AFRICAN URBAN RESILIENCE INITIATIVES STOCKTAKE (2016–PRESENT)

Background synthesis for continental urban resilience dialogue

May 2026

Prepared by ICLEI Africa, the African Union, and GIZ

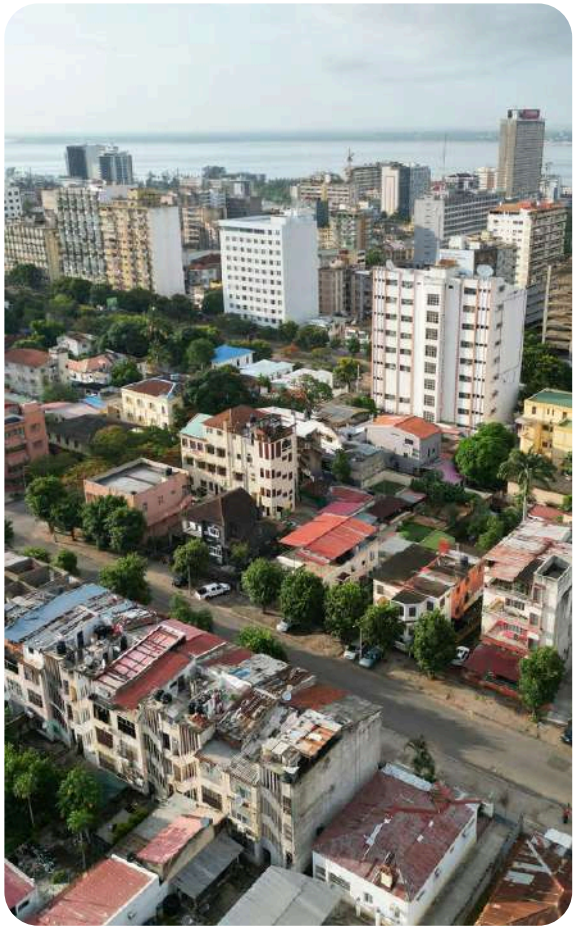
1. Context and rationale

Africa is experiencing one of the most profound urban transitions in history. By 2050, the continent's urban population is expected to more than double, presenting both significant opportunities for economic transformation and increasing exposure to climate and disaster risks. Rapid and often unplanned urbanisation, combined with infrastructure deficits and high levels of informality, means that many African cities face escalating vulnerability to flooding, extreme heat, drought, ecosystem degradation and other climate hazards. Indeed, a large proportion of the fastest-growing cities globally are in Africa and are considered to be at extreme risk from climate and disasters.

Importantly, Africa's urban transition is not only a continental issue but a global one. The infrastructure, spatial form, and governance systems being shaped in African cities over the next two decades will significantly influence global emissions trajectories, climate resilience outcomes, and the achievement of sustainable development goals. African cities are, therefore, not only sites of vulnerability but critical arenas for global climate action and transformation.

At the same time, global climate trajectories indicate that the world is likely to temporarily exceed the 1.5 °C global warming threshold, creating a period of climate overshoot that will profoundly reshape development pathways and urban systems (ICLEI Africa, 2025). For African cities, such overshoot could intensify extreme climate impacts, disrupt infrastructure systems, undermine livelihoods, and exacerbate existing inequalities.
s across the continent.

African cities are already experiencing elements of this "future climate" today, with increasingly frequent and severe flooding events, prolonged heatwaves, and water stress disrupting urban systems. This underscores the urgency of moving beyond incremental adaptation toward more transformative, systems-based approaches to resilience.



However, this moment of crisis also presents an opportunity for transformation. African cities possess unique characteristics—including vibrant informal economies, diverse knowledge systems, and rapidly evolving governance and innovation ecosystems—that position them to pioneer alternative pathways to urban development. Informal systems and community-led practices already provide adaptive, flexible and resource-efficient responses to urban challenges and represent a critical foundation for resilient and equitable urban futures (ICLEI Africa, 2025).

Recognising these challenges and opportunities, the African Union's Africa Urban Resilience Programme (AURP) has emerged as an important continental framework to strengthen risk-informed urban development and accelerate resilience investments across the continent.

