

Building Urban Climate Resilience in South-Eastern Africa (SEA)

Experiences and emerging lessons from project implementation



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This document captures the experiences and lessons learned from the *“Building Urban Climate Resilience in South-Eastern Africa (SEA)”* project, funded by the Adaptation Fund and led by UN Habitat in partnership with Oxfam. The SEA project was implemented across four cities: **Morondava (Madagascar), Zomba (Malawi), Chokwe (Mozambique), and Moroni (Union of Comoros)** from 2020 to 2024. The project aimed at enhancing *urban climate resilience* by empowering local communities and stakeholders to adapt to climate change through locally led adaptation strategies, targeted projects, and knowledge-sharing at the city, national, and regional levels. By addressing the growing challenges of climate change in urban environments, the SEA project has focused on developing adaptive capacities and fostering resilient urban systems.

The document specifically focuses on the lessons that emerged from the implementation of activities at the local level (23 initiatives ranging from early warning systems, rehabilitating mangroves, constructing and rehabilitating bridges and roads, constructing safe havens and improving solid waste management), for which Oxfam was responsible, with the aim of highlighting the richness of the themes addressed, the variety of initiatives, and the significant role played by Oxfam in engaging local communities.

The *Building Urban Climate Resilience in South-Eastern Africa (SEA)* project offers profound insights into fostering urban resilience through a holistic, inclusive, and adaptive approach. One of the central lessons from the initiative is the **pivotal role of stakeholder engagement and community ownership**. By involving stakeholders early and sustaining their participation throughout the project, the initiative built trust, clarified roles, and fostered co-ownership. This inclusive approach, grounded in continuous dialogue, proved essential for navigating challenges and maintaining flexibility, ensuring that the project could adapt to evolving circumstances while maintaining its relevance and effectiveness.

The project also underscored the **transformative potential of community-driven solutions**. Tailoring interventions to the specific needs of each city allowed for the development of locally relevant and sustainable strategies. By leveraging local knowledge and forging strong partnerships between communities and local governments, the project empowered residents to become active agents of change, fostering long-term impacts that extended beyond the project's duration.

Gender responsiveness emerged as a cornerstone of the project's success. The initiative went beyond surface-level inclusion, actively addressing systemic barriers that limit women's participation. By integrating gender considerations into every stage of the project and **creating opportunities for women to engage meaningfully**, the project not only fostered equity but also demonstrated that inclusive strategies are essential for achieving resilience.

Risk management was another critical area of focus. The project demonstrated the importance of **adopting flexible and anticipatory frameworks** capable of responding to economic disruptions, natural hazards, and other unforeseen challenges. Comprehensive baseline studies and realistic assessments ensured that interventions were feasible and aligned with local realities, laying the groundwork for sustainable and impactful outcomes.

The SEA project demonstrated that **urban resilience relies on collaboration, inclusivity, and adaptability**. Lessons learned underscore the importance of community engagement, gender equity, and robust risk management in addressing urban climate challenges. These insights serve as a guide for future resilience-building initiatives in similar contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Building urban climate resilience is a critical challenge facing cities in South Eastern Africa. With growing populations, expanding urban centers, and increasing climate change impacts, many cities in the region are struggling to adapt and become more resilient. In response, a 4-year project funded by the Adaption Fund and implemented by UN-Habitat, Oxfam, National and Local Governments and DiMSUR, was launched in 2020 to **support 4 cities in Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique, and Comoros to strengthen their climate resilience**.

The project “*Building Urban Climate Resilience in South Eastern Africa*” (SEA) has addressed these issues through a coordinated and integrated approach that leveraged the strengths of urban areas, ensuring that all communities could adapt and thrive in a changing climate. With the main goals of developing capacities and establishing conditions to adapt to the adverse effects of climate change in the 4 target cities of Morondava (Madagascar), Zomba (Malawi), Chókwè (Mozambique) and Moroni (Union of Comoros) and, to promote inter-country experience sharing and cross-fertilisation on the adaptation to transboundary climate-related natural hazards, the project acted at 3 main levels of interventions:

1. **City level:** Preparation, implementation, and sustainable management of 23 pilot initiatives at city level focusing on urban climate resilience.
2. **National Level:** Development of tools and guidelines, along with training delivery at the national governments and institutions.
3. **Regional Level:** Inter-country experience sharing, cross-fertilization, and dissemination of lessons learned.

This 4-year project sought to build adaptive capacities across four target cities by focusing on city, national, and regional interventions that addressed infrastructure, early warning systems, sustainable urban planning, agricultural adaptation, and institutional capacity-building.

This report analyzes the emerging lessons from the implementation of this project focusing mainly on the activities implemented at city level and led by Oxfam. The primary

objective of the report is to identify key achievements and lessons learned. The insights, challenges and learnings documented here draw directly from the on-the-ground experiences and perspectives of the country project staff, community members, and other key stakeholders involved in the project activities as well as from a desk review of the project document realised throughout the project implementation.

The report explores and analyse the data collected through 4 main areas: **Stakeholder Engagement and Community Ownership; Transformational Change; Gender-Responsive Interventions; Risk Management Systems**. For each thematic area, a specific exemplary case is given to capture deeper insights.

