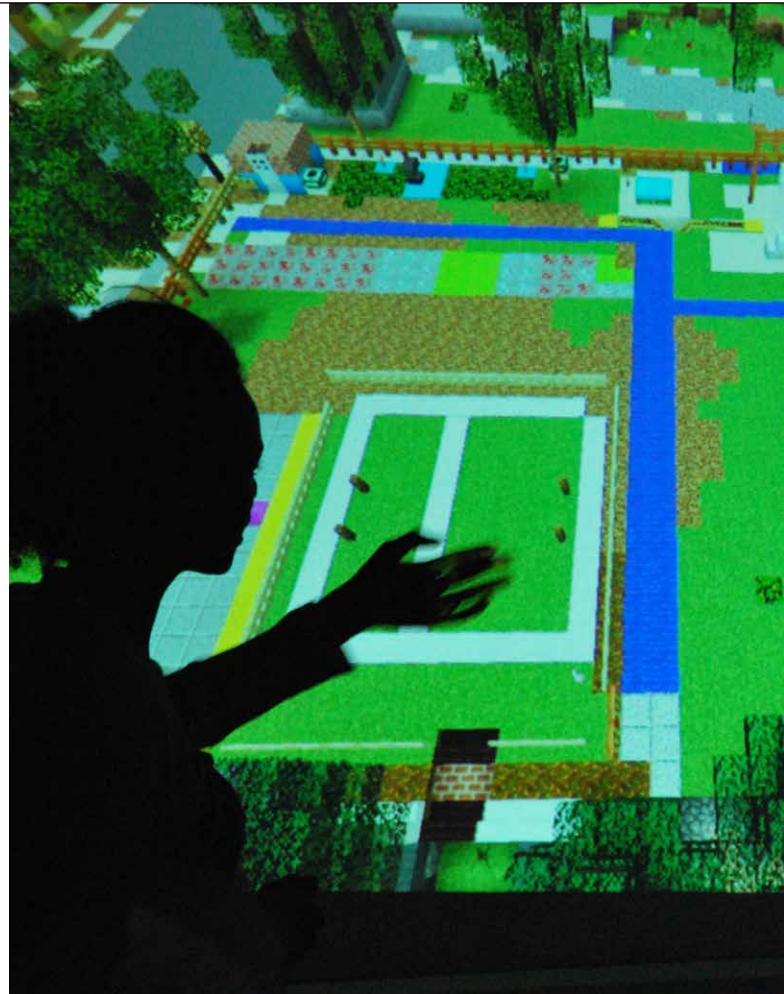
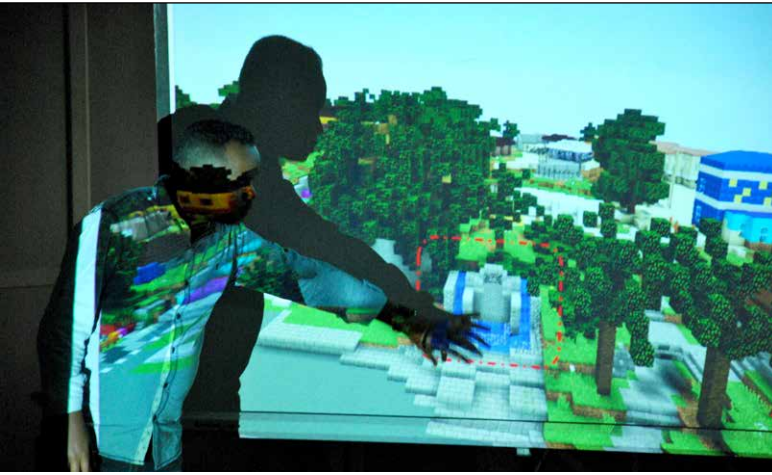
INCLUSIVE URBAN PARK 



“The community needs to be included at all levels. Each has their own opinion, knowledge and ideas and by including them it contributes to the project’s success and sustainability.”

