UN-HABITAT

Optimizing the Potential of Intermediary Cities for Urban-rural Synergy and Territorial Resilience in East Africa

APRIL 2024

REPORT

While the world, and especially Africa, is rapidly urbanizing, the development divide between rural and urban human settlements continues to expand. Urbanization has been widely acknowledged for its transformative power, but even then urban and rural areas depend on each other in myriad ways. Rural areas often lag behind and worldwide, as almost 80 per cent of the global poor still live in there. These trends will continue unless new integrated territorial approaches are taken that balance urban and rural development. New policy options should be considered to address these challenges and opportunities to align development of the surrounding peri-urban with rural areas.[1]

In the context of rapid urbanization in Africa, intermediary cities[2] (ICs) are now the fastest growing category of urban areas. They are also the cities' most closely associated with surrounding rural communities and smaller towns, giving ICs a pivotal role in strengthening urban-rural linkages.

Intermediary cities are especially well positioned to facilitate the intersection and flows of rural goods and urban services. they are the emerging categories of urban areas in support of the planet's resilience, especially through sustainable food systems and healthy ecosystems, and more importantly, as models of balanced territorial development.

In this context, from 17 to 19 April 2024, UN-Habitat organized an expert group meeting (EGM) in Jinja, Uganda, to take a closer look at the relationships of intermediary cities to selected thematic and convergent arenas: food flows or value chains, biodiversity of soil and nature that food systems depend on, the digital solutions and e-commerce tools that are increasingly important as well as opportunities for cooperation between urban and rural authorities.

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1. Read more here.
2. UN-Habitat and OECD co-developed a report, Intermediary Cities and Climate Change: An Opportunity for Sustainable Development, define intermediary cities as: "small and medium-sized cities that play an intermediation role by connecting urban and rural areas. They act as hubs for the provision of goods and services and the structuring of urban-rural linkages, thereby providing a conducive environment for job creation and income diversification." (page 16)

The EGM had the active participation of participants from 10 international organizations, 10 national and local governments, 5 academic institutions and 5 nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The participants' profiles for the EGM provided a wide spectrum of knowledge, experience, and thematic diversity, all related to intermediary cities and urban-rural linkages. The meeting was designed to harness the experience, perspectives, and continuous involvement of attendees through presentations in plenary keynotes and presentations in thematic sessions, followed by group sessions. The outcome was a rich discussion where participants explored the various themes of the EGM and identified gaps, opportunities, and proposed actions to optimize the role of intermediary cities in strengthening urban-rural linkages.

Participants following conclusion of Day One of the Expert Group Meeting © UN-Habitat

Key Highlights from Day One

Welcome and opening statements

The gathering began with a warm welcome from **Angella Baligeya**, representing Jinja District Local Government. She informed participants of Jinja's promotion to city status in 2020, which meant the subsequent inclusion of rural communities in its governance structure. She highlighted the challenges of this integration, stressing the city's aim for inclusivity. She also emphasised the importance of tourism and agriculture in fostering community cohesion.
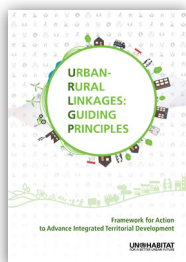
Remy Sietchiping from UN-Habitat followed with opening remarks recognizing the significance of urban-rural linkages (URLs) and intermediary cities (ICs) in the broader agenda for sustainable development.

He emphasized the importance of the EGM in the evolution of the urban-rural linkages work and also for intermediary cities. He noted how a key past milestone - the 2015 Monteria Communique - paved the way for development of the Urban-Rural Linkages Guiding Principles and Framework for Action (URL-GP), as well as the UN Habitat Assembly Resolution passed in 2019. He went on to describe UN-Habitat's progress since then, including supporting 13 countries to incorporate URLs into policies and frameworks.

Remy welcomed participants from various East African countries and international partners, underscoring the collaborative effort towards inclusive urban and territorial development.

Urban-Rural Linkages Guiding Principles and Framework for Action (URL-GP)

In her keynote presentation on the context for the EGM, **Firdaous Oussidhoum**, from UCLG, highlighted the current situation of global urbanization to be harnessed through different global agendas, and how Africa's local reality could play a significant role in bridging the gap between the developed countries and the countries in development. Africa's significant role in global urbanization, brings challenging figures while it is a fertile territory for solutions to be scaled up: its abundant solutions, creativity, and its gift of the "human dimension" to development and impact on growth.