By sharing these emerging lessons, the report aims to **inform and guide future efforts to strengthen climate resilience in urban areas across the region**. The experiences and insights documented here can help city leaders, development practitioners, and other stakeholders develop more effective, locally-tailored approaches to this critical development challenge. This analysis aims to provide valuable insights that can guide future initiatives. The target audience for this learning product includes Oxfam Country Offices and Regions engaged in similar thematic areas or interested in implementing similar programs. Additionally, the report is intended for donors supporting urban resilience, disaster risk reduction, and anticipatory action.

The project in a nutshell

LEAD: UN-Habitat

PARTNERS: Oxfam, Southern Africa Development Community (SADC), Technical Centre for Disaster Risk Management, Sustainability and Urban Resilience (DiMSUR), Governments of Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique, and the Union of Comoros

DONOR: Adaptation Fund

DURATION: 4 years (2020 – 2024)

METHODOLOGY

The preparation of this report was guided by a participatory and multi-faceted methodological approach designed to harness the rich experience of local staff and the invaluable knowledge of local communities and stakeholders. A diversified approach was also necessary in order to analyse all key areas of the project:

- **Stakeholder Engagement and Community Ownership:** Examine the extent of stakeholder and community involvement in project design, implementation, and decision-making, and assess how this participation influenced project outcomes.
- **Transformational Change:** Assess the project's impact on the community's capacity to adapt to climate-related challenges, with a focus on sustainable, long-term outcomes over short-term solutions.
- **Gender-Responsive Interventions:** Evaluate the integration of gender considerations, focusing on whether the projects addressed the specific needs and priorities of women and marginalized groups and how these interventions contributed to overall resilience.
- **Risk Management Systems:** Review the effectiveness of risk management strategies, including the identification, mitigation, and management of climate-related and urban development risks.

These four areas were the ones that were considered essential to address, encompassing the planning, implementation and evaluation phase. Consequently, this report delves into the lessons that can be taken from the project's implementation, bearing these areas in mind.

The methodological approach therefore was a combination of quantitative research methods, including desk reviews and interviews, aimed at leveraging local experience and knowledge and to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the key factors influencing project implementation. Most common tools have been:

- **Desk Review.** An in-depth desk review was conducted to establish a foundation of knowledge based on existing literature, project reports, and policy documents. This helped identify key themes, trends, and knowledge gaps related to urban resilience in Southern Africa, as well as provide a contextual background for aligning insights with broader regional and global resilience and climate adaptation discussions.
- **Interviews with Staff and Stakeholders.** Interviews were conducted with Oxfam staff and key stakeholders involved in the project. These interviews were semi-structured, allowing for in-depth discussions on specific areas of interest while also providing flexibility for participants to share their insights and experiences. Topics explored included the effectiveness of implemented strategies, challenges encountered, and lessons learned from past and ongoing projects.
- **Interviews with Local Communities.** Interviews with community members, especially those in urban areas impacted by climate change, were central to the methodology. These conversations captured first-hand experiences, perceptions, and recommendations from community members regarding the project's impact on their daily lives, their roles in project activities, and the sustainability of interventions.
- **Data Analysis and Synthesis.** The data collected through interviews and desk reviews were systematically analysed using thematic analysis. This approach allowed for the identification of common themes, patterns, and lessons across different cities and contexts. The insights were then synthesized to draw conclusions and provide recommendations aimed at enhancing urban resilience in Southern Africa.

In conclusion, this methodological approach, rooted in participatory research and grounded in local realities, enabled the report to provide a well-informed analysis of urban resilience experiences and emerging lessons from project implementation.

EXPERIENCES AND EMERGING LESSONS FROM PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION

Stakeholder Engagement and Community Ownership

LESSON 1 | Early, inclusive, and sustained stakeholder engagement drives project success

In the project, the success of urban resilience initiatives was significantly bolstered by early, inclusive, and sustained stakeholder and community engagement. This approach was implemented through a series of multi-day learning opportunities across the 4 cities, designed as transdisciplinary sessions that brought together a diverse array of stakeholders. These included city planners, local councillors, community representatives, private sector actors, civil society organizations, researchers, and other interest groups. The goal of these sessions was to ensure that **all relevant voices were included in the conversation, fostering a holistic understanding of the issues at hand.**

The trainings identified key challenges and priorities, creating a collective vision for sustainable solutions. Importantly, discussions were led by local experiences and immediate needs rather than solely focusing on climate science. This ensured solutions were grounded in real-world contexts that were relatable for the audience. This **inclusive design promoted a “safe space”** where participants could freely share their views, with particular care taken to amplify marginalized voices and prevent imbalances in power dynamics, allowing for genuine accounts to be gathered, in order to move forward in an unbiased way.

The importance of this approach can be identified by the **high levels of respect, trust, and co-ownership it built among participants**, increasing the relevance and acceptance of interventions and enabling the development of lasting networks that extended beyond the project’s timeframe. In summary, early, inclusive stakeholder engagement was instrumental in developing a strong foundation of trust, ownership, and sustainable collaboration—essential elements for advancing long-term urban resilience.

