



AFRICAN FORUM
ON URBAN FORESTS

2nd African Forum On Urban Forests

18 - 21 March 2025

Green Horizons: Shaping the Future Resilience
of African Cities through Urban Forests

Forum Background

As of 2023, approximately 57.3% of the global population resides in urban areas, and this trend is projected to intensify. According to United Nations estimates, by 2030, the urban population will grow by nearly 600 million, reaching 5.2 billion people. By 2050, almost 70% of the world's population is expected to live in cities, more than doubling current figures. This rapid urban expansion, combined with escalating climate change impacts, is placing significant pressure on natural ecosystems within urban environments.

Africa, renowned for its rich natural heritage, supports a quarter of the world's species and holds a sixth of the planet's remaining forests, making it a vital reservoir of global biodiversity. However, this biodiversity is under growing threat from a range of pressures, including deforestation, habitat fragmentation, illegal wildlife trade, and the accelerating impacts of climate change. These forces are contributing to a significant reduction in key ecosystem services such as clean water, fertile soils, and pollination, which are critical to the well-being of millions of people across the continent.

As forests shrink and habitats degrade, the ability of ecosystems to provide these services is compromised, directly affecting agriculture, food security, and access to clean water. This not only disrupts local economies but also heightens vulnerability to natural disasters, such as floods and droughts. The deterioration of Africa's ecosystems, if left unchecked, threatens to unravel the delicate balance between nature and human well-being, endangering the continent's iconic

wildlife and jeopardizing the livelihoods of communities that depend heavily on natural resources for their survival.

The loss of biodiversity also poses broader risks, undermining Africa's potential to address global challenges such as climate change mitigation and sustainable development. Urgent and coordinated conservation efforts are needed to safeguard Africa's ecosystems, ensuring both the preservation of its natural treasures and the resilience of its people in the face of growing environmental challenges.

In response to these urgent challenges, there is a growing recognition of the critical role that urban forests play in fostering sustainable, resilient cities. Urban forests, which include street trees, foliage in private developments, forest parks, and public green spaces, provide numerous environmental, social, and economic benefits. They mitigate the effects of climate change by absorbing carbon dioxide, reducing the urban heat island effect, improving air quality, and supporting biodiversity within densely populated areas. Furthermore, these green spaces offer residents opportunities for recreation, improved mental health, and enhanced community well-being.

Local governments, urban planners, city managers, and civil society organizations are increasingly acknowledging the importance of urban forests as essential components of sustainable urban development. These stakeholders are actively engaging in initiatives to expand and protect green spaces, recognizing that urban for-



ests not only enhance the quality of life but also contribute to the resilience of cities in the face of growing environmental pressures.

Globally, more than 250 cities have committed to expanding their tree cover through initiatives such as the FAO's Tree Cities of the World Programme and the UNECE's Trees in Cities Challenge. These initiatives mobilize local efforts to plant and maintain trees, with the aim of creating greener, healthier urban environments. By participating in these global campaigns, cities are demonstrating leadership in climate action and urban sustainability, while setting a precedent for future urban development that prioritizes nature-based solutions. The momentum behind these efforts underscores the increasing recognition that urban forests are not just aesthetic amenities but crucial infrastructure for a sustainable and livable future.

Notably, several African countries, including Kenya, South Africa, Cameroon, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, and Burundi, have committed to expanding their urban green canopy.

Urban forests are increasingly recognized for their critical role in advancing sustainable development goals and enhancing cities' resilience to climate change, population growth, and future pandemics. Beyond their environmental benefits, these green spaces provide a range of essential economic, social, and cultural ecosystem services that are vital for urban communities. By integrating urban forests into city planning, municipalities can future-proof cities against var-

ious challenges while improving overall quality of life for residents.

Economically, urban forests contribute to local economies by boosting property values, reducing energy costs through natural cooling, and supporting tourism and recreation industries. Socially, these green spaces strengthen community bonds by fostering social networks and providing inclusive spaces where people from diverse backgrounds can interact. They also enhance public health by promoting physical activity, reducing stress, and improving mental well-being, all of which contribute to lower healthcare costs in the long run.

Urban forests play a crucial role in food security, providing urban agriculture opportunities that help ensure access to nutritious food, especially in marginalized communities. Additionally, they contribute to environmental justice by increasing social and environmental equity, ensuring that all residents—regardless of income or background—have access to the benefits of green spaces.