– Eshetu Mulu Melaku, Director:
Green Development, Urban Beautification
Bureau, Addis Ababa City Government





CRAFTING BETTER CITIES

A participatory workshop using Minecraft to include natural assets in developing Addis Ababa

VIDEO: CRAFTING BETTER CITIES WITH NATURE: ADDIS ABABA, ETHIOPIA ▶





CASE STUDY

Entebbe: Nurturing women's skills for nature-based livelihoods

In Entebbe, the UNA project supported the empowerment of women working in subsistence agriculture around the Namiiro wetland. Through hands-on skills training in permaculture, composting, water harvesting and sustainable farming, women gained the skills to build resilience in the face of environmental and economic challenges. These efforts strengthened local food security and helped women gain visibility and recognition in community-level planning and supported access to decent livelihoods. By investing in women's agency and knowledge, the UNA project ensured that NbS also support inclusive and sustainable livelihoods.



Read more about gender and inclusion in UNA cities:

GENDER AND INCLUSION 





CASE STUDY

Lilongwe: Working with informality to restore nature and inclusion

In Lilongwe, Malawi, the UNA project challenged the perception of informal areas as illegitimate and undesirable by reframing them as essential but underserved parts of the city. Through extensive trust-building with city officials and informal traders at the Tsoka and Lizulu markets, the UNA project created space for dialogue, shared understanding and joint problem-solving. Together, officials and market leaders co-produced a master plan to restore the adjacent river system and improve waste management. The plan culminated in a composting initiative that reached thousands of residents. The experience revealed strong internal leadership structures in informal areas and showed officials first-hand that inclusive, co-designed solutions are

not only possible, but transformative and long-lasting. City officials reported that the initiative has become a permanent feature of the market’s waste management landscape.



Learn more about how the UNA project worked with informality:

IMPACT STORY ▶

UNA HANDBOOK ON THE VALUE OF WORKING WITH INFORMALITY ▶



VIDEO: WASTE IS WEALTH: COMPOSTING AT THE LILONGWE RIVER ▶

“ I have liked the inclusive approach of UNA in designing the project and implementing the project.... Under the UNA project, we have learned that everyone matters, whether it's a vendor, whether it is a farmer. But if we want to improve the locality of a city, then everybody must take part. So that inclusivity, it is the one that brings a change to an area because there is ownership... Everybody would like to say, 'this is part of me. I'll take care of this particular development because I was involved.' So I've liked that approach, and I think it can be beneficial to many cities in Africa. ”

– Gift Kasamira, Deputy Director: Planning and Development, Lilongwe City Council





CASE STUDY

Bo City: Making human rights real through learning and localisation

In Bo City, the UNA project supported the realisation of human rights by grounding complex ideas in local knowledge, languages, folklore and priorities. Using accessible resources like illustrated maps, posters, infographics and participatory learning labs, stakeholders were invited to explore the links between urban nature, community wellbeing and rights. These sessions sparked inclusive dialogue among government, traditional leaders, civil society and informal actors, which built shared understanding and trust.

Language is one of our most powerful communication tools, shaping how we connect, express ideas and make sense of the world around us. Through the use of vernacularisation as an entry point, concepts as complex as human rights were unpacked and explored in local languages. They were traced back to African history, values and ways of living. African folklore, storytelling and proverbs were used to break down concepts often deemed foreign into locally relatable language that resonates with the people. These stories, shared over generations, were recognised not just as entertainment but also as moral instruction, rooted in principles of human rights.

Through this innovative entry point to human rights, the UNA project empowered local communities, academics, practitioners and other stakeholders to better understand

human rights. This included understanding the intricate relationship between rights holders and rights bearers in driving sustainable urban transitions. As a result, this enabled cities like Bo City to build toward a more informed, rights-based approach in decision-making that centres people and the environment.