In conclusion, the early, inclusive, and sustained stakeholder engagement strategy employed in the project was a critical factor in its success. By fostering an environment where diverse voices could contribute meaningfully to the project, the initiative was able to **build a strong foundation of trust, ownership, and lasting collaboration** - key elements that are essential for driving long-term urban resilience in Southern Africa.

LESSON 2 | Clear roles, capacities and responsibilities drives efficient project implementation

Efficient project implementation is fundamentally dependent on a **well-defined methodology** that delineates clear roles, capacities and responsibilities, especially in the case of multi-stakeholder approach. In the context of urban resilience projects, such clarity is essential to prevent delays during both the inception and execution phases. It is crucial that the roles and responsibilities of various entities—including civil society organizations, local governments, local authorities, national institutions, and local communities—are explicitly defined from the outset. This clarity ensures that all stakeholders understand their specific contributions, reducing the potential for overlaps, gaps, or misunderstandings that can hinder progress.

Initially, the project encountered delays due to unclear roles, which led to difficulty in implementation and dissatisfaction among team members involved on both the technical and financial. Specific meetings and documentation clarified these roles, resulting in positive impacts on project momentum. This foundation of defined roles facilitated close coordination between local and national stakeholders, enhancing alignment and mutual support. The **structured multi-stakeholder approach enabled the project to adapt to challenges and maximize resources** by tapping into a broad range of expertise. This highlighted the importance of clearly defining roles from the offset, particularly with an eye on future projects.

Building on this foundation, the project underscores the significance of a well-designed multi-stakeholder approach. Such an approach involves **close coordination with both local and national stakeholders**, ensuring that efforts are aligned and mutually reinforcing. This coordination is pivotal for monitoring progress, providing support, and engaging in ongoing discussions about existing initiatives at the local level. By bringing together a diverse array of stakeholders, the project can tap into a wide range of expertise, resources, and perspectives, enhancing its capacity to adapt to challenges and seize opportunities as they arise.

The framework also fostered continuous feedback and learning, allowing the project to respond to evolving community needs. By ensuring clarity from the outset and fostering coordinated partnerships, the project was better positioned to achieve its climate adaptation objectives efficiently and effectively.

In summary, the clear definition of roles and the establishment of a robust multi-stakeholder approach are critical drivers of efficient project implementation. By ensuring that each stakeholder knows their responsibilities and by fostering strong, coordinated partnerships across different levels of governance, the project is better equipped to **navigate complexities and achieve its climate change adaptation goals** in a timely and effective manner.

LESSON 3 | Continuous dialogue and flexibility improve adaptability

Continuous dialogue with partners and stakeholders and the flexibility to adapt to changing conditions are key factors in enhancing the adaptability and success of climate-resilient infrastructure projects. In dynamic and often unpredictable economic environments, maintaining an ongoing, open line of communication with all partners and stakeholders—ranging from local communities to governmental bodies and private sector partners—is essential. This continuous engagement allows for the timely identification of emerging challenges, the exchange of vital information, and the building of trust among all parties involved.

The experience from the project highlights the critical importance of **incorporating regular reviews into the project management process**. These reviews are essential for addressing challenges that arise from economic fluctuations, such as devaluation, cost inflation, and shifts in the economic landscape. By systematically revisiting project plans and budgets, the team can adjust to these economic realities, ensuring that the project remains viable and on track to meet its objectives. This proactive approach prevents small issues from escalating into major obstacles and allows for adjustments that align with the project's long-term goals.

Flexibility is another crucial element that underpins the project's adaptability. The **ability to pivot in response to unforeseen challenges**—whether they are economic, environmental, or social—demonstrates the resilience of the project framework. This flexibility is not just about reacting to changes, but also about being prepared to **revise strategies and reallocate resources as needed, without compromising the overall vision of the project**. For example, if a sudden economic downturn leads to significant cost increases, the project team can explore alternative funding sources, renegotiate contracts, or scale certain components to ensure continuity and sustainability.

Engaging project partners and stakeholders proactively in these adaptive processes further strengthens the project's resilience. When stakeholders are continuously involved and their feedback is integrated into decision-making, the project benefits from a diverse set of perspectives and expertise. This inclusive approach not only enriches the project's adaptability but also fosters a sense of shared responsibility among stakeholders, enhancing their commitment to the project's success.

In conclusion, continuous **dialogue and flexibility are indispensable for improving the adaptability of climate-resilient infrastructure projects**. By maintaining open communication channels, regularly reviewing project progress, and being willing to adapt to new challenges, the project team can navigate the

complexities of a changing environment. This approach ensures that the project remains relevant, effective, and sustainable, even in the face of unforeseen challenges.

