



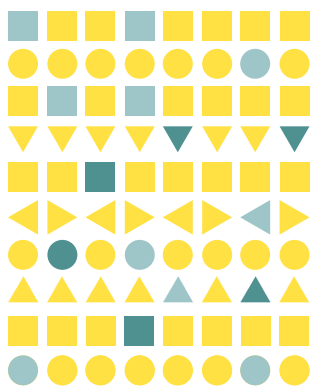
UNA pathways to mainstreaming nature-based solutions in local planning and decision-making in Africa



INTRODUCTION

Current global trends call for building a world where people live in greater harmony with nature. Over 55% of the world's population live in urban areas, with an expected increase of up to 68% by 2050 (UN, 2018). Urban crises such as floods, disease outbreak, water scarcity, food scarcity and polluted air, underscore humanity's dependence on intact ecosystems and access to healthy natural environments for livelihoods, risk mitigation and economic opportunities. Echoing the demands of global policy agendas and initiatives such as those set out in the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), we need to collectively work towards achieving more resilient and people-centred development where nature is central to addressing our global challenges. The nature-people-economy relationship is inextricably linked, making people a core driver to effective solutions to the current challenges. While people are central to the intricate dynamics of managing and safeguarding urban natural assets, it remains a challenge to translate this collective aspiration into everyday reality.

Africa is one of the fastest urbanising regions of the world (UN-Habitat, 2014), with rapidly growing populations and changes in land-use trends threatening some of the world's richest biodiversity (Gunalp et al., 2017). Coupled with challenges associated with economic inequalities, this has resulted in a significant proportion of African livelihoods being at risk and more vulnerable to the impacts of climate change (UN-Habitat, 2014). Globally, there has been in depth research efforts to make the case for nature-based solutions (NBS), with numerous case studies showcasing their implementation, successes and failures across various landscapes and in addressing different challenges (Hanson, Wickenberg & Olsson, 2020; Acreman et al., 2021). There is also a broad range of literature on the importance of NBS, not just as a replacement for conventional grey infrastructure, but as a sustainable approach to complementing existing infrastructure (Depietri & McPhearson, 2017), delivering more benefits to people, planet and the economy,





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specifically at the local scale. This publication explores the UNA Resilience methodology to mainstreaming nature-based solutions into local planning and decision-making processes. It delves into 4 pathways to mainstreaming NBS into decision-making, highlighting the critical role each pathway plays in promoting equitable and long-term impact at the local and national levels and further exploring opportunities for promoting NBS mainstreaming into governance, planning and financial decision making frameworks, particularly at the local scale.

ABOUT UNA

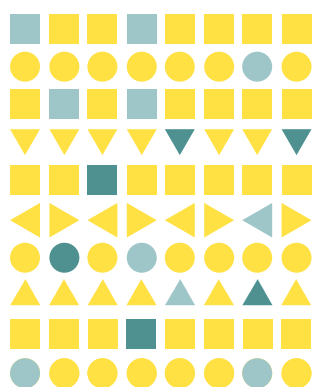
Since 2014, the Urban Natural Assets (UNA) programme, one of ICLEI Africa's flagship programmes, has supported 10 cities across 10 countries in Africa to drive more resilient and nature-positive development. Key to the programme has been working with local and subnational governments experiencing challenges around protecting and revitalising their urban natural assets by integrating and mainstreaming nature-based solutions into city planning activities and decision-making. Throughout the decade-long implementation journey, UNA has advocated for contextually relevant approaches, defining opportunities in urban natural asset management while enhancing nature's contribution to people. The current phase of UNA, [UNA Resilience and Restoration for Life \(UNA Resilience\)](#) has since 2021 adopted a human rights based approach (HRBA) to nature-based solutions. Leveraging the three key and interconnected pillars of **governance, planning and finance** as entry points, UNA Resilience has focused on creating an enabling environment for inclusive planning and decision-making as it relates to urban development in African cities.