She stressed the need for urban development to harmonize with ecosystems to ensure sustainable life systems for present and future generations. Addressing challenges of feeding human settlements, managing waste and ecosystem services, she advocated for resilient rural practices and climate-resilient infrastructure, linking it to the restoration of nature and biodiversity, benefiting from resources from the loss and damage mechanism, to restore territories from the impacts of climate change. Firdaous emphasized the importance of intermediary cities as bridges between urban, rural, and natural environments, promoting deep rural-urban synergy and pioneering climate-positive environments through policies. She called for a horizontal way to address the spheres of governance as an approach to multilevel governance and optimized local land management to maintain global equilibrium, aligning local actions with global agendas like the 2030 Agenda with the SDGs, the New Urban Agenda, and the Rio Conventions addressing biodiversity, desertification and climate change.

Additionally, she highlighted systemic challenges such as gender equality, balanced territorial development, migration, human rights, and food systems as critical transversal considerations as entry points to address local realities in governance and decision-making.

Opening Presentations

1. CURLA

Isaac Mwangi, Director of the Centre for Urban-Rural Linkages in Africa (CURLA) introduced CURLA to participants, presenting the centre's role in bridging the gap between academia and governance. He described the center's focus including research, capacity development, youth mentorship and policy dialogues. He also underscored inter-institutional partnerships as crucial for advancing research on URLs, fostering policy implementation dialogue and providing relevant research and data collection support for local and subnational governments. CURLA is helping to create liaisons between research centres across East Africa and other subregions of Africa.

2. East Africa Case Studies on Intermediary Cities

Nelly Babere, (Ardhi University, Tanzania) provided insights from East African case studies, collection and analysis in the convergence of food flows, biodiversity, and governance. Emphasis was made on the importance of agroecological zones and biodiversity management in intermediary cities like Mbeya and Arusha. The challenges of balancing urbanization and tradeoffs with environmental conservation were also discussed, along with the role of governance in ensuring sustainable development.
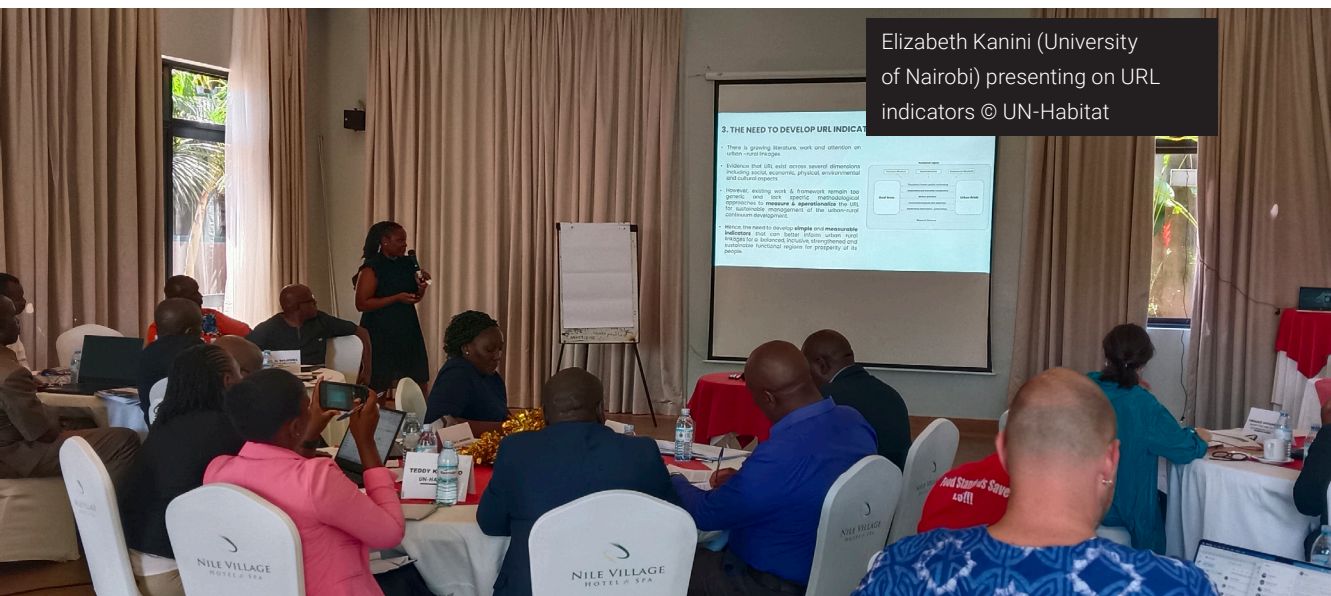
Session 1: Indicators for Urban-Rural Linkages