 **Learn more about how to introduce and mainstream rights-based approaches in African cities:**



“ The human rights-based approach brings everybody on board, and we all think together to solve the problem, so everybody knows what to do and how to do it. ”
 – Ken Ketor, Planning Officer, Cape Coast Metropolitan Assembly





Pathway resources



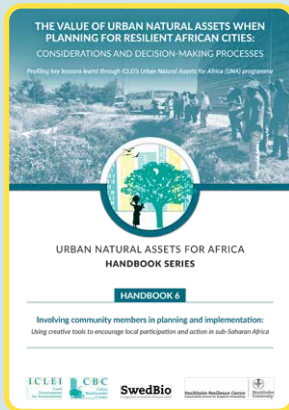
IMPACT STORY 7 - URBAN RESILIENCE FOR ALL ▶



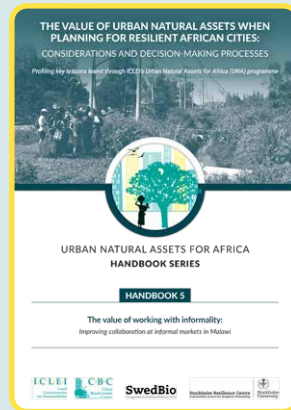
IMPACT STORY 8 - WORKING WITH INFORMALITY ▶



IMPACT STORY - PROMOTING THE PROGRESSIVE REALISATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS THROUGH URBAN NATURAL ASSET PROTECTION ▶



HANDBOOK 6 - INVOLVING COMMUNITY MEMBERS IN PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION ▶



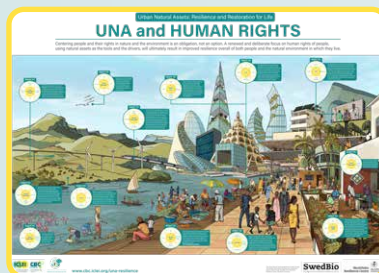
HANDBOOK 5 - THE VALUE OF WORKING WITH INFORMALITY ▶



ICLEI AFRICA'S UNIQUE ENTRY POINTS ON HUMAN AND GENDER RIGHTS IN URBAN NATURE ▶



VIDEO: NATURE-BASED SOLUTIONS FOR AFRICAN CITIES: THE HUMAN RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH ▶



THE VALUE OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN CITIES POSTER ▶



VIDEO: WHY DO HUMAN RIGHTS MATTER IN THE CONTEXT OF URBAN NATURAL ASSETS? ▶



IMPACT AREA 6: Innovation, learning and knowledge sharing





In the face of complex urban challenges, rigid planning frameworks often fall short. Cities need flexible, iterative approaches that embrace learning and adjust over time.

The UNA project created space for experimentation, from walking workshops and urban tinkering to storytelling and photovoice. These participatory, low-risk yet innovative methods helped cities test ideas, learn from failure and co-create solutions with diverse actors. Through this process-driven approach, cities built cultures of collaboration, reflection and innovation that extend far beyond the project itself.

6a. Testing new ways and experimentation

The UNA project created space for cities to try new ideas, reflect on what worked and adapt. This built a culture of experimentation and learning, helping cities become more agile in their approach to complex problems.

[SEE CASE STUDY ON PAGE 46](#) ▶

6b. Evidence generation and storytelling

The UNA project leveraged arts, photography and storytelling as powerful ways to connect with the world around us. Through creative tools like photovoice, participatory exhibitions, poetry, song and visual storytelling, the project helped surface lived experiences and ground data in human narratives. This approach built understanding and empathy, especially around the value of nature in urban life.

[SEE CASE STUDY ON PAGE 47](#) ▶

6c. Research and knowledge generation

To mainstream NbS, communication must be tailored to local contexts. The UNA project invested heavily in co-creating tools and knowledge products that aren't just fit for purpose but consider the city context. This included investing in research and research outputs to ensure the project contributed to knowledge generation; developing interactive posters and infographics to help community members understand what is happening in their cities; and creating interactive videos and stories that enabled cities and stakeholders to share their knowledge and experience on NbS. Over the years, the UNA project collaborated with researchers and universities in Africa and beyond to build on the current evidence base on NbS and urban development in African cities. These efforts made knowledge accessible to inform policy and planning at multiple levels.

