

The Race to Resilience Culture (RTRC)

Normalizing the Inclusion of Culture in Climate Action



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

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THE RACE TO RESILIENCE CULTURE (RTRC) — NORMALIZING THE INCLUSION OF CULTURE IN CLIMATE ACTION

The Race to Resilience Culture (RTRC) initiative—co-hosted by ICLEI USA and ICLEI Africa —is making great strides to demonstrate and normalize the inclusion of culture, heritage and the arts in climate planning. Across continents and coastlines, from bustling cities to historic municipalities, **31 communities** have come together through RTRC. What connects them is more than shared climate risk, but a shared belief: that resilience begins with culture, is guided by equity, and must be led by the people. In open dialogue and collective reflection, local leaders surfaced their most pressing challenges, such as flooding and sea level rise, extreme heat, housing displacement, and the erosion of essential services and green spaces. Whether facing crumbling infrastructure in urban centers or rising tides along coastlines, communities echoed a powerful truth: survival depends not only on systems, but on stories. In response, communities are turning to what they know best, including their heritage, traditions, and creativity. Across the cohort, we saw a striking alignment in priorities through **Cultural education, traditional knowledge, nature-based solutions, Creative arts, storytelling, and land stewardship.**

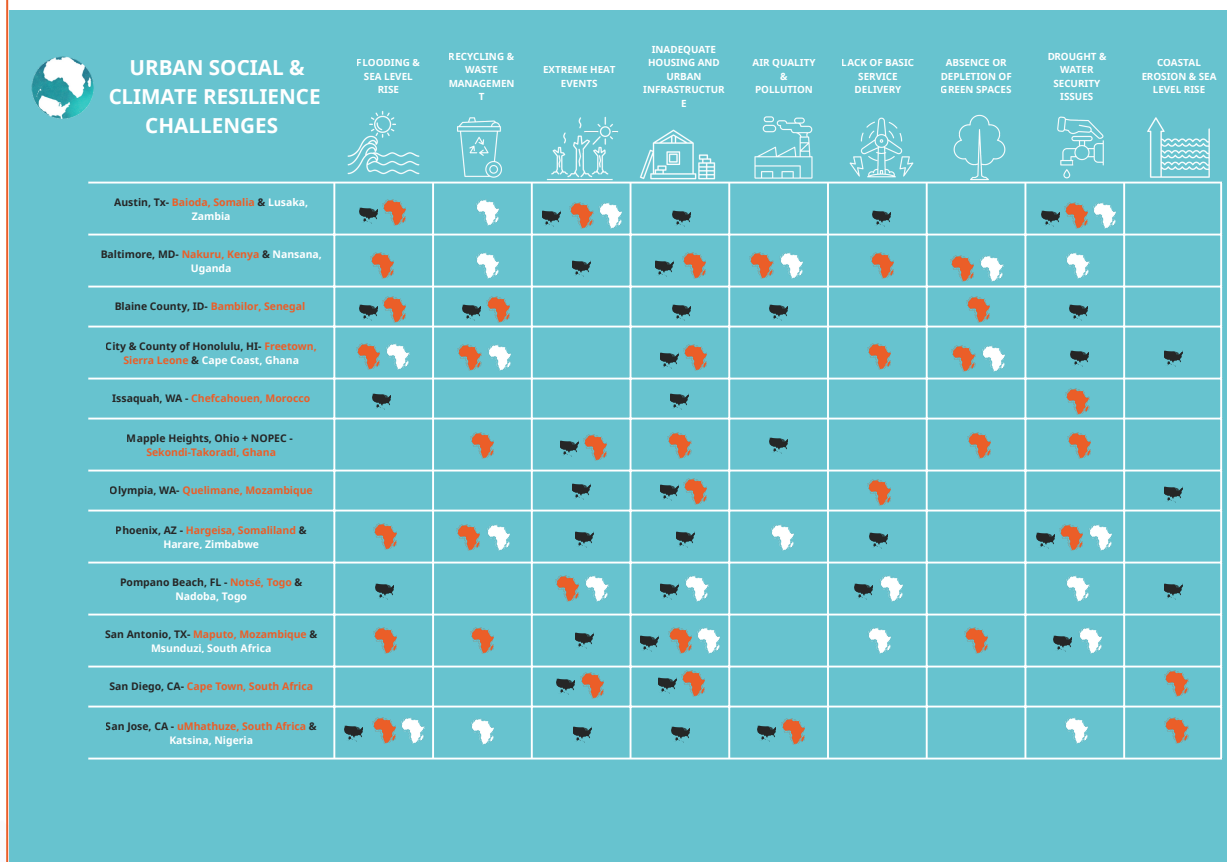


Chart showing overlapping resilience challenges facing communities in both Africa and the U.S.