The AURP is structured around five resilience drivers (AUC, 2024), which summarise the ambition and priorities of the AUC and serve as pillars for action:

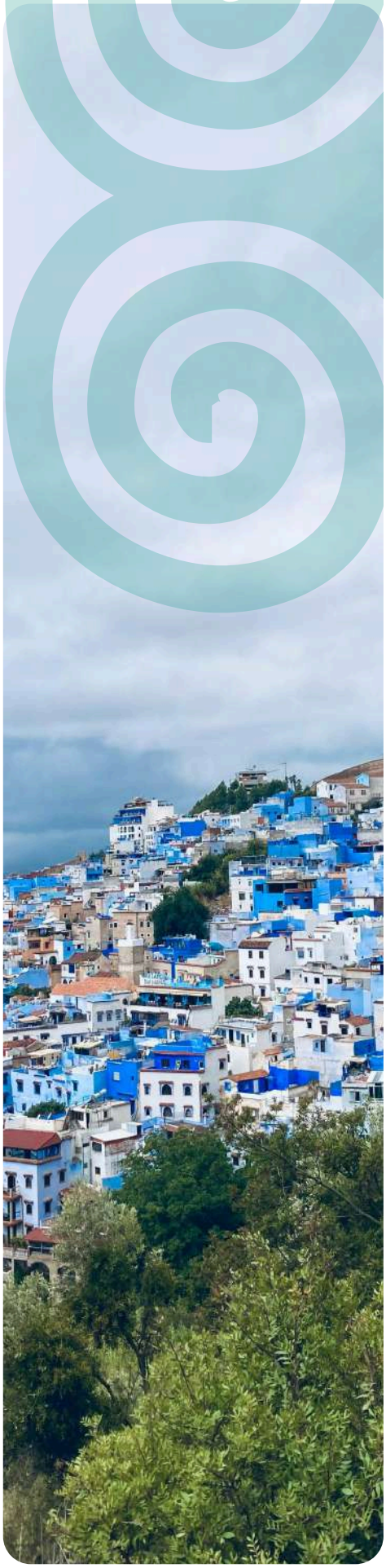
1. **Enhanced disaster risk knowledge, assessment, and analysis.** Building robust, context-specific knowledge of risks is essential to designing effective resilience strategies. This includes integrating scientific data with local and indigenous knowledge, and ensuring that urban risk assessments capture the multidimensional nature of hazards and vulnerabilities.

2. **Enhanced multi-hazard early warning, preparedness, and action.** Strengthening early warning and early action systems is central to reducing disaster losses. The AURP promotes integration with continental systems such as the Africa Multi-Hazard Early Warning System (AMHEWAS), while ensuring their relevance for urban contexts where risks are concentrated and highly dynamic.

3. **Enhanced risk-informed development planning.** Embedding disaster risk reduction and resilience into urban development planning is critical to shaping safe, sustainable, and inclusive cities. This includes strengthening local governance capacities, enhancing regulatory enforcement, promoting participatory planning, and integrating resilience into housing, infrastructure, and land management practices.

4. **Enhanced disaster-resilient recovery and adaptation.** The AURP views recovery as a transformative opportunity to build back better, not only replacing what has been lost but creating more resilient systems for the future. By supporting post-disaster needs assessments, anticipatory recovery planning, and inclusive approaches to rehabilitation, the programme aims to reduce fragility and support long-term adaptation.

5. **Improved disaster risk transfer.** Recognising that disasters impose disproportionate financial burdens on vulnerable communities and fragile urban systems, the AURP promotes innovative financing mechanisms, including insurance and municipal risk-transfer schemes. These mechanisms are designed to complement preparedness and recovery, ensuring that risks are not borne solely by those least able to carry them.



However, a persistent gap remains between continental policy commitments and the capacity of cities and municipalities to implement resilience actions at scale. City and municipal governments are critical actors in translating resilience agendas into practice, yet they often face constraints in terms of institutional capacity, finance, coordination, and access to knowledge networks.

In response, the initiative “Planning in Action: Strengthening Resilience of Cities and Urban Centres in Africa”, led by ICLEI Africa, in partnership with the African Union Commission and GIZ’s Resilience Initiative Africa (RIA), seeks to convene city leaders and institutional partners to co-produce a continental vision and action framework for urban resilience.

