



## CONSERVING NATURAL ASSETS IN AFRICAN URBAN LANDSCAPES: ACHIEVEMENTS AND LESSONS LEARNED

### ICLEI Africa, Cities Biodiversity Centre

The [Urban Natural Assets for Africa: Rivers for Life \(UNA Rivers\) project](#), implemented by ICLEI Africa in Lilongwe (Malawi), Dar es Salaam (Tanzania) and Addis Ababa (Ethiopia), is an innovative program designed to work with city region stakeholders to pro-actively manage urban natural assets for improved human wellbeing and climate resilience. This project has provided a variety of lessons that relate to the management of natural assets in fast developing city regions in sub-Saharan Africa.

The ecological components of urbanised environments and the transformation of these landscapes to meet basic human needs has long been a discussion point. This is particularly true of

discourse around African city regions where developmental challenges are significant and include high levels of poverty and inequality, coupled with a [recent slowing of economic growth](#), increasing urbanisation and informality.

Dealing with the interaction of ecosystems with the built environment, social systems and climate change is complex, due in part to the fact that [70 percent of the world's population is expected to become urban by 2050](#). This complexity is even more pronounced in rapidly urbanising African city regions; areas rich with natural assets, but facing challenges such as inadequate planning, poor infrastructure, and a lack of financial, human and

Above: UNA Rivers Project Logo  
Photo Credit: ICLEI Africa

knowledge resources.

Nevertheless, African cities provide numerous opportunities for better urban natural asset management via innovation and collaboration between multiple stakeholders. The work of [ICLEI Africa](#) over the past fourteen years in sub-Saharan Africa has confirmed this. The UNA Rivers project, implemented by means of generous funding from Swedbio through the Stockholm Resilience Centre, works with city region stakeholders in three sub-Saharan African countries to pro-actively conserve and protect nature in cities for improved human wellbeing and climate resilience.

Our experience has shown that many African local governments

lack the necessary mechanisms to effectively conserve and maintain their natural asset base. Some challenges include:

- a) understanding where natural assets are and why they are important;
- b) linking decision makers with specialists who hold the necessary information;
- c) limited coordination and engagement between key role players within city regions;
- d) implementation of scalable and sustainable projects that connect urban communities with biodiversity and ecosystems;
- e) tackling differences between different stakeholders; and
- f) balancing inclusive participation with the resource investment needed.

Co-production and transdisciplinary processes

are being used to overcome these barriers while aligning the project activities with city needs, with the explicit aim of better understanding and increasing cognisance of the local context in each of the city regions.

Over a relatively short time, the UNA Rivers project has implemented a significant range of activities. These include:

- a) Co-ordinating the development of a plan for a pilot river revitalisation project in Malawi. Through a prioritisation exercise, an implementation strategy for components of the plan will guide implementation, with the plan providing the platform to secure additional support;
- b) Improving partnerships and co-ordination of stakeholders in the project cities. A coordination platform for Dar es Salaam is currently being developed;
- c) Developing a sustainable river-based urban planning guideline

document which guides planners (and other technical staff) on how and why to plan for their rivers;

- d) Drafting case studies for city-city learning exchange;
- e) Producing a list of alternative ways to generate income by sustainably using the natural asset base;
- f) Providing inputs into Local Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan processes;
- g) Improving cultural activation by supporting a local artist to develop a mobilisation song for the protection of urban rivers; and
- h) Initiating the development of mapped biodiversity and climate change information to increase the understanding of the socio-economic importance of biodiversity and ecosystem services, as well as guide city planners and decision makers for future development policies and planning.



The natural buffer zone has been removed to make way for urban agriculture.  
Photo Credit: ICLEI Africa





The Lilongwe River - one of the main sources of water for the City of Lilongwe  
Photo Credit: ICLEI Africa





have come to appreciate and recognise that there is both an official and unofficial decision making structure in City councils. The unofficial or “shadow system and space” represents the more complex inner social working of a council as it recognises the invisible aspects at play within learning and decision making processes of municipal institutions. Other significant lessons include:

- a) the importance of processes that build on mutual respect and cut across many disciplines to ensure a holistic approach;
- b) how to focus on issues where change can be enabled, within contexts of overwhelming challenges;

- c) the value of improved information provision and coordination;
- d) improved understanding of the need to engage with existing institutional and decision making processes to better find entry points for transformational shifts;
- e) better understanding of the barriers and enablers to co-production in Africa;
- f) the dynamic nature of land-use planning in an African context;
- g) the importance of flexibility and relationships in project implementation;
- h) the need to recognise and seek to understand capacity constraints;

- i) the realities on the ground for proactive planning and action;
- j) the need to work with informality and the methodologies to best engage with these communities;
- k) the power of deep scaling and building on existing work;
- l) the absolute necessity to respond directly to needs identified rather than impose project ideas on cities; and
- m) the benefit of working with funders that understand the African landscape.

By mainstreaming biodiversity and ecosystem services into local land use and development policy and planning systems, the UNA Rivers project aims to proactively assist local governments in Africa with their management of urban natural assets.



ABOVE: Transporting charcoal. The domestic market for charcoal as fuel in African cities is causing the deforestation rate of many African cities to rise exponentially  
Photo Credit: ICLEI Africa

BELOW: Urban rivers, despite their significance as the lifeblood of cities, often act as informal waste collection and disposal sites  
Photo Credit: ICLEI Africa



Remnants of forests remain in areas of cultural significance as can be seen here at a Malawian graveyard  
Photo Credit: ICLEI Africa





Intact riparian vegetation along a river bank,  
Photo Credit: ICLEI Africa

Maintaining the natural assets base is essential for all and will contribute to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (in particular goals 11, 13, 14 and 15) as well as the New Urban Agenda. The UNA Rivers project has made significant impacts and continues to make headway in advancing frontiers in terms of urban biodiversity in an African landscape.

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#### Resources

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Urban rivers, primary focus of the UNA Rivers Project  
Photo Credit: ICLEI Africa