

POST-EVENT SUMMARY

Adapting Cities from Below

*Community resilience, nature in the city, informal-settlement
governance, and the mobilisation of urban data*

France Pavilion | 13th World Urban Forum (WUF13), Baku

20 May 2026 | “Safe and Resilient Cities and Communities”

MODERATOR

Alina Koschmieder, UN-Habitat (Planning & Finance Section / Urban Lab).

SPEAKERS

Guy Tchakam (Expertise France — Urban Platform of Cameroon), with Diane Bittar (Urban Project Manager, Expertise France); Francesca Ferlicca (Sciences Po Urban School — “Nature in the City”); Anthony Boanada-Fuchs (IHS, Erasmus University Rotterdam).

PARTNERS

Expertise France (AFD Group), Sciences Po Urban School, IHS, and UN-Habitat.

Why this debate

This year's World Urban Forum convened under the theme *“Safe and Resilient Cities and Communities.”* Yet the debate hosted at the France Pavilion began from a deceptively simple question: how is that resilience actually made effective? Behind the consensus on resilience lies a far less settled problem — the everyday institutional, technical and political work through which exposed neighbourhoods become safer, and through which public authorities acquire the means to govern with, rather than merely for, their populations.

Two structural pressures framed the discussion. First, climate change now acts as a powerful accelerator of the housing and informal-settlement crisis: floods, heatwaves and storms fall disproportionately on the most vulnerable groups, who tend to live in hazard-exposed, informally settled areas. Second, many cities of the Global South face a persistent deficit of reliable data with which to steer public action. Where territories are illegible to those who govern them, adaptation policy is often built on incomplete or outdated information. The consequences are deeply operational. Public authorities struggle to prioritise investments, regulate land-use change, anticipate exposure to climate risks and ensure that underserved neighbourhoods are effectively included in urban planning and service-delivery systems.

The panel proposed to treat these two pressures as a single challenge, and to interrogate the production of knowledge with and through communities as a lever for transforming urban governance. Three complementary experiences anchored the conversation: a public-policy and digital-infrastructure programme in Cameroon (Expertise France), a comparative research programme on nature-based solutions across the Global North and South (Sciences Po), and a comparative analysis of multi-level governance frameworks for integrating community knowledge into institutions (IHS, Erasmus University Rotterdam). Together they span the chain that runs from generating territorial data, to organising multi-actor dialogue, to embedding both in durable institutional decisions.

Three guiding questions

1. how can the production of local data and institutional dialogue be combined to overcome urban fragmentation?
2. which methodologies generate operational knowledge and innovative governance structures in contexts of weak institutional capacity?
3. which conditions allow these bottom-up approaches to move beyond pilots and scale?

Accordingly, the session pursued four objectives: (1) to demonstrate how the production of territorialised data transforms urban governance in contexts of institutional fragmentation; (2) to present action-research methodologies that generate knowledge directly usable by decision-makers; (3) to place international experiences in dialogue in order to identify the conditions for replicability; and (4) to formulate recommendations for articulating data, dialogue and decision at scale. *The three project notes below summarise each contribution; the closing section draws out the cross-cutting findings.*

PROJECT 1 · EXPERTISE FRANCE (AFD GROUP)

The Urban Platform of Cameroon (PUC): engineering trust to make cities steerable

*Presented by Guy Tchakam, Urban Expert, with the support of Diane Bittar, Urban Project Manager, Expertise France.
Funded by the European Union; implemented by Expertise France.*

The Urban Platform of Cameroon (PUC) approaches the data deficit not as a purely technical gap but as a broader urban governance challenge: how territorial information is produced, shared and used to support planning, service delivery and public investments decisions. Its objective is therefore not only to improve access to urban data, but to improve public policy for land-use and territorial planning in support of sustainable, and inclusive cities. It does so by coordinating the full ecosystem of urban actors: the State, decentralised local authorities, para-public bodies, sector professionals and civil-society organisations. The aim is to foster a culture of dialogue, align competing visions, avoid duplication and make actions converge. In this sense, the challenge is not simply a lack of data, but also the fragmentation of existing territorial information across institutions, formats and sectoral mandates, which limits its usability for public action.