A key first step in this process is a strategic mapping and stocktake of recent and ongoing urban resilience initiatives across Africa, aimed at identifying who is doing what, where, and with what thematic focus. This document provides a high level overview of the key findings from this process, as key foundational elements for the continental policy dialogue with city leaders, enabling reflection on trends, gaps, and opportunities for accelerating resilience action at the city scale.

2. Emerging system risks and drivers of change

Insights from recent foresight and visioning processes led by ICLEI Africa with African urban thought leaders, and a review of recent reports on urban resilience in Africa highlight several system-level threats and drivers shaping the future of African urban resilience, particularly under conditions of climate overshoot:

Climate system breakdown and narrowing development pathways
A central concern identified through foresight processes is that the breakdown of the climate system is narrowing the range of viable development options for cities. Traditional economic and infrastructure models developed during the industrial era were premised on unlimited resource extraction and stable climatic conditions. Under conditions of climate overshoot, these assumptions no longer hold. African cities will increasingly need to design development pathways that operate within planetary limits while simultaneously addressing deep socio-economic inequalities.

Strains on multilateralism and climate justice
Recent visioning processes have highlighted the risk that weakening multilateral cooperation and declining climate finance commitments could undermine prospects for equitable climate transitions in African cities. Without stronger global cooperation and financing mechanisms, African cities may struggle to mobilise the investments required to adapt to accelerating climate impacts and pursue low-carbon development pathways.

Persistent barriers to urban climate finance
Access to climate finance remains a major constraint for African municipalities. Many cities face structural barriers, including limited creditworthiness, lack of project preparation capacity, and global financial architectures that do not adequately support subnational governments. Funding from external donors and support agencies is highly fragmented, with agencies prioritising funding and support for select sectors. These constraints contribute to a persistent implementation gap between resilience planning and concrete action on the ground.

Political economy and governance constraints
Beyond technical and financial barriers, political economy dynamics, including short political cycles, competing development priorities, and institutional fragmentation, continue to shape the pace and scale of urban resilience action. Many local governments operate with overlapping mandates, limited fiscal autonomy, and inconsistent lines of accountability. This leads to duplication of efforts, gaps in service delivery, and competition among agencies. At the national level, disaster risk management, climate adaptation, and urban development are often housed in separate ministries, with often scant mechanisms for joint planning or resource alignment. These dynamics often constrain long-term planning and investment in resilience, particularly where immediate service delivery pressures dominate.

Infrastructure system fragility
Ageing, inadequate, or poorly maintained infrastructure systems, including drainage, water supply, energy, and transport, are increasingly unable to cope with growing urban populations and intensifying climate impacts. Infrastructure failure under climate stress represents a critical systemic risk, with cascading impacts across urban economies, health systems, and livelihoods.

3. Key drivers of transformation in African cities

Despite these challenges, the visioning process identified several powerful drivers of change that could enable African cities to navigate climate overshoot while advancing equitable development.

- **Informality as a source of innovation and resilience**

Informality was identified as a defining feature of African urban systems and a critical source of adaptive capacity. Informal systems often provide flexible, locally embedded solutions that respond rapidly to changing conditions and resource constraints. Informal economies provide livelihoods for the majority of urban residents, serving as buffers during periods of crisis and as engines of rapid recovery. Community-based savings groups, neighbourhood associations, and informal service providers often fill institutional voids left by overstretched municipal systems. Rather than viewing informality solely as a challenge, these systems can serve as laboratories for resource-efficient and community-driven innovations that support climate resilience and social inclusion.

- **Data, technology and knowledge systems**

Digital technologies, data systems, and artificial intelligence are expected to play an increasingly important role in shaping African urban futures. Examples include climate early warning systems, digital finance platforms, and data-driven urban planning tools. However, the benefits of these technologies will depend on ensuring equitable access, open data systems, and inclusive design processes that incorporate diverse knowledge systems, including indigenous and community knowledge.

There is also a growing need to strengthen municipal data governance, monitoring, reporting and verification (MRV) systems, and interoperability across platforms to ensure that data can effectively inform decision-making, unlock finance, and track resilience outcomes.