CASE STUDY: COMOROS. THE POWER OF DIALOGUE FOR REVOLUTIONING THE DRAINAGE IN MORONI

The need for an efficient drainage system in Moroni goes back several years, after heavy rains and subsequent flooding affected the town every rainy season. The decision to build a drainage system to reduce the impact of flooding was therefore obvious and natural. The municipality, together with the community, civil society organisations and technical experts then identified La Coulée neighbourhood for this pilot initiative. The whole process was highly participative from the technical design phase to the selection of the company that would carry out the work, till the monitoring and maintenance after the finalisation. Validation workshops were held involving representatives of the Ministry of Regional Planning and the Municipality of Moroni, ensuring alignment with local needs, regulations, and environmental considerations. This collaborative approach fostered a sense of ownership among the different stakeholders involved.

The project's complexity was amplified by the need to construct a triple tunnel drainage system along a busy national road, requiring strategic planning to avoid excessive disruption. Additionally, bringing machinery to



Figure 1 - Drainage System in Moroni, Comoros, November 2024. Ph. Jessica Valerani, External Programmes and Communication Officer, Oxfam Italy

the site involved navigating areas with vegetation and farmland, demanding care to preserve local agriculture. The project required the demolition of incompatible existing infrastructure, necessitating road closures and a temporary detour, which became impassable during rains—creating hardship for the community. However, residents recognized the long-term benefits of a flood-resistant infrastructure.

Initially, some community members were reluctant to cede land for the drainage works. Persistent dialogue and community engagement, supported by field visits and discussions with Oxfam Comoros, gradually overcame these reservations. The commitment to open communication fostered trust and collective ownership, ultimately leading to full community cooperation.

The project has already delivered tangible benefits Mohamed Ali, a local bricklayer, shared that beyond earning an income through the project, he now has peace of mind knowing his community is better protected from floods. He noted,

"With the infrastructure (the new drainage system) we can provide protection against climate change impacts and even support urban agriculture with water retained in basins." This strongly emphasizes how the impact of the project is felt across the community.

Transformational change

LESSON 1 | Community engagement as a core innovation

The project underscores the critical innovation of **deep community involvement at every stage** of its implementation, highlighting that this participatory approach is not just beneficial but essential for creative problem-solving and sustaining continuous dialogue. Community engagement is pivotal to the success of urban resilience initiatives because it **transforms residents from passive beneficiaries into active co-creators** of solutions. This inclusive approach ensures that urban resilience-related information, which should be treated as a public good, is accessible to all citizens, enabling them to make informed decisions about their own safety and well-being.

Recognizing that community engagement is fundamental to project success, targeted efforts were made to overcome existing participation barriers, particularly among marginalized groups. These efforts included promoting mechanisms for engagement that are both inclusive and accessible, amplifying the voices of people facing social, economic or political exclusion. By actively involving the community and claiming citizens power to lead in the production, dissemination, and review of risk information, the project **fostered a sense of ownership among participants**. This inclusive process not only enhanced the legitimacy and relevance of the project activities but also built a stronger, more resilient community that is better equipped to respond to future challenges.

The project teams **worked directly with communities, treating them as equal partners alongside local governments**. This partnership model was crucial in ensuring that the community's perspectives and priorities were fully integrated into the project. Respecting the diversity of approaches within different communities also proved fundamental to the project's success. Local communities often have their own established processes and methodologies for group decision-making, knowledge co-construction, plan co-design, and evaluation and accountability functions. Rather than imposing external practices that could stretch the capacity of these communities, the project embraced and supported these local approaches. This respect for local knowledge and practices not only ensured greater buy-in from the community but also enhanced the effectiveness of the resilience strategies.

Moreover, prioritizing learning within the community and among different social groups facing specific challenges was integral to the project's approach. By **creating spaces for communities to share experiences**, learn from one another, and adapt strategies based on real-world feedback, the project facilitated a continuous cycle of improvement and adaptation. This iterative learning process is vital for building long-term resilience, as it equips communities with the skills and knowledge they need to navigate evolving risks and uncertainties.

In summary, the project's inclusive, community-centered model exposed how community engagement is foundational for the success of urban resilience initiatives. Empowering communities through inclusive participation and respect for local knowledge drives impactful and sustainable change.

LESSON 2 | Fostering community participation through committees and collaborative capacity strengthening

Establishing community-led committees and investing in collaborative capacity-building was a strategic approach that laid the groundwork for long-term resilience. This integrated approach goes beyond merely involving communities in project activities; it actively builds their ability to lead and sustain these efforts long after the initial project phase. By **creating formal committees**, the project not only ensures that there is a structured mechanism for ongoing project maintenance but also **deepens the sense of ownership among local residents**. It allows for the creation of a dedicated mechanism for project maintenance, fostering a strong sense of ownership and accountability among community members. This sense of ownership is critical

for the effectiveness and longevity of interventions, as it **motivates community members to take an active role in preserving and building upon the project's outcomes.**

These committees served as platforms for **participatory decision-making**, helping tailor strategies that resonated with local realities and aligned with community priorities. By holding local leadership accountable to take the helm in these processes, the project facilitated more effective implementation of strategies, as decisions were made by those with intimate knowledge of the local environment and its challenges.

