

The Race to Resilience Culture (RTRC)

Amplifying Culture-Based Climate Resilience on the Global Stage



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The Race to Resilience Culture (RTRC) initiative continues to gain global momentum, with cities across Africa and the U.S. demonstrating how culture and heritage can be powerful catalysts for climate resilience. From Africa to North America, participating cities are proving that effective climate action is not only about infrastructure and emissions, but also about identity, belonging, and the lived experiences that shape how communities adapt, endure, and thrive.

This milestone captures the breakthroughs, innovations and collaborations shaping RTRC's work in 2025, reframing climate policy from a technical exercise into a human-centered movement, demonstrating that culture-based approaches contribute directly to measurable resilience outcomes, from strengthened risk communication and improved behavioural uptake of climate-smart practices, to greater community participation in adaptation planning, increased trust in local governments, and higher adoption rates of local climate action plans.

CULTURE-BASED RESILIENCE PROJECTS

In **Hargeisa, Somaliland**, the focus is on participatory research and community storytelling. Through the city's Impact, Vulnerability, and Risk Assessment, residents documented their experiences with flash floods using the Photovoice method. They captured photos and drawings that highlight how local traditions and informal networks, such as mosques and markets, act as early warning systems and anchors of resilience. This process revealed vulnerabilities like urban sprawl and poor drainage while celebrating cultural resilience and intergenerational learning.

Two cohorts of fourteen young people and twelve children from Gacan Libax and 31 May districts, including marginalised groups from IDP camps and the Gabooye community, participated in the activities, producing more than 40 photos and 21 drawings. Approximately 85% of these documented infrastructural risks. Participants reported increased climate risk awareness through the process, summarised by one youth who said, "Even though we experience the floods, we now see it with different eyes." This demonstrates measurable shifts in understanding and risk perception, supporting improved risk communication and future behavioural uptake of preparedness actions.

Complementary field visits, household interviews, and focus groups helped surface community priorities such as improved access to health, education, water, and livelihood support, particularly for women-headed households. The project strengthened collaboration across municipal departments, civil society, and national actors. The Mayor committed to incorporating short-term recommendations into the upcoming municipal development plan, and the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change expressed readiness to support actions on floodplain erosion and Prosopis removal, indicating that culturally informed evidence is directly shaping planning and cross-government alignment.

Harare City is advancing the “Resilient Markets, Resilient Communities” project, which integrates cultural heritage and community participation into climate action. The initiative aims to transform traditional markets such as Mbare and Mupedzanhamo into climate-resilient hubs through waste-to-energy innovations, clean energy provision for clinics and market facilities, and culturally grounded practices like nhimbe/ubuntu clean-ups, storytelling, and art for climate awareness. By engaging women vendors, youth cooperatives, and informal settlement residents, the project enhances equity through safer trading environments, green job creation, and improved public health.

Harare’s engagement has also catalysed cross-city collaboration. After presenting its approach at the launch of Hargeisa’s Impact, Risk, and Vulnerability Assessment, both cities have continued an ongoing knowledge-sharing relationship. This exchange signals RTRC’s role in enabling genuine inter-city learning—not just participation—with the third installment of the structured bilateral session planned for early 2026 to deepen peer learning on informal market resilience and community-centred adaptation.

In **Sekondi-Takoradi, Ghana**, the municipality is advancing a Cultural and Heritage-Based Approach for Sustainable Community Resilience (CHASCR). Building on its Sustainable Energy Access and Climate Action Plan, the city is documenting and digitizing cultural assets, creating heritage clubs and festivals, and empowering vulnerable groups through storytelling and education. By weaving heritage into adaptation strategies, Sekondi-Takoradi is showing how culture can drive inclusive economic growth, environmental protection, and social empowerment, all at once. These cultural and heritage components have now been fully incorporated into the Metropolitan Assembly’s Climate Action Plan (CAP) and the Medium-Term Development Plan (MTDP) 2026–2029, making Sekondi-Takoradi one of the first cities in West Africa to embed culture so comprehensively across both climate and development planning instruments. This milestone is significant: it sets a regional precedent for mainstreaming culture into adaptation, demonstrates institutional commitment beyond project cycles, and positions the city as a frontrunner whose model can be scaled across other African municipalities. By aligning culture with long-term strategic planning, Sekondi-Takoradi is reinforcing the global relevance of the RTRC initiative and showing how cultural approaches can strengthen policy integration, improve community engagement in adaptation processes, and attract interest from national and international partners.