[SEE CASE STUDY ON PAGE 48](#) ▶






CASE STUDY

Kisumu: Experimenting with small tweaks for big impact

In Kisumu, Kenya, the UNA project embraced innovation through an approach called urban tinkering, which involves working with what already exists and adjusting small elements to improve resilience. City officials and community members participated in walking workshops through informal areas to identify practical ways to enhance local infrastructure using NbS. From tree planting for flood control to small-scale food gardens, these site-based sessions allowed for real-time experimentation and learning. The process showed how co-designed, low-cost interventions can address complex challenges while building agility, collaboration and shared ownership in city planning. Through the groundwork laid under the UNA project, Kisumu City has since scaled the approach to the County level,

where they were awarded catalytic funding through the UN Decade of Restoration Generation Restoration Project. Their investment in restoring the Auji River aims to improve livelihoods, prevent ecosystem degradation and promote sustainable farming practices by restoring biodiversity hotspots and collaborating with local communities.

 **Learn more about the UNA project’s alternative approaches to planning:**

IMPACT STORY ▶

UNA'S HANDBOOK ON ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO PLANNING ▶



Through the UNA Rivers for Life project, ICLEI Africa partnered with renowned local artist, Lulu, to raise awareness about the importance of rivers in cities. He has become an ambassador for the project and officially launched a song on the 12th of June 2018.



VIDEO: LULU – MPUMULO. RIVERS FOR LIFE, OFFICIAL MUSIC VIDEO ▶



CASE STUDY

Cape Coast: Storytelling as a tool for systems change

In Cape Coast, the UNA project demonstrated how storytelling can shift perceptions about nature and its contributions to people, thereby sparking behavioural changes. Through the *Preserve, Conserve and Tinker* exhibition featuring youth-led photography, research insights and community voices, residents and decision-makers were invited to reflect on how nature and rights intersect in the city. The exhibition was part of a broader learning journey that used HRBA to unpack exclusionary norms through participatory exercises, local folklore and accessible resources. These creative, inclusive methods helped build awareness, agency and community-led accountability around nature and urban development.

Through its catalytic impact, the *Preserve, Conserve and Tinker* exhibition has since formed a key feature in the Cape Coast Biodiversity Centre. This has reignited the centre as a place for learning and local schools and organisations now take children there to learn more about nature and how to safeguard the environment.



Explore the *Preserve, Conserve and Tinker* online exhibition:

[EXPLORE THE EXHIBITION](#)



Learn more about the UNA exhibition:



VIDEO: PRESERVE, CONSERVE, TINKERING WITH THE FUTURE - BY NORA X. ANYIDOHO ▶



VIDEO: #UNARESILIENCE EXHIBITION THEME EXPLAINED ▶



CASE STUDY

UNA: Research and publications

The UNA project produced several peer-reviewed research articles. These articles contributed to practical change in cities and the broader evidence base that informs urban development and NbS, both in Africa and globally. This was done through partnerships with academic institutions and other development organisations, better connecting research and practice. The papers explored critical links between nature, people and development. They addressed diverse themes including (i) scaling NbS in African contexts, (ii) building transformative capacities in NbS development projects, and (iii) recognising informality as a key factor in urban resilience. Although scientific research products were not a requirement in the UNA project, they provided important insights from the project that were scaled

through publication and shared in academic circles. Research articles are also important because they tend to be readily taken up by policy-level decision-makers.