PATHWAY 1: Centering people and nature considerations in decision-making processes

To address challenges associated with climate resilience, health and well-being in urban areas, current policy platforms are shifting their focus to ecosystem-based and nature-based solutions. Following the COVID-19 global pandemic which threatened progress towards Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UN, 2020; Aysan, Bergigui and Disli, 2021), the importance of nature in building back better, particularly in urban environments, has gained traction (Cook & Taylor, 2020). Undoubtedly, this has stressed the need to integrate NBS as an alternative to conventional grey infrastructure, putting nature at the centre of decision-making process at all levels.

► *Data and research as an entry point*

Critical to putting nature at the centre of the decision-making table is an accurate stocktake of natural assets, nature's benefits to people and the intricate link between people and the environment. Data and research are a critical entry point to making informed and contextually sound decisions about nature. Beyond investing in an assessment of the biophysical elements of a city, including





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the types of ecosystems present, their current ecological condition and the pressures they face, a comprehensive account of the socio-economic landscape is key. Understanding what challenges and pressures are there and how we can collectively respond to these challenges in a way that safeguards urban natural assets and livelihoods for current and future generations. Data provides a tangible entry point to engaging relevant stakeholders and calling for cross-sectoral mainstreaming, ultimately advancing the implementation of nature-based solutions in policy and governance at multiple scales.

► ***Education, awareness and training***

Key to achieving this in UNA is through education, awareness and training, enhancing stakeholder's understanding of the value of urban nature in safeguarding livelihoods, driving thriving economies, building resilience to climate change and other critical benefits. Central to this approach is creating spaces for open and meaningful dialogue, bringing together diverse voices to the decision-making table. By working collaboratively with city stakeholders including practitioners, research institutions, academics, private sector, community members, traditional leaders and youth, inclusive platforms are created, elevating the often hidden voice further solidifying the legitimacy of all urban governance processes.

► ***A whole-of-society approach***

Urban resilience cannot be achieved without addressing issues of equity, human rights and the responsibilities of duty bearers concerning access to and protection of urban natural resources. These crises also highlight the disproportionate burden on marginalised communities. Women, children, and the poor often bear the brunt of these impacts. For instance, women and girls in sub-Saharan Africa collectively spend about 40 billion hours a year collecting water (UN, 2014)—time that could be used for education or economic activities (IISD, 2022). By prioritising a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach to addressing urban challenges, cities have the opportunity to promote inclusive governance processes (Chausson et al, 2023; Kabisch et al 2016; Connolly 2013), recognising the voices of stakeholders not merely as recipients of aid, but rather as key partners to urban development processes (Kabisch et al 2016; Leone et al., 2021).

In practice, this includes embedding inclusive participatory processes in policy relating to NBS and sustainable urban development planning, and holding all relevant stakeholders accountable to public consultation, engagement and participation as it relates to decision-making. Key to the implementation of UNA is the facilitation of co-production and co-learning platforms such as learning labs. Learning labs provide a co-production platform where all stakeholders have access to information and data on natural assets in their city, can co-develop tools and resources to respond to pressing challenges and have a voice in shaping the future of their communities.



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PATHWAY 2: **Mandates that influence how nature and ecosystems are managed and are placed at the right level, with resources flowing to where they are needed most**

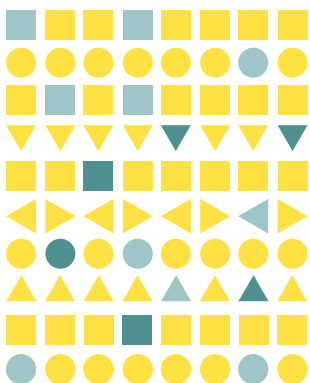
Creating an enabling environment for NBS requires effective governance and the exercise of power, coupled with responsibilities on how natural assets are managed. This includes the use of legislative instruments such as legal frameworks, policies and strategies to guide decision-making as it relates to development and natural assets. It also includes establishment of relevant institutions such as Departments, Agencies, Ministries and others with mandates directly or indirectly related to natural asset management. Furthermore, it is important to facilitate resource mobilisation and prioritisation to make sure that skills, funding and resources flow where they are needed most.