The emphasis on community-driven methodologies throughout the project underscored the importance of **aligning interventions with local dynamics.** This alignment is essential for achieving sustainable impact, as it ensures that the interventions resonate with the community's existing practices, values, and social structures. By **fostering collaboration and strengthening the capacity** of local committees, the project not only enhanced the community's ability to manage and sustain the interventions but also built a resilient local infrastructure capable of responding to future challenges.

Moreover, the collaborative nature of the approach **encouraged knowledge sharing and collective problem-solving**, creating a strong foundation for community cohesion and resilience. As community members worked together within these committees, they developed a deeper understanding of the issues at hand and the skills necessary to address them. This capacity strengthening was not limited to technical skills but also included enhancing leadership, communication, and organizational skills—key components of a resilient community infrastructure.

In conclusion, **holding communities accountable through the formation of committees and collaborative capacity strengthening is essential for fostering a sense of ownership, ensuring effective implementation, and achieving sustainable impact.** By actively involving local leadership and aligning interventions with local dynamics, urban resilience projects can create lasting, community-driven solutions that are resilient, adaptive, and deeply rooted in the strengths of the community itself.

LESSON 3/ Tailoring interventions to local needs

The project exemplified the crucial importance of adapting interventions to the specific local needs of each city to achieve transformational change. This tailored approach recognizes that no two urban environments are identical, and that **effective resilience strategies must be deeply rooted in the unique context, challenges, and priorities of each city.** By customizing interventions to align with local realities, the project was able to address the most pressing issues facing communities, thereby maximizing the relevance and impact of its efforts. The project emphasized the importance of partnerships between local governments and communities, fostering an enabling environment for locally-led initiatives. Meaningful partnerships between communities and local governments were also identified as a critical factor in creating an enabling environment for locally led initiatives to flourish. By **building strong, collaborative relationships**, the project facilitated a shared vision and mutual support between community members and municipal authorities. These partnerships ensured that the interventions were not only technically sound but also culturally and socially appropriate, resonating with the values and aspirations of the local population.

Aligning efforts with local needs is not just about addressing immediate challenges; it is about laying the groundwork for transformational adaptation. When communities see that interventions are tailored to their specific circumstances, they are more likely to engage with and support these efforts, leading to a deeper and more sustained impact. This alignment creates a sense of ownership, as **communities feel that the solutions are truly "theirs"—designed with their input, reflecting their priorities, and implemented with their active participation.**

Moreover, by adapting to local needs, the project was able to **foster innovation and creativity**, as solutions were crafted with a deep understanding of local knowledge and practices. This context-specific approach

also allowed for the integration of traditional knowledge and modern techniques, leading to more holistic and effective resilience strategies.

In conclusion, the project demonstrated that adapting to specific local needs is fundamental to achieving transformational change in urban resilience. By tailoring interventions, devolving decision-making and finance, and fostering meaningful partnerships, the project created an enabling environment where locally led initiatives could thrive. This approach not only ensured the relevance and effectiveness of the interventions but also **built a strong foundation for long-term, sustainable adaptation that is owned and driven by the communities themselves.**

The project's focus on customizing interventions based on local needs, coupled with devolved decision-making and strong partnerships, created an environment where transformational change was possible. This adaptive, context-sensitive approach enabled resilience **initiatives that were effective, enduring, and community-owned.** While it is important for there to be general guidelines in place during the planning phase, it is essential for the subsequent implementation to consider local needs.

CASE STUDY: MADAGASCAR. COMMUNITY OWNERSHIP DRIVES RESILIENCE IN MORONDAVA

Morondava, a coastal city in Madagascar, has emerged as a model for community-driven climate resilience. The success of its transformative initiatives under the Building Urban Climate Resilience in South Eastern Africa project can largely be attributed to the strong sense of ownership displayed by its residents. Through their active participation and commitment, the city has ensured the sustainability of critical infrastructure and environmental restoration efforts.

A cornerstone of Morondava's success was the adoption of the High-Intensity Labor (HIMO) approach, which emphasized local engagement and capacity building. Over 11,653 residents, more than 60% of whom were women, were directly involved in implementing key projects such as the rehabilitation of 180 hectares of mangroves. By equipping residents with technical skills and creating income-generating opportunities, the HIMO approach empowered the community to take charge of their environment.



Figure 2 - Morondava Community engaged in a Cleaning Day, Madagascar, July 2024.
Ph. Patricia Andrianaivo Communication Officer, Oxfam in Madagascar

This hands-on involvement not only provided immediate economic benefits but also instilled a deeper understanding of the importance of the projects. As one local nursery gardener noted, “Rehabilitating mangroves is of prime importance to the ecosystem, as they provide benefits to populations in terms of food security, protection of coastlines against wave assault, and carbon storage.” The mangrove restoration project, bolstered by grassroots participation, has enhanced the city’s natural defenses against flooding and climate change.

The sense of ownership extended to the city’s infrastructure projects. Residents were actively involved in the construction of a proof-elevated road and the multipurpose evacuation centre, the reconstruction of three bridges, and the enhancement of the city’s drainage system. These projects not only improved daily life by reducing flooding and easing transportation but also provided residents with new skills. Felaniaina Espérence, a resident of the Tanambao neighborhood, shared her experience: “I’m glad for this road construction project as I had the opportunity to work. I learned how to lay a paving stone; I’ve never done that before, but today I know how to do it, and I’m so happy.”