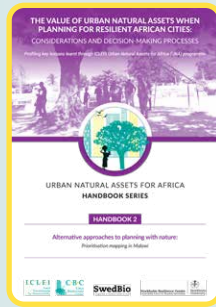
Pathway resources



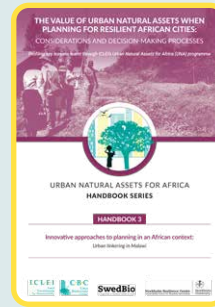
IMPACT STORY 6 - EMBRACING INNOVATION AND EXPERIMENTATION ▶



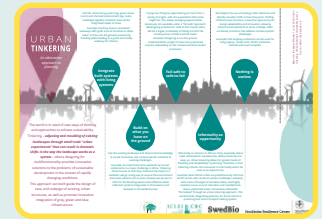
IMPACT STORY - MAKING INFORMATION AVAILABLE FOR TRANSFORMATIONAL NATURE-BASED SOLUTIONS ▶



HANDBOOK 2 - ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO PLANNING WITH NATURE ▶



HANDBOOK 3 - INNOVATIVE APPROACHES TO PLANNING IN AN AFRICAN CONTEXT ▶



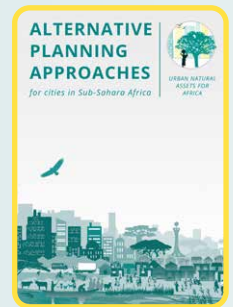
URBAN TINKERING POSTER ▶



5 APPROACHES TO INTEGRATE NATURE INTO URBAN PLANNING FOR RESILIENT AFRICAN CITIES INFOGRAPHIC AND EXPLAINER ▶



ALTERNATIVE PLANNING APPROACHES POSTER AND BOOKLET ▶



UNA SONG: LULU - MPUMULO (RIVERS FOR LIFE) (OFFICIAL MUSIC VIDEO) ▶



URBAN TINKERING ▶



GENERATING TRANSFORMATIVE CAPACITY: ICLEI AFRICA'S URBAN NATURAL ASSETS FOR AFRICA PROJECT ▶



NEGOTIATING INFORMALITY AND URBAN RESILIENCE: IMPLICATIONS FOR EQUITY ▶



VIDEO: THE VALUE OF URBAN NATURE IN CITIES ▶



IMPACT AREA 7: Advocating for the collective voice of cities





Despite being on the frontline of biodiversity and climate challenges, local governments are often excluded from global decision-making. Their efforts go unrecognised, and their needs are not reflected in international agendas and frameworks.

The UNA project helped elevate the voice and ambition of cities on the global stage in addressing nature and biodiversity loss. The project supports alignment with frameworks like the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework and connects cities to platforms like CitiesWithNature. This visibility enabled cities to influence policy, access resources and strengthen cooperation between national and subnational levels, ensuring local leadership is embedded in global sustainability efforts.

7a. Recognising cities as centres of innovation

Cities are powerful engines of growth. They offer an opportunity to both develop and implement innovative solutions to humanity's most complex challenges. Through ICLEI's Cities Biodiversity Centre, the UNA project supported global knowledge exchange by engaging in side events across the Convention on Biological Diversity's (CBD) Conference of the Parties, as well as events and Regional Climate Weeks hosted by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). These platforms created opportunities to amplify and advocate for the collective voice of local and regional governments in negotiations and implementation mechanisms.

7b. Scaling action and knowledge through CitiesWithNature

CitiesWithNature is an interactive platform recognised by the CBD as a commitment and reporting platform for cities to support the implementation of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework and National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs). This platform enables cities to demonstrate leadership in aligning local actions with global biodiversity goals, access insights to improve policies and measure impact over time through thematic communities of practice. The platform also ensures that local efforts are reflected in CBD reporting and global reviews, elevating the voice of local and subnational governments on the global stage.

[SEE CASE STUDY ON PAGE 52](#) ▶





CASE STUDY

CitiesWithNature: Linking local action to global goals

Through its partnership with ICLEI’s Cities Biodiversity Centre, the UNA project connected cities to the CitiesWithNature Action platform – an official CBD-recognised space for reporting local biodiversity action. By joining CitiesWithNature, cities can align their efforts with the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework and contribute to national and global reporting.

UNA cities also benefit from an active community of practice on NbS hosted on the platform, offering a space for online engagement, networking and shared learning beyond the project lifespan.