► Whole of government approach

Themed *Making Peace with Nature*, the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity's (UN CBD) 16th Meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP16) held in Cali, Colombia in October 2024 solidified the significance of mainstreaming biodiversity considerations into decision-making as a pathway towards sustainable use and management of natural resources. It recognised the crucial role of a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach in achieving the ambitious targets set out in The Biodiversity Plan. This recognition is supported by the recent adoption of the decision on mainstreaming of biodiversity within and across sectors (CBD/COP/16/L.9), further recognising the contributions of subnational and local governments in achieving the Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF). In practice, this means better alignment and coordination across multiple scales, ensuring that National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plans (NBSAPs) are effectively localised and translated into local action, promoting the development of Local Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plans (LBSAPs) that ensure that all local interventions and investments prioritise the sustainable use and management of natural assets.

► Robust legal and policy frameworks

We cannot talk about centering nature considerations in decision-making without recognising the value of a robust legal and policy framework that makes provision for the deliberate integration of nature in decision-making. Putting nature at the top of the priority list requires the revision of existing policies and legal frameworks to ensure that provisions are made to facilitate effective nature based solutions mainstreaming. This includes making provisions for efficient environmental impact assessment (EIA) processes, where urban development and infrastructure development decisions do not undermine progress made through restoration and nature-based initiatives. This can also be seen through the integration of urban green spaces in city planning frameworks, making sure that nature considerations are central in planning and urban development related decision-making. More opportunities for making nature central to decision-making include the integration of Natural Capital Accounting (NCA) in economic





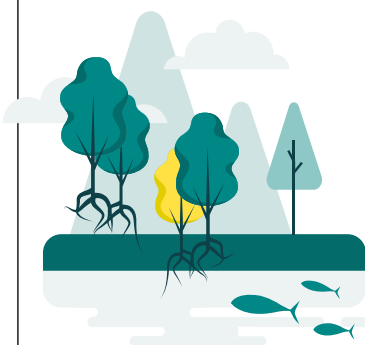
"By recognising and leveraging the multifunctional benefits of NBS, policy reform and alignment can integrate NBS for delivering organisational mandates at different scales."

planning (World Bank, 2021). In the last decade, more people are realising the economic value of natural assets and the ecosystem services they provide in driving thriving economies, particularly at the national scale. By integrating NCA in decision-making, the financial valuation of natural assets can be linked to economic development, further propelling cities and governments to make better and more sustainable decisions about natural assets (World Bank, 2021).

In reality, policy reform is easier said than done, as many barriers limit the full realisation of the policy shifts necessary for driving NBS implementation. Policy shifts and revisions necessitate a regime shift, where NBS is integrated at a landscape scale to address development challenges such as health, energy and peace (Kauark-Fontes et al., 2023). Nature is linked (directly or indirectly) to 8 of the 17 SDGs, creating an opportunity to leverage synergies with SDGs as a pathway towards mainstreaming NBS within different sectors and mandates to address development challenges (Acharya et al., 2020). By recognising and leveraging the multifunctional benefits of NBS, policy reform and alignment can integrate NBS for delivering organisational mandates at different scales. Moreover, as we consider the need to shift towards nature-based policies where NBS is central, much investment must also be put into enabling and making NBS attractive to communities, developers and other stakeholders. Through the use of innovative finance instruments and compensation schemes such as payments for ecosystems services (PES) (Sangha et al., 2024) or subsidies such as those linked to greenroofs, stormwater management interventions, we can make the case for the adoption of NBS in development initiatives and decision-making.