- **Communities of practice and intermediaries**

Another key driver of change is the emergence of communities of practice linking cities, researchers, civil society organisations, and international partners. Across Africa's urban areas, resilience governance reflects a distributed system of responsibility. Authority, resources, and social legitimacy are shared among municipal institutions, national agencies, utilities, traditional governance structures, and a wide range of civil society organisations. Intermediary organisations play a crucial role in bridging knowledge, policy and practice, enabling innovation to scale across cities and regions. Such networks can support collective learning, strengthen municipal capabilities, and mobilise investment for urban resilience initiatives.

- **Fit-for-purpose governance**

Achieving transformative urban resilience will require governance systems capable of responding to rapid environmental and socio-economic change. This includes strengthening municipal capacities, improving coordination across government levels, integrating climate considerations into urban planning and infrastructure design, and enabling participatory decision-making processes that reflect the diverse realities of African cities. Recognising how diverse urban actors interact, and whose knowledge informs decision-making, is therefore central to urban resilience governance and practice (ICLEI Africa, 2025).

- **Coastal and port city leadership**

Coastal and port cities are emerging as critical frontlines of climate risk and innovation, particularly in the face of sea-level rise, storm surge, and coastal ecosystem degradation. These cities are increasingly piloting integrated "source-to-sea" and port-city collaboration models that link climate resilience, economic development, and ocean-based systems.

4. Institutional landscape of African resilience initatives

Since 2016, African urban resilience initiatives have expanded significantly, supported by a diverse ecosystem of regional institutions, global city networks, development agencies, and research partnerships. Key institutional actors and related initiatives include (but are not limited to):

- **African Union (AU)** – Africa Urban Resilience Programme (AURP) and continental policy leadership
- **ICLEI Africa** – urban resilience programmes, city networks, circular economy initiatives, and nature-based solutions
- **GIZ (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit)** – programmes on climate governance, urban planning, and climate-resilient infrastructure, including the Resilience Initiative Africa (RIA)
- **Resilient Cities Network (RCN)** – resilience strategies and Chief Resilience Officer programmes
- **C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group** – climate action planning, urban heat initiatives, and climate finance support
- **UN-Habitat** – City Resilience Action Planning (CityRAP) and risk-informed planning frameworks
- **UNDRR** – Making Cities Resilient 2030 (MCR2030) platform
- **UNDP** (Resilience Hub for Africa)
- **Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI)**
- **United Cities and Local Governments of Africa (UCLG Africa)** – key continental local government representative body; important for municipal leadership, decentralisation, peer learning.
- **Global Center on Adaptation (GCA)** – especially through the Africa Adaptation Acceleration Program (AAAP), a joint AfDB–GCA initiative, and its work on urban adaptation and locally led adaptation.
- **World Resources Institute Africa / WRI Ross Center** – urban resilience, inclusive mobility, nature-based solutions
- Global initiatives such as Race to Resilience, UrbanShift, and Shack/ Slum Dwellers International (SDI)
- **Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate & Energy / CoM SSA** – important for city climate planning, emissions/adaptation reporting, technical support, and linking African cities to global city climate governance.
- **Cities Alliance** – longstanding work on urban poverty, informality, slum upgrading, secondary cities, and inclusive urban governance; useful given the strong informality and local government capacity dimensions.
- **Regional Economic Communities, especially SADC, EAC, ECOWAS, IGAD and COMESA** – important for regional policy alignment, cross-border risk, disaster risk reduction, migration, infrastructure corridors, and implementation pathways. GIZ's RIA explicitly supports AURP implementation and regional urban development with SADC.

In addition, development finance institutions (such as the African Development Bank, the World Bank, and the DBSA), climate funds (including the Green Climate Fund and the Adaptation Fund), bilateral donors, and emerging private-sector actors, particularly insurers and infrastructure investors, are playing an increasingly important role in shaping the urban resilience landscape. This is especially evident in relation to project preparation, blended finance, and risk transfer mechanisms.