In addition to construction, awareness campaigns were conducted to educate residents about the maintenance of these infrastructures. For example, the drainage system rehabilitation involved sensitizing the community to avoid littering canals, a practice that had previously exacerbated flooding. The establishment of maintenance committees for both the natural and built infrastructure ensured that these initiatives would be sustained long after their completion.

These committees, composed of community members, together with the municipality are responsible for the upkeep of the mangroves, drainage systems, evacuation centre, bridges, and roads. By taking ownership of these assets, the community has demonstrated its commitment to safeguarding Morondava’s resilience against climate change.

Gender responsive interventions

LESSON 1 | Gender mainstreaming is the starting point for active involvement of women in implementation

Incorporating gender mainstreaming from the proposal stage of an urban resilience project is essential for promoting gender justice in climate resilience and achieving meaningful, equitable outcomes. Explicitly outlining these considerations in project documents serves as a crucial starting point and commitment to addressing gender disparities. However, **this commitment must go beyond mere inclusion in documentation and it requires active and thoughtful implementation throughout the project lifecycle.**

For effective gender mainstreaming, women’s active roles need to be identified from the project’s design and inception. This must be **grounded in context-specific analyses that identify local gender gaps and challenges**. Understanding these dynamics is key to designing interventions that are not only inclusive but also effective in addressing the unique needs and contributions of women in urban resilience efforts.

The project highlighted that while integrating gender considerations from the outset is necessary, it is not sufficient on its own to achieve significant gender-related outcomes. The project aimed for a strong gender focus by ensuring that women’s participation in activities across all levels was at least 50%, and in some cases, 60%. This quantitative approach was important for ensuring representation, but the project found that **simply achieving gender parity in numbers does not automatically translate into gender justice.**

For gender considerations to yield the desired impact, they must be accompanied by **comprehensive awareness-raising measures at the community level**. This includes engaging men and boys in the process, fostering an environment of support and understanding that enables gender equity to thrive. Without this active involvement and support from all community members, efforts to claim women power can be undermined by existing social norms and power dynamics.

Moreover, the project revealed that during the design phase, actions aimed at fostering gender justice should be widely discussed and shared with the target groups of women. This participatory approach allows the project to be adapted to local solutions that are culturally relevant and accepted, thereby **enhancing the effectiveness and sustainability of gender-focused interventions**.

Mainstreaming gender justice and sensitization throughout the project—at every level from the implementing entity to the programme participant—is crucial. This crosscutting integration of gender considerations ensures that **gender equity is not treated as an isolated component** but as an expected result that enhances the overall impact of the project. By embedding gender considerations into all aspects of project planning, implementation, and evaluation, urban resilience projects can achieve a more holistic and transformative impact that benefits all members of the community.

In conclusion, the importance of including gender considerations from the very beginning of an urban resilience project cannot be underestimated. It **requires a comprehensive approach that goes beyond numbers, actively involves the community, adapts to local contexts, and integrates gender equity as a fundamental principle across all project activities**. This approach not only promotes gender justice but also strengthens the overall resilience and cohesion of urban communities.

LESSON 2 | Promoting gender inclusive opportunities for removing structural barriers

Gender justice is essential in urban resilience projects, even in areas not directly related to livelihoods. Urban resilience projects often benefit men more, due to them being tailored toward more traditional roles, particularly in fields like construction. This imbalance underscores the urgent need for deliberate and strategic efforts to integrate and claim women power throughout the project lifecycle.

The project fostered gender-inclusive opportunities by **involving women in project committees and decision-making processes**, valuing their unique insights and contributions to resilience-building. Beyond representation, investing in women's skills such as leadership, business planning, and community organization empowered them to actively contribute to resilience efforts.

Investing in skill development programs specifically designed for women is another critical component. While the project may not directly focus on livelihoods, enhancing women's capacities in areas such as business planning, leadership, and community organization can have a transformative effect. These skills **support women to take on more active roles within their communities**, contribute to resilience-building efforts, and advocate for their needs and rights. This support is vital for ensuring that women are not only participants but also leaders in shaping the future of their urban environments.

Moreover, conducting thorough assessments to gain insights into women's perspectives on intra-household gender dynamics is essential. Understanding these dynamics allows the project to **design interventions that address the root causes of gender inequality**, rather than just the symptoms. For example, if women are burdened with the majority of unpaid domestic work, the project can explore ways to reduce this burden or provide support mechanisms that free up time for women to engage in community and project activities.

By taking these steps, a comprehensive urban resilience project can ensure that women claim power in ways that go beyond mere economic or livelihood benefits. Supporting women in this context means **providing them with the tools, opportunities, and platforms to influence decisions**, participate fully in community life, and contribute to building resilient urban spaces. This holistic approach not only strengthens the overall impact of the project but also fosters greater equity and social cohesion, which are essential for long-term resilience.