Ann Trevennen Jones, from the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN), opened the session as moderator, explaining why indicators for URLs are important, especially as they gain more attention at all governance levels. Indicators, she said, are inherently interdisciplinary, that they must be relevant and supportive of systems thinking, that human settlements are networks, and that indicators can help to bridge the urban-rural divide.

The first substantive session began with a presentation on the ongoing process of developing the indicators for urban-rural linkages. Delivered by **Elizabeth Kanini** (University of Nairobi), a consultant in the UN-Habitat Global Observatory unit, her presentation began by setting the context for URL indicators, relating this to the guiding principles of urban-rural linkages. The categories proposed for URL indicators include physical flows, socio-economic flows, material flows, technological flows, and policy and governance.

Following her insightful presentation, participants including representatives from Uganda's Ministry of Agriculture and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) shared questions and reflections, making suggestions for improvement of the URL indicators. Four groups followed the presented further recommendations for the indicators. These include consideration of digital technologies, scalability and contextualization, interactions between the indicators, and consideration to have global, regional, national and local indicators that relate to multilevel governance.

The session was summarized by **Nyasha Mutsindikwa** (University of Zimbabwe). He underscored the importance of understanding the institutional sources of indicators, historical and socio-political factors, infrastructure needs, varying administrative contexts and the hierarchy of settlement scales in different geographies.
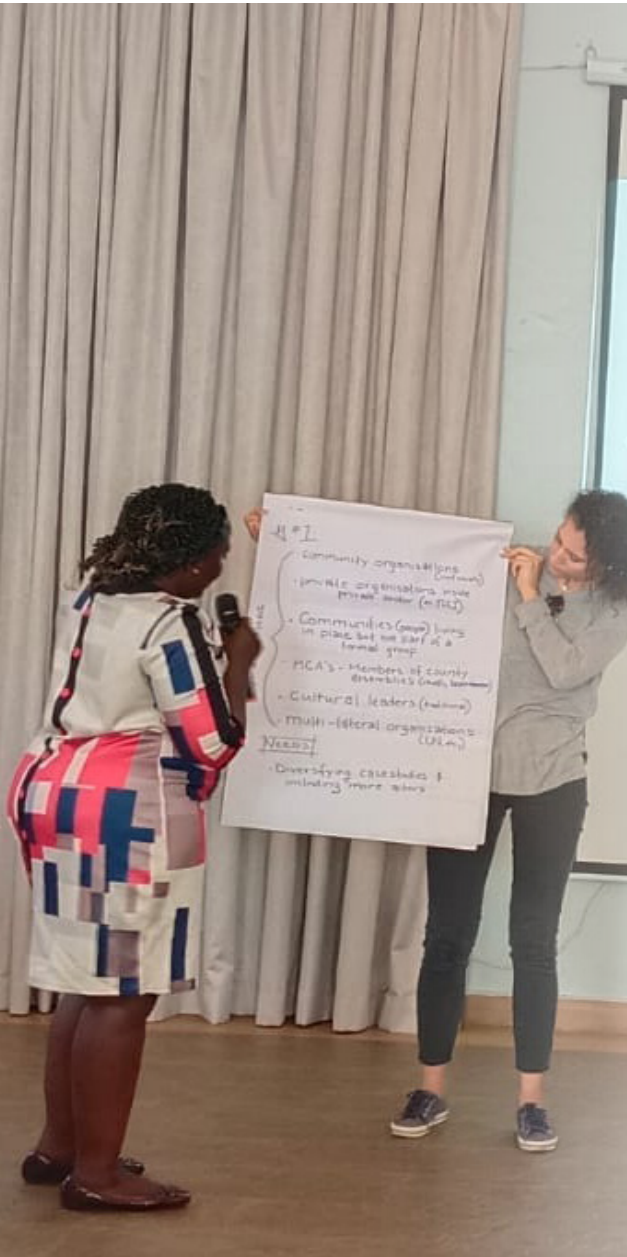

Elizabeth Kanini (University of Nairobi) presenting on URL indicators © UN-Habitat

Session 2: Digital Solutions and Urban-Rural Linkages

The second session explored the complexities of digital dimensions of urban-rural linkages and leveraging technology for inclusive development.