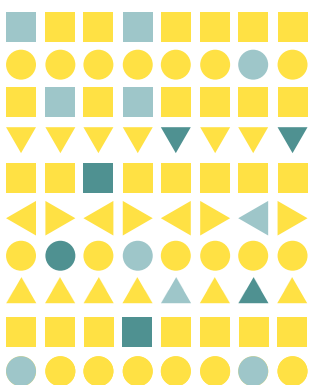
► ***Mainstreaming nature across different sectors***

Critical to effective mainstreaming is coordination between and amongst different sectors. By ensuring that nature considerations are mainstreaming sectorally and cross-sectorally, development, planning and investment decisions are more likely to take a systems approach to urban development. Key to the implementation of UNA resilience is promotion of multi-stakeholder partnerships and a holistic approach to development. This includes methodologically integrating NBS considerations into planning and decision-making as a way to address social and environmental challenges using healthy ecosystems. Through this approach, we advocate for the mainstreaming of nature considerations into sectors such as agriculture, marine resources, forestry, fisheries, energy, water supply, poverty alleviation and sanitation. By taking a holistic approach, policy decisions, financial investments and interventions prioritise nature and ensure that institutions and mandates that influence how nature and ecosystems are managed are placed at the right level, with resources flowing to where they are needed most.





"Biodiversity planning frameworks such as the Local Biodiversity Strategic Action Plan (LBSAP) should integrate land use planning. This would enable the utilisation of land use planning to encourage environmental preservation as well as enhance implementation of NBS to improve urban service delivery and support provision of ecosystem services."



PATHWAY 3: **Transform planning systems and processes, especially as they relate to informality and rapid urbanisation**

► ***Integrating natural systems within urban planning frameworks***

Urban planning trends highlight that inadequate planning frameworks, weak legislation, ineffective land administration, as well as complex land markets and the lack of enforcement and development control in many African cities have contributed to negative impacts on natural systems. These factors have also increased urban informality which in turn increases the vulnerability of people and natural systems. Thus urban planning frameworks and consideration of different types of plans such as structure plans and green blue frameworks are essential in integrating nature within urban planning frameworks. This is critical to ensure forward planning to demarcate areas that are not meant to be developed, but should rather be conserved.

► ***Improving development control and land management practices***

Frameworks themselves are insufficient in enabling outcomes that are favourable for people, places and the planet. Therefore action is needed through improved practices in development control and land management practices. This requires strengthening of institutional structures that govern urban planning and development control to ensure that mandates are defined and clarified between various actors across the various scales of government. Involving local level actors such as ward and sub-ward officials in urban planning and development control enables a coordinated approach between local government officials in undertaking development control and land administration.

► ***Localise nature-based solutions to support service delivery***

Biodiversity planning frameworks such as the Local Biodiversity Strategic Action Plan (LBSAP) should integrate land use planning. This would enable the utilisation of land use planning to encourage environmental preservation as well as enhance implementation of NBS to improve urban service delivery and support provision of ecosystem services. The process of developing these biodiversity planning frameworks should take on a whole-of-society approach to engage various stakeholders including marginalised groups. Roadmaps present an opportunity to consolidate research outputs, data, stakeholder engagement into crafting a common vision between various stakeholders and sectors, that highlight goals and initiatives to be undertaken in mainstreaming NBS that address societal and ecological concerns. Implementation of innovative NBS such as reticulation ponds and bioswales, which encourage ecosystem services that support the water cycle and regulate erosion for instance, can create urban resilience in cities through mitigating the impacts of flooding on people and the environment.



"Developing clear biodiversity financing strategies and well-crafted concept notes, that speak to the local context and address its challenges, help articulate the financial and ecological value of NBS to potential private sector investors."



PATHWAY 4: **Financial mechanisms that encourage greater private sector investment in NBS, and increase public sector funding for NBS**

The global biodiversity finance gap, identified in the Global Biodiversity Framework, is \$700 billion per year, to be progressively closed by 2030 (CBD, 2024). With only 18% of biodiversity funding flows coming from the private sector, (UNEP, 2023) it is imperative for local governments to forge partnerships to leverage innovative financial mechanisms to increase these investments.

