

The Race to Resilience Culture (RTRC)

Cohort Launch



Produced by ICLEI - Local Governments for Sustainability USA and ICLEI Africa Secretariat

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SPECIAL THANKS

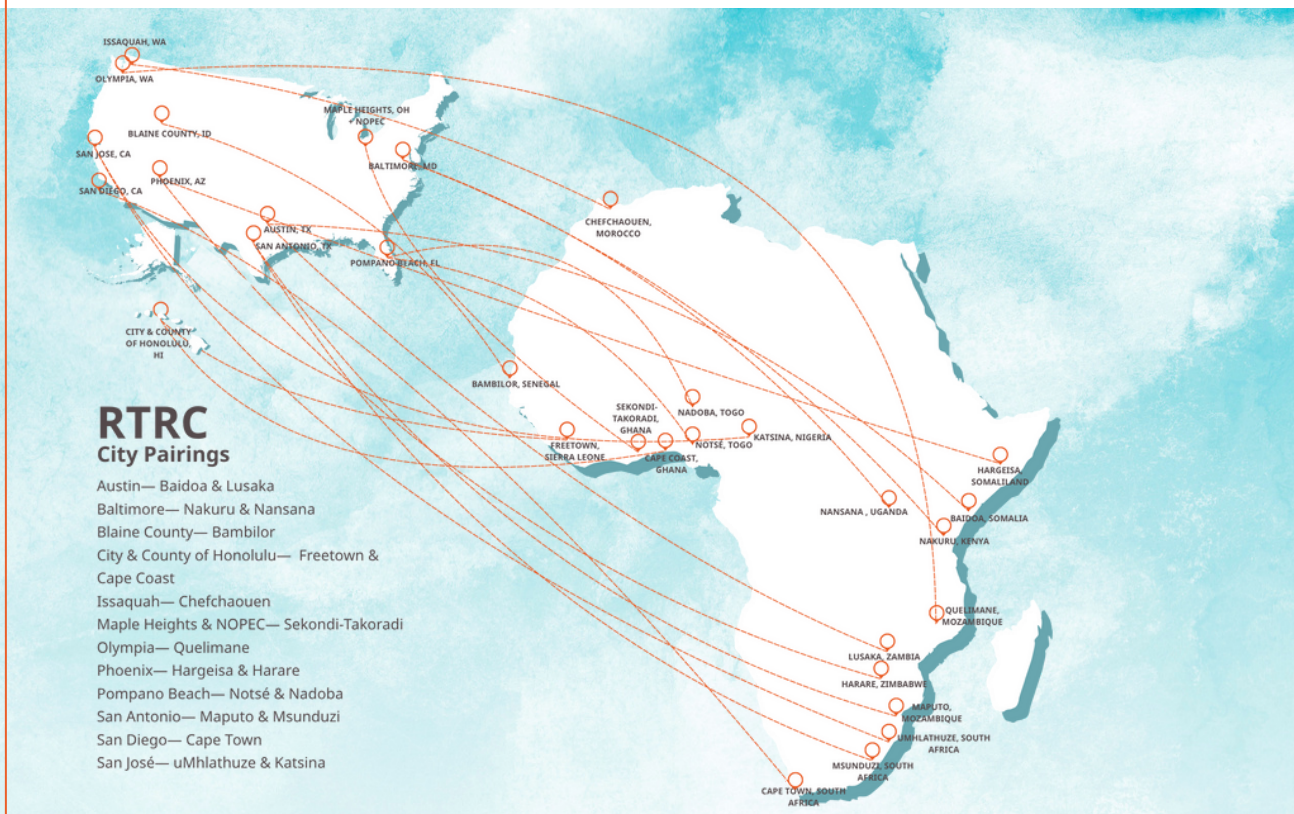
We extend special thanks to the local government staff and elected officials across our participating cities and counties who shared their time, experiences, and insights. Their ongoing commitment to resilience, culture, and community well-being is the foundation of this work. We also thank the Mellon Foundation, Climate Heritage Network, and supporters whose contributions made RTRC possible.

THE RACE TO RESILIENCE CULTURE (RTRC) — COHORT LAUNCH



We're proud to announce that the **Race to Resilience Culture (RTRC) initiative**, co-hosted by [ICLEI USA](#) and [ICLEI Africa](#), is officially underway! This powerful cross-continental effort aims to reimagine climate resilience through the lens of culture, heritage, and the arts.

From the Horn of Africa to the islands of Hawai'i, 31 cities have joined the inaugural RTRC cohort, which will run from March 2025 to February 2026. All of these cities bring distinct histories, landscapes, and cultural assets, yet they share an eagerness to weave those assets into climate action. Through the RTRC initiative, we are actively listening to how U.S. and African city stakeholders understand and experience climate change impacts, loss and damage, and migration, and co-developing practical responses. Culture provides an entry point to navigate these challenges—connecting past and future, vulnerability and strength.



RTRC city pairing map

To spark cross-regional learning, each U.S. city is paired with one or two African counterparts. Over the next 18 months, the cohort will participate in monthly virtual learning sessions, exchange ideas in smaller bilateral calls, and develop a locally driven “project of choice,” and ultimately share their outcomes in the RTRC Academy, inspiring even more cities to embark on this cultural resilience journey.

On March 26, we launched the program through two online convenings—tailored for African and U.S. participants, respectively. Program directors Marisa Kellogg (ICLEI USA) and Dania Petrik (ICLEI Africa) outlined the roadmap ahead for participating cities, setting the stage for an exciting and collaborative journey. Special guest speakers, Andrew Potts, Director of Community-Preserving Legacies at the Climate Heritage Network, and Maria Aguilar, Race to Resilience Campaign Manager, offered reflections on the global momentum that led to this program and underscored the vital role of cultural heritage in climate planning.