Oliver Hillel (Center for Excellence in Destinations) moderated the session, calling for participants to apply an understanding of digital solutions in the broader context looking beyond food to relevant major technological interventions across sectors, and including finance. He also reminded participants that there are social and political if not cultural constraints in the fact that technological solutions always come associated with products and mechanisms developed for certain purposes by its creators – not always pursuing the interests of the technology users.

Martina Baldessin ([UN Observatory on Digital Communication](#)) gave highlights from the recent Infopoverty conference in New York, USA, with a central focus on linking digital solutions to sustainable intensification of agriculture. An example shared was Planthead Platform, used for IT/AI adoption by small farmers and SMEs in East and West Africa.

Hannington Ochieng, a researcher at CURLA, followed with a presentation of a draft strategy paper on digital and e-commerce solutions for improved urban-rural food flows.

Groups discussing using guiding questions © UN-Habitat

The paper reviews areas of potential synergy between urban and rural spaces. It also highlights 10 strategic challenges and proposes responses such as capacity enhancements, financial inclusion, improved decision-making, resilience-building strategies, and enhancing digital literacy. Participants then shared reflections, a key one being the need for funding to apply the solutions.

Some of the points raised include understanding the proportion of consumers transacting online, the use of marketing and ecommerce applications to improve profit margins, access to mobile devices, data privacy, just-in-time information sharing, e-marketing platforms, increasing training on digital literacy, the role of governments, and in particular the role of intermediary cities as hubs of digital innovations benefiting both urban and rural areas.

Diverse examples were presented from the different cities in East Africa on innovative solutions supporting food actors in food production, disaster prediction, e-extension services, e-marketing, soil testing and more. These examples will go a long way in enriching the strategy paper by offering existing digital solutions that are working. Groups presented reflections in terms of challenges, benefits and interventions going forward.

Some of the proposed interventions centered around improving social and digital coordination, improving connectivity, expanding energy sources, improved adoption of digital solutions by governments, increasing accountability and data protection, increased awareness and inclusive policy frameworks to harness the potential of digital solutions in URLs for sustainable development.

The session was summarized by **Abdul Husaini** (Niger State Government, Nigeria), who underscored the collective use of digital tools to support the community in commercial activities, increasing digital literacy training for youth, applications of digital solutions in the context of informality, data dependability, and more community engagement to address the urban-rural disparities. Day One of the EGM concluded with a call for continued collaboration and innovation to address the complex challenges and opportunities available to intermediary cities in aiming for balanced territorial development.

Key insights from Day Two

The second day of the expert group meeting kicked off with a recap of the previous day. **Thomas Forster** (UN-Habitat) summarized the key messages and actions that arose from the various sessions. The EGM then launched into the third session of the meeting on biodiversity and urban-rural linkages.

Session 3: Biodiversity and urban-rural linkages

M'Lisa Lee Colbert (The Nature of Cities), moderator for the session, introduced The Nature of Cities (TNOC) as a convergence of good practice, policy and art. This convergence aims at addressing the looming economic, social, and environmental impacts of agriculture through a dynamic multimedia approach to reach new constituencies in the wider public.

Oliver Hillel (Center for Excellence in Destinations) set the stage for the session, summarizing a forthcoming white paper on the significance of informality for nature and cities in Africa. He delved into how urban informalities play a critical role in preserving urban green spaces across Africa, thus ensuring their use as development assets. The survival of Africa's rich biodiversity is at the centre of the relentless march of "metropolitanization" overtaking rural territories through their urban linkages. He went on to pose a question: could intermediary

cities (ICs) integrate harmoniously with nature, leveraging the gains of its informal yet sustainable use? He emphasized the urgent need to capitalize on the economic applications of the Food, Water, Energy, and Health Nexus (FWEHN) as proposed by IPBES and cutting-edge scientists for decentralized governance.