In **Msunduzi, South Africa**, this vision has taken shape through the addition of a new Culture and Heritage goal to the city’s Climate Change Action Plan. Recognizing that protecting cultural landmarks and indigenous practices is inseparable from environmental stewardship, Msunduzi is investing in climate-resilient infrastructure for heritage sites, integrating traditional knowledge into adaptation planning, and engaging youth through eco-clubs and education programs. This work connects climate policy to community pride, reinforcing identity and cohesion as essential elements of resilience.

Across the United States, the RTRC approach is inspiring cities to embed culture and equity in climate action. This cross-regional exchange is creating a learning loop between African and U.S. cities, where approaches developed in African contexts (such as community-led

storytelling, cultural mapping, and inclusive planning) are informing U.S. engagement strategies, while U.S. innovations in equity frameworks and institutional coordination are, in turn, enriching African partner cities' approaches to governance and implementation.

In **San Diego, California**, a new Equitable Outreach and Engagement Strategy ensures that underrepresented communities have a real voice in shaping the city's Climate Action Plan. By prioritizing multilingual communication, accessible engagement formats, and culturally relevant storytelling, San Diego is building a model for inclusive governance rooted in justice and participation, illustrating how shared RTRC methodologies can be adapted across very different urban and cultural contexts to strengthen resilience globally.

Similarly, **San Antonio, Texas** is developing a Climate Heritage Strategic Plan to safeguard its diverse cultural assets, from historic neighborhoods to intangible traditions, against climate risks. Multiple city departments are collaborating to ensure that adaptation measures align with the city's Climate Equity Screening Tool, addressing the disproportionate impacts on vulnerable residents and using cultural heritage as a lever for long-term resilience.

In the mountain community of **Blaine County, Idaho**, local leaders are integrating culture-based engagement into their Climate Risk and Vulnerability Assessment. Through 15 thematic workshops and creative outreach (such as youth art projects, food bank interviews, and climate conversations in cafes and breweries), the county is weaving storytelling and cultural identity into its assessment process. This inclusive approach is helping to normalize climate dialogue in everyday spaces, ensuring that planning reflects the full diversity of community voices and experiences.

Together, these projects represent a milestone for the RTRC cohort: the world's first network of local governments placing culture, heritage, and community voice at the heart of climate resilience. Each city's work underscores a shared truth, where climate solutions are most effective when they are locally led, culturally grounded, and community owned.



San Diego's coastline from an aerial perspective.

INTERDEPARTMENTAL COLLABORATION & EXTERNAL PARTNERSHIPS

The session spotlighted how collaboration, creativity, and cultural connection can powerfully drive climate resilience. Vivienne Byrd of the **Los Angeles Public Library** brought this vision to life through the **Neighborhood Science Initiative**, which turns residents into citizen scientists tackling climate challenges together. Through hands-on workshops and take-home kits, community members monitor air and water quality, deepening their connection to the environment and one another. Byrd shared how partnerships with city agencies, the **US EPA**, and **NASA** expand the reach and impact of this work, while collaborations with grassroots groups ensure cultural relevance and trust. She also highlighted the **LA Bioblitz Challenge**, inviting Angelenos to document biodiversity and build the city's first-ever biodiversity index—an inspiring example of how data, art, and civic pride intersect.



Vivienne Byrd, Librarian at the Los Angeles Public Library



From left to right: Danielle Siembieda, Devon Bella, and Jasmine Jain from the City of San José.

An engaging presentation from the **City of San José**, featuring Devon Bella, Jasmine Jain, and Danielle Siembieda, who explored how **art can amplify climate action**. They shared how San José's **Climate Smart Initiative**—aiming for carbon neutrality by 2030—is linking artists, residents, and city departments to reimagine how climate stories are told. By centering creativity and cultural expression, they are making climate engagement more accessible, equitable, and inspiring. Together, these leaders demonstrated that when science, culture,

and community come together, climate resilience becomes not just a policy goal—but a shared movement grounded in empathy, imagination, and hope.

The **Climate Heritage Network (CHN) Africa Secretariat** is building powerful partnerships across sectors and continents to integrate culture into climate and biodiversity action. Founded in 2018, CHN now unites more than 500 organizations—including cultural institutions, Indigenous groups, universities, and local governments—under a shared mission to harness the transformative power of culture for a just, low-carbon, and resilient future. Through collaborations with networks like **ICLEI USA and ICLEI Africa**, CHN is aligning local leadership with global advocacy to mainstream cultural heritage in climate policy. Joint initiatives include mapping heritage sites that support ecosystem protection, co-developing campaigns that highlight culture's role in biodiversity conservation, and co-hosting events at major global forums such as COP and UNEA. These partnerships demonstrate how cultural heritage can serve as both a driver and enabler of resilience—connecting communities, amplifying historically excluded voices, and fostering inclusive, place-based solutions to the climate crisis.

