



# Interconnected rights

Promoting the progressive realisation of human rights through urban natural asset protection.

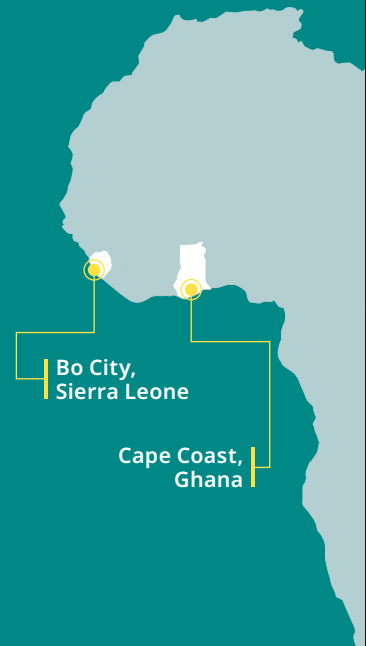


## Key impact

By integrating a Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA) into urban planning, the UNA programme strengthened the connection between human rights and nature conservation, leading to increased awareness and community-led accountability.



## Case study cities



### Setting the scene

## Situation prior to the UNA programme

In many cities, discussions about urban biodiversity management and nature preservation often overlook the importance of human rights. Across the Global South, cultural and national perspectives often made human and gender rights discourse challenging, with 'rights' frequently perceived as Western or foreign concepts. As a result, human rights violations linked to environmental issues were less likely to be recognised or addressed.

Women were disproportionately affected by environmental challenges, experiencing time poverty, exposure to harsh conditions, and increased risks of gender-based violence due to inefficient cooking and fuel methods. The degradation of natural environments was especially concerning for vulnerable urban residents who depended heavily on nature for shelter and essential resources.





## Programme interventions

### Bo City, Sierra Leone

The introduction of human rights concepts using culturally relevant methods, such as storytelling and analysing traditional folklore, proved successful in encouraging participants to view human rights as intrinsic to African heritage. Learning labs were used to introduce HRBA and human rights discourse through engaging visual aids like posters and videos, and through participatory discussions with diverse stakeholders.

This approach allowed participants to see the interconnectedness of human rights and environmental protection and encouraged them to interrogate the roles of culture, religion, and beliefs in perpetuating gender and resource inequalities. Stakeholders were able to identify key entry points for transformative change, understanding the need for gender-responsive, context-specific urban planning. The project emphasised representation, inclusive decision-making, and breaking down power dynamics to foster safe and equitable participation.

### Key changes



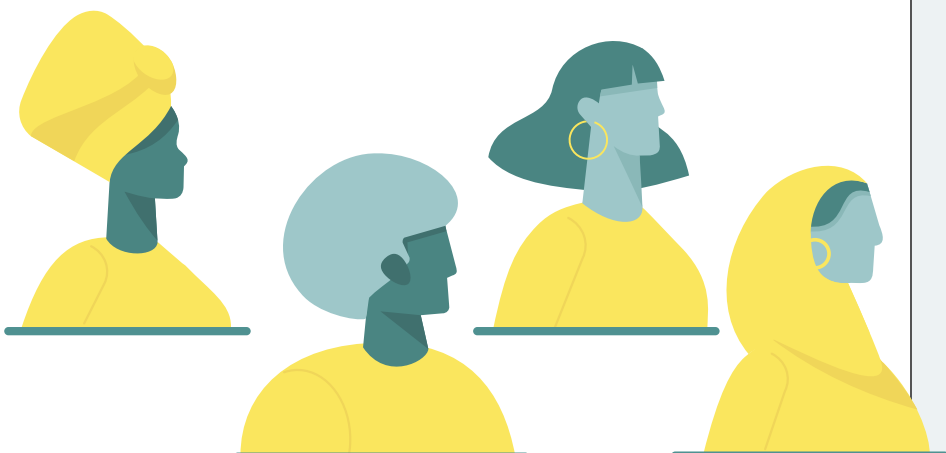
**Stakeholders demonstrated a significant shift in understanding the role of natural assets and the impact of environmental degradation.**



**Officials began prioritising collaboration with institutions like the Ministry of Lands to protect wetlands, recognising the importance of integrating natural asset preservation into urban planning.**



**Improved community-government relationships led to communities holding authorities accountable, with actions like reporting unauthorised construction in protected areas.**



### Aim

**To advance human rights-based approaches and considerations in urban planning and decision-making, it is essential to position human rights as interconnected with urban nature. The UNA programme aimed to create an enabling environment that addresses inequalities, which are often at the core of development challenges, to uphold the rights of all community members, especially vulnerable groups like women and youth.**



## Cape Coast, Ghana

The notions of ownership and access to natural resources were debunked through an understanding of the vernacularization of human rights into the local context. The HRBA unpacked how folklore and idioms, that have been used and passed down over generations, continue to entrench notions of exclusion of various marginalised groups such as women and children in accessing various natural resources. Through discussions in the learning labs, the participants who included both men and women reflected on the importance of accessing nature for social, spiritual and cultural well-being. Thus highlighting the need for equal access and equitable management of natural resources. The cultural and spiritual significance of urban natural assets was also highlighted by traditional leadership representatives who expressed that areas such as shrines play a significant role in the society.

The various interactive exercises and methodologies tested through the learning labs offered a platform for marginalised groups, who are often not involved in decision making fora, to contribute towards discussions relating to natural resource management. Embracing diverse voices in deliberations during problem identification and solution generation was impactful in taking on a whole of society approach through meaningful participation.