The PUC is structured around two complementary and mutually reinforcing dimensions. The first is a physical space for multi-actor dialogue that has brought together around 69 actors representing national ministries, municipalities, para-public bodies, professional associations and civil society. That process has led to the creation of the National Association of Urban Actors (ANAU), presented as a significant innovation in African urban governance, as it institutionalises the dialogue initiated through the PUC and provides a more permanent framework for coordination and knowledge-sharing among actors. The digital space provides the interoperable systems that make territorial information more accessible, usable and actionable. These include several urban management tools: the communal geographic information system (SIGCOM), the Open Digital Address Database of Cameroon (BANOC), a collaborative digital platform, and a *multipurpose cadastre*, piloted in the municipality of Soa, that functions simultaneously as a planning instrument, for managing change over time, and an aid to decision-making.

Methodologically, the project's most transferable lesson is a deliberate shift away from the “*metric-precision obsession*” that can make exhaustive accuracy a precondition for action. The Soa pilot illustrates this approach. It focused on a limited set of fundamental, verified and immediately usable data, designed to be progressively enriched over time. This approach generated 14,297 geolocated points, including 6,050 built and unbuilt parcels, 369 public buildings and 7,878 equipment and network features. Rather than waiting for complete information, the approach prioritises operationally relevant data, enriched through field collection and participatory mapping. Precision is not abandoned, but progressively built over time. This makes territorial information systems more responsive, particularly where timely information is needed to support planning and risk management.

Framed this way, the multipurpose cadastre becomes a dynamic infrastructure of territorial knowledge rather than a static map — a lever for climate resilience, territorial sovereignty and the anticipatory management of risk. The PUC's self-description as an “*engineering of trust*” captures the core claim: making cities more governable is less about acquiring more data than about building the relationships and shared platforms through which public, technical and territorial actors agree to decide together.

Tools and guides are openly available at plateforme-urbaine.com and banoc.cm.

PROJECT 2 · SCIENCES PO URBAN SCHOOL

“Nature in the City”: a structured North–South comparison of nature-based solutions

Presented by Francesca Ferlicca, Rachel L. Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow and Principal Investigator. A four-year comparative research programme (Gerard B. Lambert / Rachel L. Mellon Foundation).

“Nature in the City” examines the relationship between vulnerable and informal urban environments and natural ecosystems, asking how cities approach climate adaptation amid the intricate socio-technical interactions between people, institutions, infrastructures and ecologies. Its distinctive feature is method: the programme works simultaneously in cities of the Global North and South — Paris, Mexico City, Cape Town and, most recently, Asunción — deliberately building a cumulative comparative dataset to which new cities are added each year. Two complementary 2026 capstone studies were presented.

The first study compares nature-based solutions (NBS) for urban water management across Paris, Cape Town and Mexico City. The team identified and classified 264 NBS projects — by infrastructure type, NBS typology, intervention, key risk targeted, social use and initiating organisation — and built a GIS-based interactive web-mapping tool. The analysis is organised in three pillars: a macro comparison of NBS typologies; a micro comparison of governance structures; and a micro comparison of social and ecological impacts, with particular attention to justice and equity. The governance findings are pointed: NBS are delivered through hybrid arrangements marked by differing degrees of fragmentation and transparency, uneven public-sector initiative and collaboration with NGOs and community-based organisations, recurring gaps in participation and buy-in, and shared hurdles around implementation and maintenance — land tenure, capacity and institutional silos chief among them.

The second study turns to NBS for climate-risk adaptation in informal settlements, comparing Mexico City's *colonias populares* with Asunción's *bañados* — contexts defined by tenure insecurity, a weak formal institutional presence and acute climate exposure. Here the research documents the governance innovations that emerge from communities themselves, including hybrid and community-led arrangements, and asks what it takes for public authorities to recognise and integrate them without flattening the very features that make them work.

Across both studies, the programme produces territorialised data through a consistent toolkit — participatory mapping, GIS analysis and roughly 15–20 stakeholder interviews per city, complemented by field observation and an art exhibition. The value of the structured North–South comparison is that it surfaces what single-city studies cannot: it destabilises the assumption that learning flows only from North to South, and instead identifies the conditions under which NBS approaches — whether for water management or for adaptation in informal settlements — prove replicable across markedly different urban contexts.

Synthesis materials are available via the [Nature in the City 2025 synthesis](#) and the Urban School's [feature on NBS](#).

PROJECT 3 · IHS, ERASMUS UNIVERSITY ROTTERDAM

From community knowledge to institutional decisions: multi-level governance and the integration gap

Presented by Anthony Boanada-Fuchs, Head of Projects and Partnerships, Institute for Housing and Urban Development Studies (IHS), Erasmus University Rotterdam.