From an ecological perspective, urban forests regulate local climates by mitigating the urban heat island effect, improving air quality, and supporting biodiversity. They enhance soil formation, prevent erosion, and contribute to water management by reducing stormwater runoff. Furthermore, these spaces offer aesthetic and recreational opportunities, fostering a sense of place and cultural identity for urban residents. In sum, urban forests are indispensable in creat-



ing sustainable, equitable, and livable cities for present and future generations.

Despite numerous initiatives aimed at urban forestry and greening, many African cities continue to fall significantly short of their long-term goals, facing multiple barriers to achieving sustainable impact. Key challenges include conducting cost-benefit analyses that adequately account for the long-term costs of maintaining urban forests, navigating complex land tenure systems, and limited enforcement of environmental regulations. Many cities also operate under outdated legal frameworks, which hinder the development of comprehensive urban forestry policies. Furthermore, insufficient monitoring mechanisms, the absence of long-term management plans, and poor implementation of existing policies all contribute to the persistent underperformance of urban greening initiatives.

Integrating forestry into broader urban planning remains a major challenge, as the sector is often viewed as separate from mainstream urban development. Historical legacies of colonialism exacerbate these difficulties, perpetuating inequities in the distribution of green spaces. Poor and marginalized communities, including residents of informal settlements, typically have far less access to green spaces than their affluent counterparts. These inequities are further reinforced by environmental decision-making processes that often exclude disadvantaged groups, concentrating power among elites and technocrats. Another critical issue is the limited involvement of local communities in the management of urban green spaces. Top-down planning process-

es, dominated by experts and decision-makers, frequently overlook the value of indigenous knowledge in conserving and managing these areas. This lack of community participation leads to disconnection and poor stewardship of green spaces, exacerbating the depletion and mismanagement of these vital urban resources.

Addressing these challenges requires not only stronger legal and policy frameworks but also inclusive governance approaches that integrate urban forestry into broader city planning efforts. Engaging communities, particularly those in disadvantaged areas, and valuing indigenous knowledge are essential steps to ensuring the long-term success and equitable distribution of green spaces in African cities.

Amidst these challenges, the ongoing global COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the critical intersection of urban health and the role of urban forests. The pandemic has emphasized the importance of resilient and healthy urban environments in safeguarding public well-being. Learning from the experiences of COVID-19, it becomes evident that urban forests play a crucial role in enhancing urban health by providing spaces for physical activity, reducing stress, and contributing to overall well-being.

Contributing to the complexities are three factors: a lack of knowledge sharing, collaboration, and prioritization of equity.

A key challenge in advancing urban forestry across Africa is the lack of localized knowledge regarding the specific dynamics of urban

forests, such as their spatial extent and unique characteristics. Given the continent's vast size—spanning 52 countries with diverse ecosystems ranging from forests to deserts—it is difficult to generalize urban forestry practices across the region. Africa's economic diversity, with GDP per capita ranging from USD 220 in Burundi to USD 8,600 in Gabon, further complicates the uniform application of urban forestry policies. This diversity results in varying needs, financing structures, expertise, coverage, and drivers for urban forestry initiatives.

The benefits derived from urban forests are significantly shaped by local factors, including species diversity (both indigenous and exotic), community composition, and regional environmental characteristics such as vegetation greenness, temperature, and the degree of urbanization. These localized differences underscore the need for tailored, context-specific conservation and sustainable use strategies, as well as governance frameworks that address the unique environmental and socio-economic conditions in different African cities.

Another major barrier is the limited opportunities for urban forestry practitioners to convene in forums where they can exchange knowledge, share experiences, and disseminate best practices. More forums are needed to foster transparent dialogue and collaboration among stakeholders, cities, and countries across Africa. These platforms would enable the development of effective governance, management, and policy models that respond to the distinct challeng-

es and opportunities presented by urban forestry in African cities.

Equity must also be prioritized in urban forest use and management, particularly as a means of enhancing biodiversity. A decolonized approach to urban forestry requires reexamining existing power structures, acknowledging indigenous knowledge systems, and integrating Africa's rich cultural diversity into the planning and management of urban forests. This inclusive approach promotes social justice, sustainability, and the equitable distribution of green spaces across all communities.