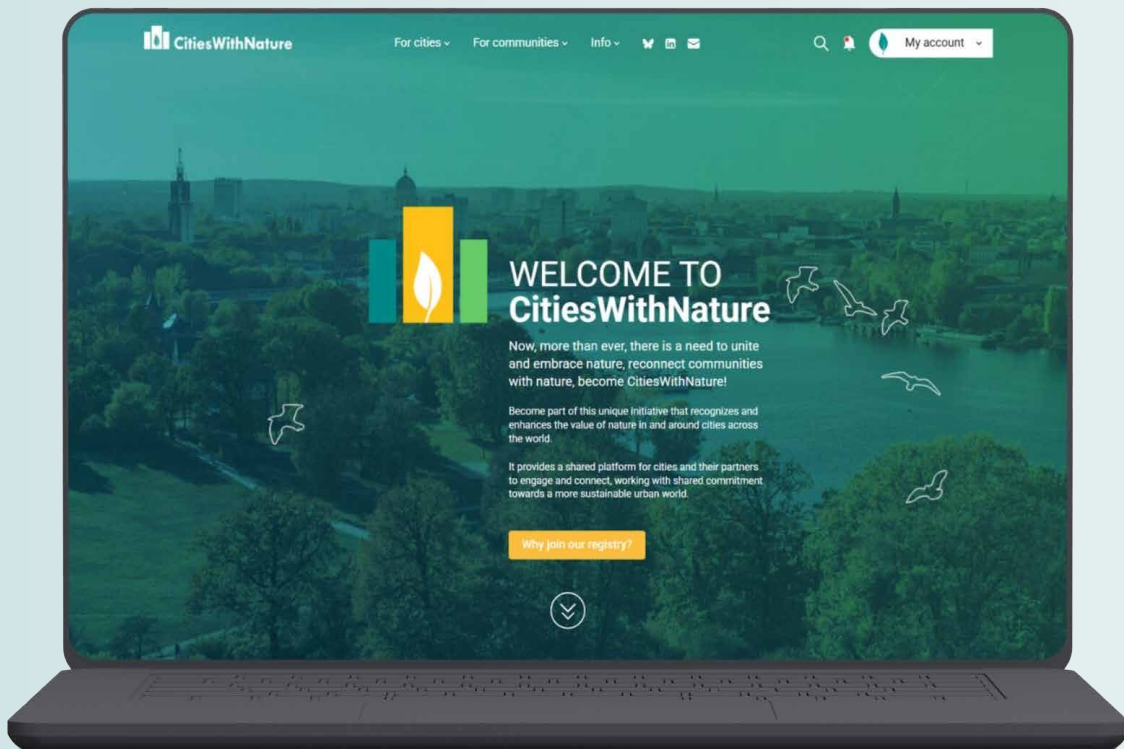


Visit CitiesWithNature and the CitiesWithNature Community of Practice on nature-based solutions

to learn more:

CITIESWITHNATURE 

COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE ON NATURE-BASED SOLUTIONS 







LOOKING FORWARD: Lessons for future initiatives

The UNA project's learnings span many years, different phases, several themes and across cities, but always return to the fundamental goal of supporting African cities in integrating NbS into urban governance, planning and finance frameworks to achieve nature-positive, inclusive and resilient urban development. For cities, funders, private businesses and practitioners wanting to develop similar initiatives, we offer the following recommendations and learnings:



1. Driving people-centred development

Embedding human rights into urban development is not a box-ticking exercise; it's a long-term commitment to inclusion, dignity and shared agency. When we centre rights to education, nature and participation, we create cities where people are not just beneficiaries of change, but active drivers of it.



2. Promoting nature-positive development

The role of nature in safeguarding livelihoods, driving economies and promoting social inclusion cannot be underestimated. As cities transition towards a more sustainable development trajectory, it is critical to recognise that restored and healthy ecosystems, along with NbS, offer cities a way to provide a range of benefits and services for urban communities simultaneously. These benefits are often less costly than "grey" alternatives in the long term. Sustainable cities require healthy natural ecosystems to thrive; therefore, development decisions and actions must ensure nature-positive outcomes.