He also took time to advocate for innovative financing models, while reminding participants of Africa's competitive advantage in terms of its informality as an asset for redefining infrastructure through blue-green solutions. The white paper, soon to be published through Expertise France's Transformative Action series, argues the new wealth necessary for Africa's sustainable development will be generated by the greening of urban spaces through nature-based solutions to FWEHN challenges.

Participants were then invited to view a video from one of UN-Habitat's key partners on urban-rural linkages- Songyang County, China. Some of the key good practices stemming from the video include digitalization of processes, rural revitalization, honoring local culture and traditions, the acupuncture approach and working together with territorial residents.

Reflections from the cities

A series of reflections from representatives from East African cities followed, providing concrete examples and experiences on the impact of growth of the cities on biodiversity, agriculture and the rural environment.

Mwencha Nyasimi began with an overview of Nyamira County Kenya, noting trends such as development of "rural slums". He discussed challenges faced by Nyamira County in Kenya, where rapid urbanization is transforming land use and impacting ecosystems. He also outlined the urgent need for policy revisions and investment strategies aimed at protecting agricultural land and promoting urban and peri-urban

farming and conservation planning. **Leonard Mpanju,** (Ministry of Lands, Housing and Human Settlements, Tanzania) highlighted similar challenges in Arusha, emphasizing the encroachment of urban growth on farmland and on biodiversity. With examples, he called for balancing conservation efforts with urban development and emphasized the importance of local government initiatives in linking conservation and economic development. From Uganda, **Joseph Okee** (Ministry of Agriculture, Uganda), pointed out that Uganda is going through new planning processes that emphasizes agro-industrialization. This poses the question on how agroecology can be integrated with the national plan pushing agro-industrial development with monocultures. "The biodiversity of Uganda will be impacted by what kind of agriculture is supported by policy", he stated. He also emphasized the need to integrate agroecological approaches with national development plans.

He underscored the challenge of commercialization in agriculture and advocated for policies and approaches that promote both sustainability and profitability.
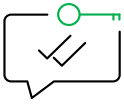
The session attracted a significant number of reflections in plenary from the group discussions. For example, **Kiggundu Amin** emphasized on the need for new imagination to create cities that truly integrate nature and cities, such a "forest cities'. **John Recha** proposed planning for land use incorporating standards of sustainability including urban agriculture, waste management, urban forests.

Kusiima Anita highlighted the challenges of encroachment on green areas and the importance of biodiversity in urban planning. **Isaac Mwangi** discussed land fragmentation, emphasizing community-driven approaches to address challenges.

Other participants underscored the necessity of reimagining cities as integrated ecosystems, where urban and peri-urban farming play pivotal roles. The challenges of encroachment on green spaces and the imperative to incorporate biodiversity considerations into urban planning were again highlighted.

Oliver Hillel then summed up the discussion with key takeaways:

» Depletion of natural capital/biomass is best measured at the local level.

» There is need and opportunity for productive cooperation by calling for international donors' humility - many of the solutions are already being developed in Africa.

» Understand the importance of local alliances, including informal ones.

» Importance of understanding the costs of loss and damage to biodiversity - needs to be delivered to the financial and actuarial system - new measuring of inaction to protect critical natural capital at territorial level and ignite action.

» As an example, look at the innovative Ugandan approach to tourism promotion - visiting a territory means visiting its people and cultural and natural environments.

Session 4: Intermediary City cooperation guide

The session was moderated by **Firdaous Oussidoum** (UCLG), who emphasized bringing these messages to the international level, including the World Forum on Intermediary Cities in January, 2025. She also reminded all that cooperation is not only between local authorities but also across other levels of governance.

Vicente Ruiz (OECD) then set the stage for this session, sharing reflections on multi-evel cooperation in intermediary cities. He also presented to participants results of a climate and intermediary cities report, highlighting the challenges of managing multiple issues in rapidly expanding ICs. He also stressed the need for a systems approach to address the multifaceted challenges posed by rapid urbanization and climate change.

Other key points raised include:

» Governance should address root causes;

» Capacity building is good but breaking silos is more important;

» Policy effectiveness must address both stocks and flows; and

» Governance efforts should consider shifts in mindsets.