National disaster management and climate governance institutions – for example national DRR agencies, ministries responsible for local government/urban development, climate change directorates, and planning commissions are crucial because AURP implementation will depend on vertical alignment between continental priorities, national mandates, and municipal delivery. Academic and practitioner learning platforms – such as CLARE, African Cities Research Consortium (ACRC), FRACTAL/FCFA legacy networks, START, African Centre for Cities, and university–city partnerships are central for evidence, capacity strengthening, locally grounded climate services, and co-produced resilience planning.

These initiatives and institutions collectively support cities through:

- policy and governance frameworks
- climate risk assessments
- resilience strategy development
- capacity strengthening
- climate finance mobilisation
- demonstration projects and pilot interventions

Geographically, initiatives tend to concentrate in large metropolitan areas and coastal cities, including: Cape Town, Durban, Johannesburg, Lagos, Nairobi, Kigali, Addis Ababa, Freetown, Accra, Dakar, Mombasa, and Beira. However, secondary and intermediate cities remain comparatively underrepresented, despite experiencing some of the fastest urban growth rates.

5. Thematic trends in African urban resilience initiatives

Flood risk management and water systems
Flooding and water-related hazards represent the most dominant focus across initiatives, reflecting both the exposure of many African cities to hydrometeorological hazards and the prioritisation of these risks within international resilience programmes.

Common interventions include:

- early warning systems
- flood modelling and hydrological monitoring
- drainage and stormwater management
- river basin and watershed management
- blue–green infrastructure and nature-based solutions

These initiatives often intersect with informal settlement upgrading and disaster preparedness programmes. There is an increasing shift toward integrated catchment-to-coast approaches that link upstream land management, urban drainage systems, and coastal processes.

Early warning systems and climate information
Closely linked to flood risk management is the expansion of climate services and early warning systems.

Typical activities include:

- rainfall monitoring networks
- hydrological modelling
- climate risk mapping
- community-based early warning systems

These initiatives increasingly align with global efforts such as “Early Warnings for All.”

Governance, planning, and institutional capacity
Many resilience initiatives focus on strengthening governance frameworks and municipal capacity rather than infrastructure delivery.

Typical activities include:

- resilience strategy development
- climate action planning
- improving data accessibility and coordination
- risk-informed urban planning
- institutional capacity building

This reflects the recognition that effective urban resilience requires strong governance systems capable of coordinating action across sectors and scales. Additionally, it was found that the key for institutionalizing multi-hazard, risk-informed urban planning is that African cities must proactively leverage frontier technologies and continental standards.

Nature-based solutions and ecosystem-based adaptation
Nature-based solutions (NbS) are increasingly integrated into resilience strategies, particularly in cities exposed to flooding and coastal risks.

Examples include:

- wetland restoration
- mangrove protection
- urban forests and green corridors
- integrated blue–green infrastructure systems

ICLEI Africa, C40, GIZ programmes, and other key institutions and actors have contributed significantly to the mainstreaming of these approaches.

Infrastructure resilience and service delivery
A growing number of initiatives are focusing on strengthening the resilience of critical urban services and infrastructure systems, including water supply, sanitation, energy, and transport. However, this remains underdeveloped relative to planning-focused interventions.

6. Emerging themes

Urban heat resilience
Urban heat is an emerging focus area in African cities, particularly through initiatives linked to C40 and global heat resilience partnerships. Despite growing recognition, heat remains significantly underaddressed compared with flood risk, even though it poses major risks in dense informal settlements.

Climate finance and project preparation
Several initiatives increasingly focus on unlocking climate finance for cities, including project preparation and investment planning. However, many cities continue to face challenges in translating resilience strategies into bankable projects and implementable infrastructure investments. Additionally, it was found that cities should explore innovative mechanisms such as land-value capture, blended finance, or resilience-linked budgeting.

Community-based resilience and informality
Some initiatives increasingly recognise the role of informal settlements and community-led adaptation in building urban resilience. Examples include:

- participatory upgrading
- community-based disaster preparedness
- livelihood-focused resilience interventions

However, these approaches remain less prominent than infrastructure and governance programmes.Yet, it was found that there is a need to scale inclusive upgrading programs and formally integrate informal actors into municipal preparedness and response systems.