► Biodiversity financing and concept notes for economic development and expansion of natural assets in urban areas

Developing clear biodiversity financing strategies and well-crafted concept notes, that speak to the local context and address its challenges, help articulate the financial and ecological value of NBS to potential private sector investors. These also reduce perceived risks for the private sector as they demonstrate a structured, transparent approach to financing linked to measurable outcomes for biodiversity conservation. By demonstrating how these initiatives can lead to cost savings, increased property values, and enhanced ecosystem services, they provide a compelling case for investment (World Bank, 2020). Additionally, given biodiversity financing's alignment with Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) goals, it provides a compelling rationale for private sector involvement.

Expanding natural assets in urban areas offers substantial economic benefits that can enhance urban economies while providing ecological and social advantages and contribute to citizens well-being. Examples of these include parks, green spaces, urban forests, and wetlands. Not only does it enhance the livability of cities but it also contributes significantly to their economic development. Green infrastructure fosters innovation and creates jobs in sustainable industries. Leveraging natural resources for their direct contribution to livelihoods requires sustainable practices and forethought in urban planning processes, as detailed above.

► Strengthening governance through multi-stakeholder dialogues and partnerships

Governance can be strengthened through multilevel and multi-stakeholder dialogues. Hosting inclusive dialogues with the private sector, governments both national and local, together with local communities help to build trust and contribute to a greater understanding of mandates, roles and responsibility. This in turn creates transparency and provides an opportunity to broaden accountability. This trust is essential for long-term private sector investment but also to ensure that people and nature considerations are centered in decision-making processes. Furthermore, multi-stakeholder partnerships, forged through dialogues present an opportunity to pool resources and expertise, resulting in efficiencies that can translate into cost savings and reduced risk for private companies while amplifying impact. By creating an enabling environment through effective policies and regulations developed through collaborative efforts private



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sector participation can be incentivised (Van Raalte et al, 2023). Support for local implementation remains a priority even at global level, demonstrated by the recent commitment from multilateral development banks (MDBs) which announced financial support and other measures for countries to achieve ambitious climate outcomes at COP29 in Baku. (World Bank, 2024)

► ***Gender responsive budgeting and resource allocation to foster inclusion***

'Gender budgeting is an approach to budgeting that can improve it, when fiscal policies and administrative procedures are structured to address gender inequality. When properly done, one can say that gender budgeting is good budgeting' (Stotsky, 2016). Considering the significant role women play in natural resource management, but also their dependency on natural resources, a nuanced and gender-responsive approach to budgeting ensures that the design and implementation of NBS address the needs and contributions of all genders. Not only does this promote inclusivity, but enhances effectiveness as inclusive projects are more likely to succeed given their diverse perspectives and priorities, improving buy-in from local communities and ensuring sustainability. Leveraging gender-responsive approaches can positively contribute to projects by highlighting the economic and social benefits of inclusive NBS projects, in turn encouraging private sector investment in initiatives that empower underrepresented groups. Given their close alignment with ESG goals and corporate diversity and inclusion policies, the appeal of NBS projects can be broadened.

A combination of the above elements presents a compelling case for private sector investment in NBS, demonstrating profitability, social responsibility, and contributing to long-term sustainability.