Overall, addressing these challenges requires joint efforts to unpack underlying issues and identify opportunities for long-term collaboration and knowledge sharing. By fostering collective action, African cities can implement effective urban forestry and green space programs that support sustainability, social equity, and biodiversity.

The 2nd African Forum on Urban Forests

The 2nd African Forum on Urban Forests, organized by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the City of Johannesburg Metropolitan, United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), and the Centre on African Public Spaces (CAPS), in collaboration with other partners. This year's theme, "Green Horizons: Shaping the Future Resilience of African Cities through Urban Forests," is critical for the future of urban forests in Africa. Reflected in the three sub-themes, namely Climate-proofing African cities; Equitable access, health and well-being; and, Making the business case for urban forest, the aim of the event is to focus on the role of urban forests and green public spaces in creating just and livable cities in Africa.

The event seeks to convene key stakeholders, including representatives of local and national governments, the private sector, non-governmental organizations, research and academic institutions, community groups, and urban professionals across different sectors in in-depth conversations that stimulate innovative ideas, and inspire concrete actions to integrate urban forests and green spaces at the core of urban planning and development.

The in-person event provides an invaluable platform for city practitioners and professionals to exchange their valuable experiences on this subject, utilizing various means such as presentations and roundtables. Building upon the success of the 1st African Forum on Urban For-

ests (2021) and the outcomes of the 2nd World Forum on Urban Forests (2023), this forum is envisioned as an opportunity to take stock and assess the progress of urban forestry initiatives across the continent, while charting the path for future advancements.

Moreover, the forum provides an opportunity to examine Africa's contribution to global discussions, frameworks, and commitments. These include the New Urban Agenda, Sustainable Development Goals, the FAO Green Cities Initiative, the UN-Habitat's Biodiverse and Resilient Cities Resolution, national commitments to climate action, and the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF). Central to these discussions is the exploration of how African Cities can effectively integrate, manage and maintain urban forests and green spaces for improved health and well-being of their urban communities.

During the forum, the creation of an African Nature-Based Solutions Network with a dedicated Community of Practice on Urban Forests will also be discussed with the aim of fostering collaboration and knowledge exchange among policymakers, researchers, and other relevant stakeholders to follow up on the outcomes/recommendations from the event and to inspire joint efforts that can result in the development of more effective strategies for urban forest management.

Forum Theme

The theme for the Second African Urban Forestry Forum (AFUF), “Green Horizons: Shaping the Future Resilience of African Cities through Urban Forests,” encapsulates a bold vision for sustainable development and growth in Africa’s urban areas. It promotes an environmentally conscious, forward-looking approach that aims to build cities resilient to the challenges of climate change, rapid urbanization, and socio-economic inequality. This theme emphasizes a proactive and strategic stance in shaping the future of urban forestry across the continent, with a focus on innovation, comprehensive planning, and targeted actions that will transform urban landscapes for generations to come.

The sub-themes of the Forum focus on three critical areas of urban forestry:

1. **Climate-proofing African Cities:** This sub-theme prioritizes climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies, positioning urban forests as essential tools for enhancing the climate resilience of African cities. Contributions under this sub-theme will highlight innovative strategies for climate-proofing urban areas through the integration of urban forests and green spaces. Sessions will showcase the critical role these spaces play in mitigating the impacts of extreme weather events, reducing the urban heat island effect, improving air quality, and managing stormwater. Discussions will also focus on the integration and management of resilient infrastructure through adaptive urban plan-

ning, emphasizing the use of nature-based solutions and policy frameworks that prioritize the preservation and expansion of green spaces. Furthermore, the sessions will address disaster risk reduction strategies to safeguard cities against the growing challenges posed by climate change, ensuring sustainable and resilient urban development across Africa.

2. **Equitable Access, Health, and Well-being:** Urban forests play a pivotal role in enhancing public health and well-being by providing accessible green spaces that encourage physical activity, promote mental health, and foster social cohesion. This sub-theme emphasizes the importance of ensuring that all urban residents, particularly marginalized communities, have equitable access to the myriad benefits these green spaces offer. By leveraging urban forests and green spaces, we can promote public health and well-being in African cities while ensuring that these advantages are distributed fairly across all communities. Urban forests not only improve air quality but also offer opportunities for recreation, physical activity, stress reduction, and mental health enhancement. However, the benefits of these spaces are often unequally distributed, disproportionately disadvantaging vulnerable populations. This Forum will explore evidence-based strategies, indigenous knowledge systems, and inspiring practices to design, distribute, and manage urban forests in ways that maximize

their benefits and rectify existing disparities. By targeting underserved areas, the discussions will highlight how urban forestry can contribute to poverty alleviation through job creation, improved living conditions, and enhanced food security. Through collaborative efforts, we aim to create more equitable and healthier urban environments that empower all communities.