Reflections from East African cities:

East African representatives then shared reflections on how cities cooperate within and with other cities/stakeholders (and national government). These presentations emphasized the need for a common framework to articulate the functional characteristics of intermediary cities in East Africa and facilitate cooperation across political boundaries. They also emphasized the need for cooperation, multi-stakeholder platforms, and peer-to-peer learning to address transboundary challenges. **Leonard Mpanju** from Tanzania reflected on the challenge of political boundaries and restrictions against trade in food products as well as underlying political and economic systems create barriers. **Michael Ayebazibwe** from Uganda shared on the multi-sector, multistakeholder platform created based on urban issues in Uganda.

Paul Currie during the AfriFoodLinks session © UN-Habitat

Paul Currie (ICLEI) then presented on AfriFOODILinks. His presentation also emphasized on peer-to-peer learning and exchange, with five clusters of 3-4 cities for direct physical exchanges, and providing spaces for legitimization, critique, and future partnerships.

This was followed by plenary reflections.

> **John Recha** reminded participants that public-private partnerships are important.

> **Nelly Babere** proposed developing a common framework, common language and common definitions to address transboundary challenges affecting intermediary cities.

> **Firdaous Oussidhoum** followed, remarking that the process has started with efforts to understand the functional roles of intermediary cities in different territories.

> **John Okee's** sentiments centered around on-the-ground impacts. For example, returning to post-harvest loss as an important issue for urban-rural linkages.

He noted the efficiency of value chains leading to retailers obtaining fresh produce from long supply chains instead of from local sources and short supply chains in East Africa.

Presentation of the Cooperation guide for Intermediary Cities

Sharon Onyango (CURLA) presented the draft cooperation guide for intermediary cities. The guide is organized around challenges and opportunities for food systems, market systems, biodiversity, and food security transformation. She also highlighted case studies (Kisumu-Kenya, Arusha-Tanzania and Arua-Uganda) as well as strategies for multi-stakeholder partnerships and policy considerations. Some of the proposed cooperation strategies include multi-stakeholder partnerships, policy and regulatory considerations, and innovative funding mechanisms.

She concluded with a call to action to enhance cooperation between intermediary cities:

» Evaluate existing policies and frameworks.

» Map existing market systems.

» Promote equal distribution of investments across formal and informal sectors.

» Harness the existing wide range of knowledge.

» Encourage behavioural change in national institutions.

» Consolidate local governance to reach global goals through multilevel governance.

The groups then shared their feedback on how to improve the draft guide. A common sentiment was inclusion of more stakeholders such as youth and women, different subnational levels (for example Uganda), development partners, professional associations, trade unions, vulnerable populations, and the private sector.

Groups also deliberated on these intermediary cities' challenges, priorities, tools, and approaches to include in the guide. These include building social capital into the guide, need to include FEWHN, budgetary support, interlevel coordination bodies, women and youth engagement, natural resource management, food loss and waste considerations, adding more case studies, interactive decision tools, creation of broad frameworks for intra-city collaboration, improving financial literacy, and cooperation mechanisms between government bodies.

The lists of actors, additional challenges and priorities for cooperation, and other tools and approaches will inform the finalization of the cooperation guide.

Conclusion

Grace Githiri (UN-Habitat) concluded Day 2 of the EGM. She began by delivering the closing remarks of Remy Sietchiping (UN-Habitat), who appreciated all participants for their involvement in the EGM. From his message, it was clear that the discourse on intermediary cities does not stop here, rather the EGM was a stepping stone for more continuing dialogue with all stakeholders to advance the role of intermediary cities in achieving balanced territorial development.

Grace Githiri also highlighted that the all the propositions and outcomes of the EGM would be integrated into the draft thematic guides and papers. The outcomes of the EGM would also feed into the forthcoming global events and processes, including the upcoming event held by The Nature of Cities (TNOC), the 12th World Urban Forum,

the 4th International Forum on Urban-Rural Linkages, and the 3rd UCLG World Forum of Intermediary Cities. Similarly, other UN-Habitat processes as the community of practices on urban-rural linkages would include the outcomes from this EGM.

Overall, the expert group meeting provided valuable insights into the complex challenges and opportunities for intermediary cities in Africa and highlighted the importance of integrating nature into urban development. The meeting provided a platform for stakeholders to exchange knowledge, share best practices, and chart a path towards more resilient, inclusive, and intermediary cities across Africa and beyond. Participants concluded the EGM with commitments to continue to collaborate on the issues presented and discussed in Jinja.