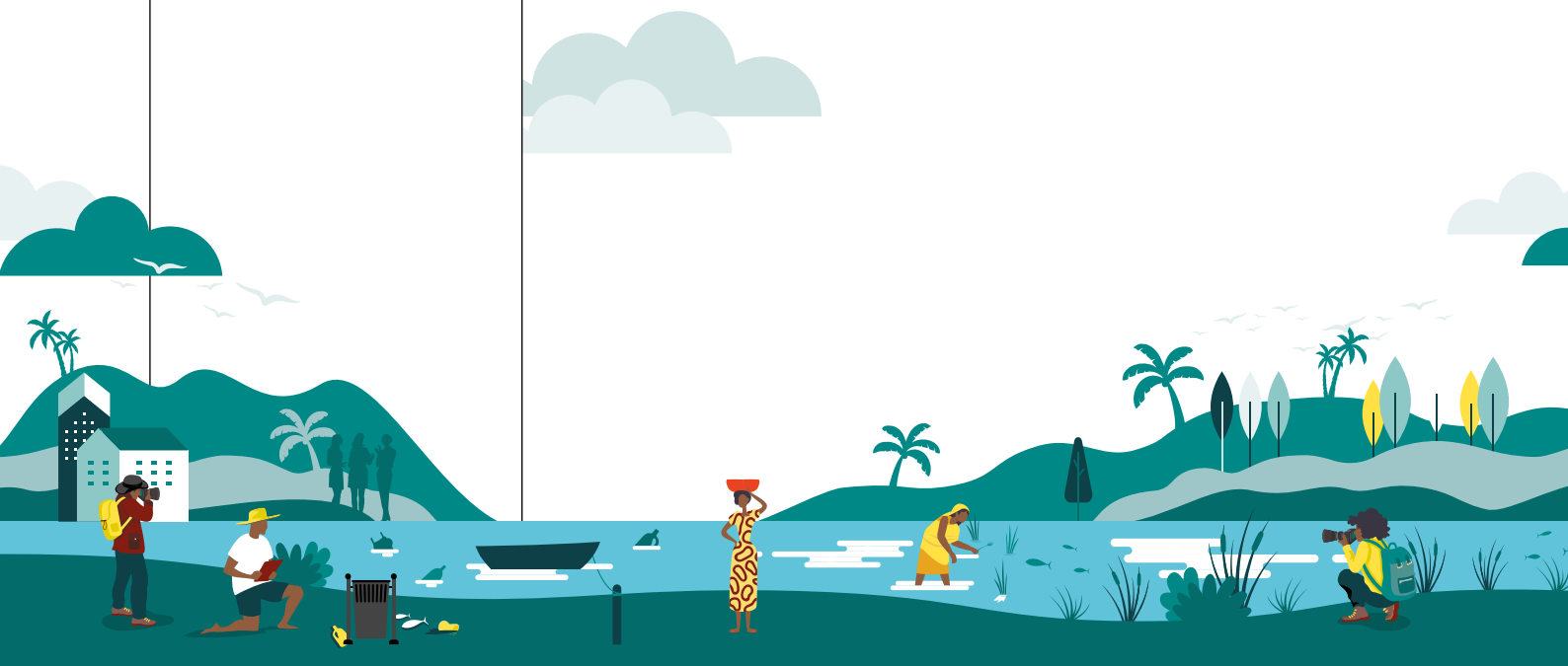
"The way forward lies in fostering collaborative, multi-stakeholder dialogues that translate local perspectives into national and international policies."

Conclusion

In conclusion, embracing a systems approach to mainstreaming nature-based solutions (NBS) is essential for fostering sustainable and resilient ecosystems. This requires enabling access to resources and biological data to support evidence-based decision-making and scaling of NBS. Furthermore, it is important to undertake strategic resource mobilisation, which is critical to leverage on funding for mainstreaming NBS. This ensures that resources are directed to where they are most needed to meet financing targets. This approach should emphasise investment in nature, integrating NBS with climate action to maximise impact.

Cities play a pivotal role in mainstreaming NBS through policy integration and sectoral planning. Therefore, continuous advocacy for policy alignment with global targets such as the Kunming Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF), coupled with linking global discourses to local actions through NBSAPs and LBSAPs, is crucial to ensure their relevance and effectiveness at the local scale. Additionally, governments at all levels must adopt a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach to enable the inclusion of the GBF. It is important to highlight the contributions of indigenous and local communities who must be recognised and supported through a rights-based approach, ensuring their voices are incorporated into both policy formulation and informing practice.

The way forward lies in fostering collaborative, multi-stakeholder dialogues that translate local perspectives into national and international policies. By driving policy and practice change through inclusive and participatory approaches, projects and programmes such as the Urban Natural Assets for Africa can bridge the gap between global ambitions and local realities, ultimately creating a sustainable and equitable future for all.





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