3. **Making the Business Case for Urban Forests:** A thriving urban forestry sector necessitates sustainable financing and investment to unlock its full potential. This sub-theme emphasizes the economic opportunities that urban forests offer, promoting collaboration between the public and private sectors to drive investment in green infrastructure. By showcasing the long-term financial returns associated with urban greening initiatives, this sub-theme highlights the significant economic impact of urban forests in African cities, particularly concerning local development. Discussions will focus on the role of urban forests in income generation and enhancing eco-tourism, thereby stimulating local businesses and creating job opportunities. Furthermore, urban forests are known to elevate property values and attract real estate investments, contributing to a vibrant economic landscape. Their economic advantages extend beyond direct financial gains; they also play a crucial role in climate change mitigation, reduce energy costs, and enhance public health, all of which lead to

cost savings and long-term economic stability. By presenting successful cases of public-private partnerships, innovative financing mechanisms, and supportive policy frameworks, this sub-theme advocates for urban forests as sustainable investments that can foster inclusive economic growth across African cities. Through these collaborative efforts, we can ensure that urban forestry becomes a key driver of economic vitality and resilience in urban areas.

In addition to these core sub-themes, the Forum will incorporate cross-cutting themes of gender, youth, governance, and peace, recognizing their essential roles in achieving sustainable urban forestry. Gender equality and youth engagement are critical to fostering inclusive growth, while good governance and peace are necessary to ensure that urban forestry initiatives are well-managed, equitable, and contribute to social stability. These nexus areas are of critical importance on the African continent and are integral to building resilient, inclusive, and sustainable cities.

The Second AFUF aims to not only advance dialogue but also inspire action by bringing together diverse stakeholders to shape policies, share best practices, and explore innovative solutions that will secure a greener, more resilient future for Africa's urban landscapes.

Forum Objectives

The Second AFUF provides a diverse multi-stakeholder platform to:

- Bring together a wider spectrum of actors to foster open discussions on urban forestry, to promote knowledge sharing for actionable results.
- Evaluate the advancements made by various stakeholders since the inaugural African Forum on Urban Forests in July 2021.
- Formulate practical strategies for achieving sustainable urban forestry across the continent.
- Showcase inspiring examples of best practices to encourage widespread adoption of urban greening initiatives across the continent.
- Build capacity among the participants, through workshops, covering topics such as conducting tree inventories, mapping alien invasive species, and developing advocacy campaigns for stewardship of urban forests.
- Explore how cities integrate urban forestry in urban planning and wider policy processes.
- Facilitate collaboration between different spheres of governments, civil society organisations, academia, the private sector, and local communities to ensure equitable access to urban green spaces in Africa.
- Facilitate a roundtable discussion on resource mobilization to garner investment commitments and partnerships from development finance institutions, private sector entities, philanthropic organizations, and other funding sources.

Intended Outcomes

The intended outputs of the Forum are as follows:

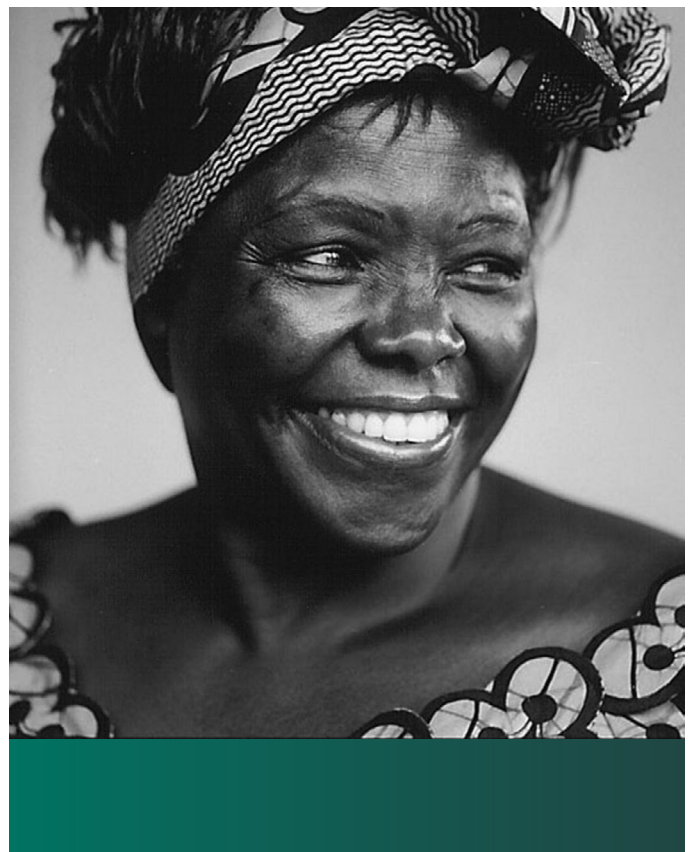
- Establish an African Nature-Based Solutions Network as part of the Centre on Africa Public Spaces, with a dedicated Community of Practice on Urban Forests to foster collaboration and knowledge exchange and inspire joint efforts to develop more effective, resilient strategies for urban forest management that address the impacts of climate change.
- Formulate actionable strategies and policy recommendations that can be implemented across various levels, from local communities to national governments, thus contributing to the protection, expansion, and enhancement of Africa's urban forests.
- Foster commitment in terms of investments and partnerships from domestic and international finance institutions, private sector entities, philanthropic organizations and other funding sources to catalyze innovation and mobilize resources that empower African cities to reverse urban forest depletion and green space loss.

Forum Format

The Forum will be structured into a comprehensive program that includes traditional formats such as plenaries, parallel sessions, roundtables, panels, training sessions, exhibitions, pre-conference webinars, a poster session, and side events. Additionally, it will incorporate innovative and engaging elements, including a reception dinner, a tribute to Wangari Maathai, tree planting activities, a green careers expo, and field visits. These elements are designed to inspire creativity, foster networking, and enhance overall engagement among participants.

Celebrating Wangari Maathai: A Tribute Dinner

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Green Careers Expo

On the final day of the event, March 21, 2025, the Green Careers Expo will take place at Ivory Regional Park. This date is particularly significant as it coincides with both South Africa's Human Rights Day and the International Day of Forests, which this year is themed "Forests and Foods." This alignment underscores the importance of social equity and environmental stewardship, highlighting how sustainable practices can enhance both community rights and ecological health.

Ivory Regional Park was strategically chosen for the expo following a comprehensive heat assessment study conducted by the City of Johannesburg and the World Bank. This study revealed a substantial shortage of trees in the area, which contributes to increased urban heat and diminished air quality. By hosting the Green

Careers Expo in this location, the event aims to address these pressing environmental challenges while simultaneously engaging the community in meaningful discussions about the vital role of urban forestry.

The Green Careers Expo is designed to connect communities with the African Forum on Urban Forestry (AFUF), facilitating interaction and promoting awareness of green careers, job opportunities, and sustainable practices. This event will serve as a platform for local residents, especially students and young people, to learn about potential career paths in environmental management, urban planning, and related fields. Various exhibitors will showcase successful initiatives, organizations, and businesses dedicated to promoting sustainability and environmental conservation.

Tree planting and fruit tree distribution

Following the Green Careers Expo, delegates and attendees will engage in a tree planting event where they will distribute fruit trees to community members and schools within Ivory Regional Park. This initiative not only emphasizes the importance of enhancing urban green spaces but also actively involves local residents in efforts to improve their environment. By providing fruit trees, the program aims to foster a sense of ownership and responsibility towards nature while promoting sustainable practices within the community.

Site Tours

To conclude the conference, delegates will participate in guided site tours throughout Johannesburg, offering a unique opportunity to explore the city's various greening initiatives and appreciate its strides in environmental progress. These immersive tours will showcase key projects and programs aimed at enhancing urban forestry and promoting sustainability within the community. Participants will visit notable green spaces, community gardens, and innovative urban forestry projects that illustrate the city's commitment to increasing tree cover and enhancing biodiversity.

Forum Organisers



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