In conclusion, a comprehensive urban resilience project should expose and remove structural barriers to women exercising their power across all activities, even when livelihood issues are not the primary focus. By

actively including women in decision-making, investing in their skills, and addressing gender dynamics within households, the project can **create a more inclusive, equitable, and resilient urban environment**.

CASE STUDY: MOZAMBIQUE. Integrating gender justice into disaster risk management activities

In Chókwè Municipality, Mozambique, the project broke traditional gender barriers by involving women in infrastructure construction. Initially, companies resisted hiring women, but the project mandated female labor inclusion as a precondition for contractor selection. This approach was supported by consultations with community women, women's organizations, and NGOs, creating open dialogue and ensuring alignment with community expectations for gender justice.



Figure 3 - Women at the SWM treatment centre in Chókwè, Mozambique, June 2024.
Ph. Jessica Valerani, External Programmes and Communication Officer, Oxfam Italy

As a result, female workers gained recognition, personal satisfaction, and challenged traditional gender roles. Through these efforts, 58% of women were trained to participate actively in disaster risk initiatives, underscoring the project's success in fostering inclusivity and building resilience by breaking gender norms. This highlights the importance of mediation and the recognition of the need for there to be gender balance, obtaining positive results in areas where gender equality is still not a priority at local and national level.

In December 2022, the project also hosted community discussions on safeguarding, gender-based violence, and HIV, engaging men, women, and young people in Machel and Ncavelane villages. These sessions reached 58 participants, 56.9% of whom were women, addressing critical community health and safety issues in tandem with resilience-building.

The project's commitment to gender justice also opened opportunities for future projects. In April 2023, the African Development Bank launched the Transformative-Gender Climate Resilience project in Chókwè and Zomba, Malawi, complementing ongoing resilience efforts and deepening gender-sensitive approaches for sustainable development.

The case of Mozambique is important as it highlights how the integration of gender justice into risk management can yield positive outcomes for the project. At the same time, it also opens the door for future collaborations.

Risk management system

LESSON 1 | Comprehensive project adaptation

The challenges encountered, such as budget constraints and delays between project preparation and implementation, underscore the critical need for comprehensive project adaptation in urban resilience initiatives. A thorough review process before launching the implementation of any project is essential to identify potential risks and establish strategies to address them. This proactive approach allows for better **alignment with evolving economic, political, and social environments**, ensuring that projects remain relevant and effective over time.

Regular evaluations are vital to this process, as they enable continuous adaptation to new challenges and changing circumstances. The ability of a project to adapt to unforeseen events—such as financial setbacks or global crises like the COVID-19 pandemic—has proven to be a key factor in its success. Lessons learned from these experiences highlight the **importance of proactive staging of implementation, innovative communication strategies, and strategic planning to overcome obstacles**.

A particularly crucial aspect of **strategic planning** is the identification and prioritization of strategic infrastructures within urban environments. These infrastructures—such as transportation networks, energy systems, water supply, and emergency response facilities—are the backbone of urban resilience. Ensuring their robustness and integrating them effectively into project plans is essential for maintaining the functionality of urban systems during disruptions and enhancing overall resilience.

Furthermore, the success of urban resilience projects depends heavily on a flexible and adaptive approach to implementation. Creating an environment where project teams can think creatively and adjust plans to fit the local context is essential. This **flexibility allows projects to navigate complex and unpredictable urban challenges more effectively**.

Ultimately, **continuous adaptation to evolving contexts is not just a reactive measure but a strategic necessity for achieving long-term project impact**. By incorporating comprehensive adaptation strategies and focusing on the identification of strategic infrastructures, urban resilience projects can be better positioned to withstand challenges and contribute meaningfully to the sustainability and stability of urban areas.

LESSON 2 | Anticipatory and resilient risk management framework

The project's forward-thinking approach to risk management, including succession planning and adaptable workspaces, highlights the **importance of establishing a resilient risk management framework**. This approach anticipates and manages risks related to staff turnover, ensuring continuity and stability even in the face of personnel changes. By proactively addressing these risks, the project secures operational integrity and **strengthens its capacity to adapt to unforeseen challenges**.

A resilient risk management framework is essential for creating a strong foundation to support the project during uncertain periods. This framework includes planning for potential disruptions, such as changes in leadership, through seamless knowledge transfer and continuity in decision-making. **Creating adaptable workspaces** that respond to team and project needs further fosters an environment of innovation and flexibility.

Moreover, **involving key partners and stakeholders in risk management** enhances resilience by incorporating diverse perspectives and expertise. This collaborative approach not only strengthens relationships but also enables the project to identify and respond to risks effectively.

In summary, a resilient risk management framework equips projects with the tools to **anticipate challenges, mitigate risks, and adapt to changing circumstances**, ultimately supporting long-term success and sustainability.

LESSON 3 /Realistic assessments and baseline studies

The project's success in **setting realistic targets and avoiding overestimation** highlights the critical importance of conducting thorough assessments and establishing accurate baseline studies in urban resilience initiatives. These steps ensure project feasibility and long-term success by providing a clear understanding of current conditions, potential risks, and realistic outcomes.