3. Mainstreaming gender considerations

Simply including men and women in planning, decision-making and implementation isn't enough to promote equality. It's vital to create an enabling environment within which all genders can thrive, particularly those whose voices are often marginalised. By exploring the intersection between gender and socio-cultural dynamics, interventions can evolve from being gender-blind to becoming more gender-transformative. This creates approaches to urban development where all genders can thrive.



4. Fostering a bottom-up approach to urban governance

Lasting change comes from listening deeply, co-developing and co-designing solutions with stakeholders. By creating spaces and platforms where communities, practitioners, researchers and marginalised groups can co-develop solutions, cities can unlock grounded, context-specific strategies that reflect lived realities and build trust in institutions.



5. Tackling urban challenges with a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach

NbS does not fall under a single department; it spans housing, transport, health and education. Future projects must encourage collaboration across all levels of government and society to align mandates, pool resources and activate shared responsibility.



6. Testing new ways to address old challenges

Complex urban challenges require adaptive solutions. Experimentation – through urban tinkering, storytelling, games or walking workshops – helps cities break through planning inertia, test alternatives and respond in agile, low-risk ways that build capacity as they go.



7. Leveraging strategic communications tools

To shift narratives and mobilise action, we must communicate beyond technical audiences. Visual storytelling, youth engagement, participatory exhibitions and creative campaigns can make complex ideas tangible. This helps to build public support, political buy-in and momentum for nature-positive change.





Long-term impacts and significance

For African cities to address growing urban crises and effectively protect and reintegrate nature into urban areas, a new approach to planning and development must be mainstreamed. Through the UNA project’s interventions, the project successfully supported city stakeholders in localising national and global action, creating a catalytic impact. On-the-ground implementation work helped to advance the achievement of SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), 13 (Climate Action), 14 (Life Below Water), 15 (Life on Land) and 17 (Partnerships for the Goals), among others. It also aligned with specific targets set out in countries’ NBSAPs, thereby promoting the tangible execution of these action plans. Focusing on multilevel

governance and awareness building, the UNA project supported cities in strategically aligning nature-based interventions with societal pressures and designed scalable projects that deliver real value to local communities.

By championing nature-based development for climate resilience and reduced biodiversity loss at the urban scale, the UNA project contributed immensely towards empowering cities with the data, skills and evidence necessary to make informed decisions needed to build urban communities’ resilience to climate change and ensure nature-positive urban development.



Learn more about Our Cities, Our Commitments, Our Future:



WATCH THE VIDEO





ICLEI & ICLEI CITIES BIODIVERSITY CENTER (CBC)

ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability is a global network of more than 2,500 local and regional governments committed to sustainable urban development. Active in 125+ 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 50 countries across the continent.

ICLEI’s Cities Biodiversity Center (CBC) – 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.

THE URBAN NATURAL ASSETS (UNA) PROJECT

The Urban Natural Assets for Africa project is implemented by ICLEI’s Cities Biodiversity Center. This cutting-edge project is designed to support the daily challenges that local governments in Africa experience around protecting and revitalising their urban natural assets, through transforming development trajectories in African cities towards those that improve sustainable development of, and interconnectedness with, their surrounding natural systems. This is achieved through three interlinked urban pillars (governance, planning and finance) and through building urban resilience, sufficient agency and momentum for an unfolding process of transformative change.

For over a decade, the Urban Natural Assets, or UNA, project has worked with 11 African cities across 9 different countries, co-creating solutions that put nature at the core of urban planning and governance. Since 2014, the UNA project has supported several flagship projects: Urban Natural Assets for Africa, Urban Natural Assets: Rivers for Life (UNA Rivers), Urban Natural Assets: Coasts for Life (UNA Coasts), Urban Natural Assets: Resilience and Restoration for Life (UNA Resilience), and, most recently, Urban Natural Assets: Embedding and sharing for scaled impact.



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