CULTURAL AND HERITAGE PRIORITIES

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT,
EDUCATION, AND EQUITY



TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE
& PRACTICES



NATURE-BASED
SOLUTIONS



THE ARTS



LAND MANAGEMENT
AND/OR AGRICULTURE







































	COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT, EDUCATION, AND EQUITY	TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE & PRACTICES	NATURE-BASED SOLUTIONS	THE ARTS	LAND MANAGEMENT AND/OR AGRICULTURE
Austin, Tx- Baioda, Somalia & Lusaka, Zambia	  	 			 
Baltimore, MD- Nakuru, Kenya & Nansana, Uganda	 	  	  	 	 
Blaine County, ID- Bambilor, Senegal	 				 
City & County of Honolulu, HI- Freetown, Sierra Leone & Cape Coast, Ghana	 	 	  		 
Issaquah, WA - Chefcahouen, Morocco	 				
Maple Heights, Ohio + NOPEC - Sekondi-Takoradi, Ghana	 	 			
Olympia, WA- Quelimane, Mozambique	 				
Phoenix, AZ - Hargeisa, Somaliland & Harare, Zimbabwe	  	  	  	 	 
Pompano Beach, FL - Notsé, Togo & Nadoba, Togo	  		  	 	  
San Antonio, TX- Maputo, Mozambique & Msunduzi, South Africa	  	 	 	 	
San Diego, CA- Cape Town, South Africa	 			 	
San Jose, CA - uMhathuze, South Africa & Katsina, Nigeria	 	  	 	 	

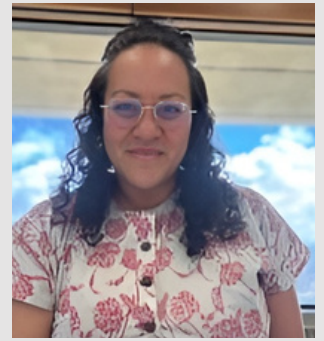
Chart illustrating overlapping cultural and heritage priorities identified in African and U.S. communities.

On May 21, RTRC's virtual learning sessions focused on Traditional and Indigenous Knowledge. Emily Makini, the Climate Equity Manager for the City and County of Honolulu, presented on Traditional and Indigenous Knowledge and illuminated the transformative power of ancestral wisdom in today's fight against climate change. Far from being remnants of the past, these knowledge systems offer time-tested, place-based solutions deeply intertwined with cultural identity and community values. The presentation underscored how Indigenous practices—rooted in a profound understanding of local ecosystems—can guide sustainable land and water management, disaster preparedness, and ecological restoration. When honored and integrated with modern science, rather than tokenized, traditional knowledge becomes a powerful tool for inclusive, resilient, and culturally grounded climate action. At its core, the message was clear: true resilience is not imposed—it is inherited, lived, and co-created by communities who have always been stewards of their environment.

Stacy Vynne McKinstrey, Sustainability Manager at the City of Issaquah, shared an evolving story of how the city is working to build meaningful partnerships with the Snoqualmie Tribe in climate action and urban planning. Rooted in the ancestral lands of Coast Salish peoples, including the Snoqualmie and possibly Sammamish tribes, the city acknowledges a complex history of displacement and delayed recognition. Moving beyond token consultation, Issaquah has begun fostering genuine collaboration by listening to the Tribe's preferred modes of engagement—holding one-on-one meetings, integrating Tribal voices into planning committees, and sharing resources for climate projects. This partnership now extends into wildfire preparedness, forest restoration, and public art initiatives like the Ancestral Lands Movement, demonstrating how honoring Indigenous sovereignty and knowledge can enrich both ecological resilience and community healing.

In June's session, Climate Vulnerability and Risk was the primary focus, and Nicolas Gate, Professional Officer at ICLEI Africa, presented a collaborative effort between INACCT, ICLEI Africa, and local communities that is reshaping how Beira, Mozambique builds resilience. With nearly 70% of its population living in informal settlements, Beira faces chronic flood risks, limited infrastructure, and institutional gaps. Community-driven mapping, updated flood models, and Photovoice storytelling have

illuminated lived realities in neighborhoods like Ndunda and Mungassa. Local Disaster Risk Management Committees, although stretched thin, play a pivotal role—engaging residents, collecting data, and driving grassroots innovation. Despite limited government capacity, infrastructure improvements like World Bank-funded drainage systems and a tidal barrage offer a foundation for resilience. Beira's story is one of vulnerability—but also of ingenuity, participation, and the transformative power of locally anchored climate action.