ADVOCACY & AMPLIFYING CULTURE-BASED CLIMATE ACTION ON THE GLOBAL STAGE

Building on this global and regional momentum, CHN Africa's work was prominently featured during the Second Climate Week (CW2) in Addis Ababa, where governments, civil society, and local leaders came together to explore practical ways to integrate cultural heritage into climate action across African cities. Convened by the UNFCCC Secretariat, CW2 provided a platform to advance climate implementation, with the Implementation Forum at its core—a dedicated space for solutions-oriented dialogue designed to identify barriers, co-design enabling conditions, and translate commitments into measurable outcomes.

Within this context, the side event **“Heritage in Climate Policy: Aligning NDCs with Culture-Based Adaptation – Advocating for the integration of cultural heritage into African climate strategies and finance frameworks,”** hosted by CHN Africa and the Arab States Regional Secretariat, highlighted the essential role of cultural heritage in shaping African climate strategies and unlocking climate finance. Speakers Dr. Kate Strachan (CoM SSA Secretariat) and Deputy Governor Justus Kinywa Mugo emphasized that local governments sit at the frontline of both climate impacts and cultural preservation, uniquely positioned to turn national commitments—including NDCs and adaptation plans—into actionable, community-driven solutions. Cities such as Embu (Kenya), Freetown (Sierra Leone), and Chefchaouen (Morocco) showcased how heritage-based practices strengthen resilience, demonstrating how cities act as innovators and translators by integrating traditional knowledge into policy, planning, and local engagement to deliver tangible climate action that safeguards both communities and cultural identity.



From left to right: Dr. Kate Strachan, Senior Manager for Climate Change Resilience, Coastal Management and DRR at ICLEI Africa, and Deputy Governor Justus Kinywa Mugo of Embu County, Kenya.

Complementing this, the second side event, **“Mobilising Culture and Heritage for Climate Resilience: African Solutions from the Ground Up – Showcasing Indigenous Knowledge, Local Practices, and Heritage-Based Adaptation Strategies,”** reaffirmed that culture and heritage are central—not peripheral—to resilience in African cities. Speakers Dr. Kate Strachan (CoM SSA Secretariat) and Mayor Trevino Forbes (Walvis Bay, Namibia) presented examples from Walvis Bay, Cape Coast, Quelimane, and Freetown, illustrating how traditional knowledge and community practices can accelerate adaptation, encourage behaviour change, and facilitate access to climate finance. A key outcome was the recognition that local governments serve as critical translators of national climate ambitions into community-owned solutions, and that traditional authorities must be meaningfully included in decision-making—a point strongly emphasized by Mayor Forbes.

At COP30 held in Belem, Brazil, the session **“Race to Resilience from Pledges to Implementation – Launch of the 2025 Progress Report,”** held on **13 November 2025** at the **Resilience Hub Pavilion** in the Blue Zone, marked a major milestone for the Race to Resilience campaign with the release of its first implementation-focused progress report. The event highlighted how the campaign is moving beyond commitments to deliver tangible, locally led resilience outcomes worldwide. The Race to Resilience Culture (RTRC) project Manager at ICLEI Africa, Dr Kate Strachan, was invited to be a guest speaker and emphasized the importance of inclusive, community-driven action supported by a diverse network of partners—from civil society and Indigenous groups to subnational governments and the private sector—and explored pathways to accelerate and scale successful approaches. The session also underscored the value of transparent measurement and embodied the spirit of the Mutirão: acting collectively, urgently, and with purpose.



Panel of speakers, with Mayor Trevino Forbes of Walvis Bay, Namibia (second from left) and Dr. Kate Strachan of ICLEI Africa (far right).

CLOSING

Together, these efforts illustrate a profound shift in global climate leadership. The Race to Resilience Culture cohort is showing that the path to a sustainable future begins not just with technical solutions, but through people and their heritage, creativity, and connection to place. By grounding resilience in culture and collaboration, RTRC participants are demonstrating that local leadership, when supported by global partnership, can transform climate action into a movement that is deeply human, culturally grounded, and universally relevant.