### Key changes



**Over time the learning labs' participation saw an increase in the proportion of women, to over 50% by the last learning lab.**



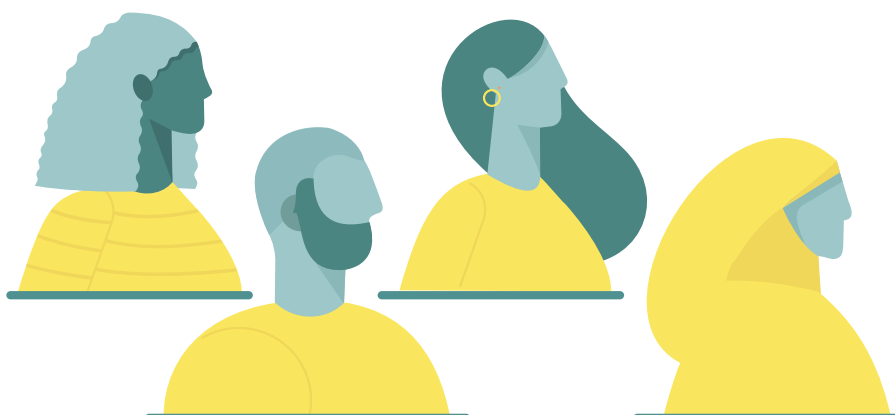
**Increased agency and elevated voices by women in learning labs contributed to the sharing of reflections, opinions and insights on various discussions.**



**Local government officials noted that the learnings from the HRBA sessions have made them more aware and intentional about including more women in engagements and decision-making platforms.**



**Various segments of society including local communities, women, youth and media as rights-holders had more agency to hold duty-bearers accountable during discussions relating to natural resource management during the learning labs.**





## Evidence of change

### Key outcomes for each city

Participants from the learning labs reported that the activities and presentations helped them understand the significance of natural assets, the human rights dimensions of environmental protection, and climate change threats. This newfound understanding inspired community action and strengthened engagement between local authorities and residents.

**Community Accountability:** In Bo City civil society members reported unauthorised construction in an inland swamp area to the Provincial Security Committee, which led to halting the illegal development. In Cape Coast increased community reporting of harmful environmental practices was also observed. A government official remarked: *“In the past, people did not care who was building where, but now some stakeholders are aware and report that to the Assembly. I can say for sure that no one who participated in the photovoice and research findings will see people building in the wetlands and not talk about it. Even the Assembly members will not allow that.”*

**Government Collaboration:** There has been a notable shift towards collaboration among government officials. In Bo City city authorities are working closely with the Ministry of Lands to enforce wetland protection regulations. One official highlighted: *“We are actively exploring ways to collaborate with the Ministry of Lands to enforce regulations that prevent construction activities in our wetland areas. By prioritising the preservation of natural assets in our planning processes, we aim to enhance the resilience and sustainability of our cities. These actions reflect valuable lessons learned from the UNA project.”*

### Quotes from stakeholders:

- *“In protecting urban natural resources, we are equally enforcing human rights (right to a clean environment, right to clean water bodies, etc.).” – Cape Coast city official*
- *“Environmental issues are human rights issues and must be treated with utmost seriousness.” – Bo City official*
- *“The most useful aspect of the UNA project is the human rights aspect which helped me to know my rights, restrictions, do’s and don’ts.” – CBO representative, Bo City*
- *“All are involved in the preservation of urban natural assets.” – Cape Coast city official*
- *“Everyone has a right to a natural, safe, and sustainable environment.” – Cape Coast city official*
- *“Human rights and the environment are intertwined.” – Cape Coast city official*
- *“As much as we have rights, we also have responsibilities to our rights.” – CBO representative, Bo City*





## Long-term impacts and significance

The project's co-design processes and HRBA have established a strong foundation for integrating human rights into city planning and governance. By embedding these principles, the project has facilitated a shift in awareness and accountability, leading to more proactive community involvement and strengthened collaboration between residents and government officials.

Community members are now more vigilant in defending their rights and reporting environmental violations, contributing to better protection of urban natural assets. Government officials have adopted more inclusive and sustainable urban planning practices. These changes are expected to have lasting impacts, setting the stage for resilient, sustainable, and inclusive city governance. The project's emphasis on community-driven approaches and safeguarding natural resources ensures a positive trajectory for urban environments.

## Key learnings

- Addressing local challenges through co-creation and inclusive approaches ensures alignment with community needs and increases project legitimacy.
- Culturally sensitive strategies make human and gender rights concepts more accessible, enhancing the relevance of HRBA in urban planning.
- Engaging women and youth requires continuous effort and culturally adapted approaches to improve initial low participation rates.
- Building collaborative relationships between civil society and government actors fosters effective and sustainable solutions.
- Anticipating and proactively addressing logistical challenges, like resource limitations and connectivity issues, is crucial for long-term success.

## Link to global targets

- **SDG 1:** No Poverty
- **SDG 3:** Good Health and Well-being
- **SDG 5:** Gender Equality
- **SDG 10:** Reduced Inequality
- **SDG 11:** Sustainable Cities and Communities
- **SDG 13:** Climate Action
- **SDG 15:** Life on Land
- **SDG 17:** Partnerships for the Goals



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## ABOUT THE UNA PROGRAMME

Implemented by ICLEI's Cities Biodiversity Center, the UNA programme is designed to support local governments in Africa in addressing the daily challenges they experience around protecting and revitalising their urban natural assets. It specifically seeks to improve human well-being and build climate resilience through integrating nature-based solutions and a human rights-based approach into land-use planning.

**To date, the UNA programme supports four flagship projects;** Urban Natural Assets for Africa (UNA Africa), Urban Natural Assets: Rivers for Life (UNA Rivers), Urban Natural Assets: Coasts for Life (UNA Coasts) and UNA: Resilience and Restoration for Life (UNA Resilience).



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