From left to right: Stacy Vynne McKinstrey, Sustainability Manager, City of Issaquah, WA; and Emily Makini, Climate Equity Manager, City and County of Honolulu, HI.



From left to right: Nicolas Gate, Professional Officer, Climate Change Resilience & Disaster Risk Reduction, ICLEI Africa; and Estelle Naidoo, Project Manager, Environmental Planning Department, City of uMhlathuze, South Africa.

The City of uMhlathuze in South Africa is taking bold strides in its journey toward climate resilience by anchoring community participation and cultural relevance at the heart of its Climate Change Action Plan (CCAP). Estelle Naidoo, Project Manager for the Environmental Planning Department, shared how the city is leveraging its rich biodiversity (including vital carbon sinks and a high number of endangered species) and simultaneously confronting serious threats like industrial pollution, fossil fuel dependence, and unplanned development in ecologically sensitive areas. The city has empl-

oyed innovative, inclusive methods such as community-driven flood mapping in the eSikhaleni neighbourhood and a school competition that engaged youth in visualizing climate threats and solutions. These efforts are feeding into the development of a neighborhood-level CCAP, built on rigorous risk and vulnerability assessments, interviews, site visits, and a series of participatory workshops. With a comprehensive implementation strategy that includes stakeholder validation, institutional alignment, and a strong reporting and funding framework, uMhlathuze is not only revising its 2018 CCAP but reimagining climate resilience through the lens of local knowledge and collective action.

Finally in July, Nature-Based Solutions was the overarching theme, emphasizing their role in addressing climate challenges while integrating cultural values. Nakuru County, located in Kenya's Rift Valley, is pioneering a culture-based approach to resilience by integrating Nature-Based Solutions (NBS) into its environmental and community development strategies. Grace Karanja, Director of Environment, Natural Resources and Climate Change, shared that while Nakuru County is faced with climate variability, urban growth, and natural resource degradation, the county leverages its rich ecosystems and cultural heritage to implement solutions that restore landscapes, enhance food and water security, and promote biodiversity. Initiatives such as agroforestry, riparian reforestation, the use of traditional farming calendars, and the protection of sacred forest sites reflect a holistic model where indigenous knowledge and scientific practices merge to support sustainability. The inclusion of youth, women, and persons with disabilities in these efforts fosters community ownership and equity in environmental stewardship.

What distinguishes Nakuru's approach is its foundation on three core pillars: cultural intelligence, participatory design, and knowledge fusion. Projects like the revitalization of Lions Gardens, the promotion of eco-tourism at Lake Nakuru, and the restoration of wetland buffers demonstrate how ecological and cultural priorities can align. Through community co-creation, climate storytelling, and cultural festivals, Nakuru has successfully made environmental protection a shared social value. The county's experience offers a compelling example of how resilience efforts rooted in local identity and inclusive engagement can deliver both ecological integrity and social cohesion.



Guest speaker: Grace Karanja, Director of Environment, Energy, Natural Resources & Climate Change, County Government of Nakuru, Kenya.



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Erick Schambarger presented Milwaukee's Water-Centric City initiative, which aims to promote sustainable water management while recognizing the cultural significance of water. He outlined guiding principles for the initiative, including collaboration with local universities and public awareness campaigns regarding water quality. Schambarger detailed successful projects, such as rain gardens and the transformation of the river walk, which have improved water quality and public spaces. He also discussed ongoing efforts to address pollution and reduce plastic waste through community initiatives and a comprehensive green infrastructure plan.

Marc Coudert from Austin addressed the disparities in green infrastructure and habitat conservation between different areas of the city, particularly highlighting the challenges faced by East Austin. He emphasized the need for equitable planning and community engagement to ensure that investments benefit underserved neighborhoods. Coudert outlined Austin's strategic goals for enhancing natural systems to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions, including increasing tree canopy coverage and adapting urban forestry plans. The session concluded with an interactive discussion on barriers to funding nature-based solutions, where participants shared insights on the economic impacts of cultural investments and the importance of community input in these initiatives.



From left to right: Erick Schambarger, Director of Environmental Sustainability, City of Milwaukee, WI; and Marc Coudert, Climate Adaptation & Resilience Manager, City of Austin, TX.

Cities are demonstrating that culture-and-heritage-based strategies for resilience are more than just strategies, they're acts of reclamation and empowerment. Communities are restoring relationships with land and ancestors, building intergenerational knowledge, and ensuring that climate action reflects who they are and who they are becoming, not just what they face.

Through RTRC, we're seeing a global mosaic of adaptation—diverse, grounded, and deeply human. As these cities shape their future, they're proving that the path to resilience doesn't start with technology or policy alone. It starts with culture, and it belongs to everyone.