The African session featured the presence of Mayors from Baidoa (Somalia), Quelimane (Mozambique), Hargeisa (Somaliland), and Nansana (Uganda). Their participation highlighted the importance of high-level political engagement in heritage-based

resilience efforts. These conversations gave city representatives their first glimpse into the people they will be working with on this journey and created space to reflect on what culture and heritage mean for climate action and resilience in their communities.

In April's session on Equitable Community Engagement & Social Inclusion, ICLEI Africa's Paul Currie, Director of the Urban Systems Unit, led an inspiring discussion around the power of **visual boundary objects**, like photographs and drawings, in bridging gaps between diverse stakeholders, including scientists, community members, and public officials. These visuals create a shared language to express complex or intangible ideas. Juxtaposing realistic images with imaginative drawings can spark deeper conversations about present realities and future hopes. In one exercise, children's drawings of nature-filled future cities were placed alongside images of environmental degradation, highlighting both current challenges and visionary possibilities. Bongiwe Simka's, Professional Officer for Urban Nature & Nature-based Solutions, remarks emphasized the vernacularizing of human rights, the process of translating global concepts into local languages and contexts. And emphasized how African societies vernacularize human rights, using folklore, proverbs, and Ubuntu to embed principles like justice and participation into everyday life. She also discussed the role of proverbs as both cultural anchors and instruments for change. While they can reinforce societal norms and gender stereotypes, they also serve as powerful tools to challenge those very norms, connecting new ideas to historical practices and enabling context-specific adaptat-



ion. These tools not only preserve heritage, they challenge harmful norms and make climate justice accessible and actionable.



From left to right guest speakers: Paul Currie, Director of Urban Systems Unit, ICLEI Africa & Bongiwe Simka, Professional Officer of Urban Nature & NbS

This powerful framing leads us directly into the spirit of the [RISE Africa Action Festival](#), taking place this May. RISE Africa is a vibrant platform that celebrates African-led storytelling, art, and innovation to shape sustainable urban futures. The festival brings together voices across the continent to reimagine cities through creative expression and collective action, making it a perfect extension of the themes explored in our RTRC sessions. We encourage all participants to engage with the festival and explore how its insights can inform their city's work. These insights support ICLEI Africa's broader effort to develop clear methodologies and frameworks that help cities navigate complex issues such as migration and the long-term ramifications of climate-related loss and damage. ensuring that no city and no cultural history is left behind. On the U.S. side, cities like Olympia and Phoenix showcased

vibrant, inclusive arts initiatives that are both functional and symbolic, from parades celebrating biodiversity to artist-designed shade structures tackling extreme heat. These examples highlight how creative place-making can transform public spaces into platforms for resilience, equity, and shared identity.

Natalie Weiss, Climate Resilience Coordinator for the City of Olympia, described her city's flagship arts initiatives, including but not limited to the Olympia Arts Walk, which was launched in 1990 and held twice a year, bring more than 100 artists' exhibits, live performances, markets, and family activities to a downtown temporarily closed to cars, encouraging visitors to walk, bike, or ride the bus (the next edition happens this weekend). And subsequently, the Procession of the Species, which was created by the community in 1995 and is now synchronized with ArtsWalk, invites residents to craft larger-than-life artworks celebrating their favourite species, then animate them in a night-time luminary parade and a daytime procession filled with music, dance, and a shared commitment to protect nature.

Mitch Menchaca, Arts & Culture Director for the City of Phoenix, and Carrie Brown, Deputy Arts & Culture Director at the City of Phoenix, followed with equally inspiring examples of the Rio Salado "Bridge Through Time". Whereby blending public art with transportation design, this project transformed a new pedestrian bridge into a linear gallery that stitches together two long-separated neighbourhoods. Installations created by local artists celebrate the area's Indigenous and Latino histories, turning a mere crossing into a storytelling corridor that

strengthens community pride, boosts foot traffic for nearby businesses, and anchors new cultural events. And the ¡Sombra! Experiments in Shade, which in confronting Phoenix's relentless heat, the city invited local and national artists to prototype creative shade structures, some solar-powered, others mist-cooled, in parks, bus stops, and schoolyards. The project doubles as an open-air lab: residents test each design, share feedback with engineers, and help refine solutions that will scale the city-wide.

Climate Resilience Coordinator
City of Olympia

Natalie Weiss



Arts & Culture Director
City of Phoenix

Mitch Menchaca



Deputy Arts & Culture Director
City of Phoenix

Carrie Brown



From left to right guest speakers: Natalie Weiss, Climate Resilience Coordinator, City of Olympia, Mitch Menchaca, Arts & Culture Director, City of Phoenix, Carrie Brown, Deputy Arts & Culture Director, City of Phoenix

With the cohort now in full swing, cities are deepening their partnerships and mapping out projects that speak to their unique cultural contexts. These efforts are more than symbolic; they are a redefinition of what climate resilience looks like when communities are co-creators, not just stakeholders. Throughout RTRC, we serve as impact brokers, convening, coordinating, and bridging sectors to build a shared understanding of climate resilience. By leveraging our technical and political expertise and deep knowledge of African cities, we help local governments turn cultural narratives into policy, planning, and partnerships that deliver tangible results.

At ICLEI Africa and ICLEI USA, we believe that culture is not just a backdrop to climate action; it is a driver of resilience. We understand that culture is never isolated; it is deeply impacted by other urban dynamics. By grounding strategies in heritage, empowering cities to govern inclusively, and building strong cross-regional partnerships, we are helping shape a future where African & U.S. cities rise stronger, prouder, and more prepared for the challenges ahead.



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