Loss and damage, and risk transfer
There is growing recognition of the need to address loss and damage in African cities, particularly where climate impacts exceed adaptation limits. This includes emerging discussions around risk transfer mechanisms, insurance solutions, and post-disaster financing.

Urban migration and climate mobility
Climate-induced migration and displacement are emerging as critical urban challenges, with cities acting as both destinations and transit points for affected populations. Other migratory push and pull factors include urban migration that is driven by employment, education, and economic opportunities.

7. Key gaps and blind spots

The stocktake highlights several important gaps across the current landscape of African urban resilience initiatives. The stocktake reveals not only thematic gaps, but also structural limitations that constrain the scale, speed, and effectiveness of urban resilience action across the continent.

a. Flood-centric resilience agendas
Flooding dominates resilience programming, while other risks receive significantly less attention. Under-addressed hazards include:

- extreme heat
- drought and water scarcity
- wildfire risk in peri-urban areas
- compound climate risks

b. Limited attention to urban livelihoods and economies
Few initiatives explicitly address economic resilience, including:

- informal economy disruption
- climate impacts on urban food systems
- resilience of small enterprises

Yet these factors strongly shape vulnerability in African cities.

c. Fragmentation across initiatives
The urban resilience ecosystem remains fragmented across multiple institutions, programmes, and donor initiatives, often with limited coordination.

d. Geographic concentration in major cities
Large metropolitan areas receive most attention, while secondary cities remain under-supported, despite rapid urbanisation.

e. Persistent planning-to-implementation gap
Many initiatives focus on:

- strategies
- assessments
- governance frameworks

but fewer support the large-scale implementation of resilience infrastructure or interventions.

f. Significant gaps remain around: Urban food systems**,** Health and climate**,** Migration and displacement.

g. Weak integration of resilience into core urban systems
Resilience is often treated as a standalone agenda rather than being embedded within core urban systems such as infrastructure planning, housing delivery, and economic development.

h. Limited engagement with the private sector and financial markets
Despite growing interest, there remains limited systematic engagement with private-sector actors and financial markets to scale resilience investments.

8. Implications for the continental urban resilience dialogue

This stocktake provides a critical evidence base for the continental dialogue and city leaders' workshop, which aims to co-produce a shared vision and action agenda for urban resilience aligned with the Africa Urban Resilience Programme (AURP). The stocktake of urban resilience initiatives across Africa suggests several priorities for accelerating action:

1. Broadening the resilience agenda beyond flood risk to include heat, drought, health, and economic vulnerability.
2. Strengthening implementation and climate finance, enabling cities to translate plans into action.
3. Supporting secondary and rapidly growing cities, which currently receive limited support.
4. Embedding resilience within informal settlements and livelihood systems, where vulnerability is highest.
5. Improving coordination across institutional initiatives to align efforts and scale impact.

Ultimately, accelerating resilience in African cities will require strong municipal leadership, enhanced institutional capacity, and strategic partnerships between continental institutions, development partners, and city governments. Building on insights from the foresight and visioning processes, the following are additional key priority areas for guiding the workshop:

a. Planning for climate overshoot
African cities will increasingly need to plan for the impacts of a temporary overshoot of the 1.5 °C threshold, including intensified heat, flooding, water stress, and economic disruption.

b. Scaling locally grounded innovation
Informal systems, community-led initiatives, and indigenous knowledge systems represent powerful sources of innovation that should be recognised and supported.

c. Bridging the planning–implementation gap
Greater attention is required to move beyond resilience strategies toward large-scale implementation and investment.

d. Strengthening municipal capabilities
Building the capabilities of city governments—including planning, finance mobilisation, and futures thinking—is essential for enabling transformative urban resilience.

e. Creating a continental community of practice
Strengthening collaboration between cities, regional institutions, development partners, and research networks can accelerate knowledge exchange and scaling of solutions across Africa.

Critically, the next phase of urban resilience in Africa must move beyond planning and pilot interventions toward systemic transformation, embedding resilience within core urban development pathways, unlocking large-scale finance, and strengthening cities' institutional capabilities to lead. This requires a shift from "projects" to "portfolios," from "initiatives" to "systems," and from "supporting cities" to enabling cities as drivers of resilience at scale.

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