Grounding the project in well-researched, attainable expectations helps avoid costly revisions later. A **realistic baseline allows project teams to measure progress**, identify gaps, and adjust strategies as needed, keeping the project aligned with its goals.

Additionally, integrating climate change considerations into structural designs underscores the importance of embedding climate resilience into core project practices. In urban resilience projects, this **proactive integration of climate strategies**—addressing risks such as flooding, heatwaves, and extreme weather—strengthens infrastructure resilience and prepares the project for future challenges.

By setting realistic targets and baselines that account for climate impacts, projects avoid the pitfalls of outdated practices and are better positioned to build sustainable, resilient urban environments. Rather than set overly ambitious targets, the project focuses on outlining achievable goals and ensuring that all the necessary steps are put into place to ensure success.

CASE STUDY. MALAWI. NATURAL HAZARDS DON'T WAIT

In Zomba, Malawi, the project involved constructing two multi-purpose evacuation centers and improving evacuation routes from flood-prone areas. When floods occurred, many people were displaced as their homes were destroyed or rendered uninhabitable due to poor construction and high-risk locations. The evacuation centers, located in Chambo and Linkangala wards, were expected to host over 500 people and provide adequate health and safety conditions during emergencies.



Figure 4 - Likangala evacuation centre, Zomba, Malawi, August 2024. Ph. Tavwana Chirwa

In December 2022, heavy rains caused flooding of the Linkangala River, displacing many families. Although the centers were not yet fully completed—they lacked toilets and kitchens—Oxfam staff, in agreement with local authorities, made the facilities available for shelter. Over 60 families stayed for approximately four months. While conditions were not ideal, the project highlighted the importance of adaptable infrastructure and the capacity to meet urgent needs even when projects are incomplete.

Before these centers, displaced families often took refuge in schools, disrupting education. Following the completion of the centers—including essential amenities like toilets and kitchens—evacuees now have a safe space that does not impact school operations. Mrs. Munira Bakari, former vice mayor of Zomba, remarked that the new centers represent a milestone for the community, preserving education and providing dignity for those affected by disasters.

By July 2024, both centers were finalized, offering comprehensive facilities to meet evacuees' needs during future emergencies. This case underscores the unpredictability of natural hazards, the importance of timely completion of infrastructure, and the need for contingency planning to adapt structures when challenges arise, such as price inflation. It is pivotal to be fully prepared in advance, in order to offset the sometimes-tragic repercussions of such events.

CONCLUSIONS

The experience and emerging lessons from the project highlight several critical factors that are essential for the success and sustainability of similar initiatives. The key takeaways:

- **Effective Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships (MSPs).** One of the key conclusions is that it is vital to structure partnerships involving multiple stakeholders in a clear, efficient and effective manner. However, even a very well-structured partnership is not guaranteed to succeed. The best structure will not be able to overcome an unsupportive political environment or ineffective implementation on the ground. In addition, although the characteristics of effective MSPs appear to apply to all development sectors, the political, institutional and economic complexities surrounding urban resilience may mean that effective multi-stakeholder engagement and local buy-in are more important and difficult to achieve than with other sectors. Thus, urban resilience should particularly rely on partnership models with strong stakeholder input and institutional support.
- **Meaningful Community Engagement.** Community engagement is a range of possible approaches to inform, consult, involve, collaborate with communities and their members. While engaging communities can be time-consuming and labor-intensive, their real and active participation is crucial to achieving long-term resilience. Deep engagement with communities in the project established a path of ownership and was instrumental in facilitating the identification of risks, hazards and appropriate actions to take, and therefore key to implement contextually relevant, effective, efficient and impactful interventions. This means that teams working on urban resilience must possess the skills necessary to facilitate this engagement, ensuring that local voices and perspectives guide the project's direction and implementation. Without this, the likelihood of sustainable outcomes is greatly diminished.
- **Gender and inclusion.** The project approach, simply promoting broad participation of women in terms of numbers, was shown to be inadequate for contributing to achieve real gender equity. The key conclusion in this regard is that an inclusive approach to urban resilience requires a nuanced and context-specific understanding of how inequality interacts with vulnerability. This means understanding how intersecting identity dimensions, such as gender, age, socioeconomic status, religion, physical and mental ability, are included or excluded from these systems.
- **Enhancing MEAL efficiency.** Although the project's commitment to monitoring evaluation and learning (MEAL) was significant, in the process of reflecting the lessons learnt, it was observed that the project's internal MEAL system was not optimally implemented and would have greatly benefited – as for gender and inclusion – from a more tailored process in coherence with the underlining theory of change. Data collection and analysis are central to urban resilience, serving as the foundation for informed decision-making and the refinement of both current and future strategies. MEAL systems help capture critical data that reveal the impact of interventions on urban systems, whether they be physical infrastructure, social networks, or governance frameworks. Given the importance of building resilient communities, the project's community-based approach should have extended its MEAL framework by actively involving local actors such as community leaders to co-lead MEAL activities, thus fostering local ownership but also ensuring that data reflects the lived experiences and priorities of urban populations most affected by vulnerabilities.

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