IHS brought the comparative, cross-national perspective that connects the other two contributions. Drawing on applied-research and capacity-building programmes on urban resilience, informal-settlement governance and land and planning systems across the Global South its contribution offered a comparative analysis of multi-level urban governance frameworks. The central question is the one that the Cameroonian and Latin American cases each raise from their own angle: under what conditions can data and adaptation practices generated by communities be integrated into the decision-making of public institutions?

The starting observation is that a great wealth of knowledge already exists at community level; the difficulty is not its generation but its integration. IHS therefore concentrated on the concrete barriers that prevent locally produced data from being taken up by public authorities — barriers that are simultaneously technical (interoperability, standards, capacity), institutional (mandates, fragmentation across levels of government) and political (whose knowledge counts as legitimate). Naming these barriers precisely is a precondition for designing mechanisms that can overcome them.

On the constructive side, the contribution examined the governance arrangements and interfaces that have proven effective in connecting community-led adaptation with municipal and national decision-making — without sacrificing the flexibility and responsiveness that make local practices work in the first place. In informal settlements that operate largely outside formal planning systems, the question is not how to absorb communities into rigid bureaucracies, but how to design durable points of contact through which local practice and institutional decision can inform one another.

The framing is squarely developmental: bottom-up knowledge production is valuable only insofar as it can translate into evolving governance arrangements — dispositifs that adapt over time and that strengthen the ties between informal neighbourhoods, local communities, public authorities and long-term urban-policy reform. The decisive test, in IHS's reading, is whether bottom-up approaches can move beyond pilot projects to shape long-term policy and investment decisions. That test — the conditions for durable scaling — became the connective tissue of the closing discussion.

Cross-cutting findings: adapting cities from below

Although the three contributions come from very different institutional positions — a development-cooperation programme, an academic research programme, and an applied-research institute — they converged on a coherent set of propositions about how urban resilience is built in practice. Read together, they sketch an agenda for adapting cities from below.

1

Knowledge is infrastructure, not paperwork

All three contributions treat data and knowledge less as a record of the city than as an infrastructure for governing it. Cameroon's multipurpose cadastre, Sciences Po's comparative NBS dataset and mapping tool, and the community-generated data at the heart of IHS's analysis are all means of making territories legible and therefore steerable. The shared move is from data-as-description to data-as-decision-infrastructure — knowledge built deliberately so that it can be acted upon.

2

Trust and relationships are the binding constraint

The recurring lesson is that the limiting factor is rarely the quantity of data; it is the relationships and institutions through which data becomes legitimate and usable. Expertise France's explicit "engineering of trust," Sciences Po's stakeholder-intensive method, and IHS's focus on governance interfaces all point the same way: data is socially produced and socially validated. Multi-actor dialogue — and durable homes for it, such as Cameroon's ANAU — is not a soft add-on to technical work but its precondition.

3

Semantic precision over metric perfectionism

A particularly transferable methodological principle emerged from the Cameroonian case and resonated with the others: in low-capacity, high-exposure contexts, the demand for perfect metric accuracy can become an obstacle to action. Prioritising semantic precision — information that is meaningful, timely and good enough to decide on — enriched by crowdsourced and field data, allows governance to keep pace with fast-moving climate risk. The same logic underwrites participatory mapping and community-generated data in the Sciences Po and IHS contributions.

4

Hybrid governance is the empirical reality

Across the cases, adaptation does not happen through the state alone, nor through communities alone, but through hybrid arrangements that braid together public bodies, NGOs, community-based organisations and residents. Sciences Po documented this directly in the governance of water-focused NBS; IHS theorised the interfaces that hold such arrangements together; Expertise France engineered them deliberately. The shared challenge is to recognise and integrate these hybrids without flattening the informal, flexible features that make them effective.

5

The integration gap is the real bottleneck

If community knowledge is abundant, its institutional uptake is scarce. The panel's most consequential diagnosis is that the binding problem lies at the **interface** between locally produced knowledge and formal decision-making — technical (interoperability and standards), institutional (mandates and fragmentation across levels), and political (whose knowledge is treated as legitimate). Closing this gap, rather than generating ever more data, is where the leverage lies.

6

North–South comparison as a method of mutual learning

Placing Paris alongside Mexico City, Cape Town and Asunción — and Cameroon alongside Latin America — did more than assemble examples. The structured comparison destabilises the assumption that lessons travel only from North to South, reveals conditions invisible in single-city studies, and reframes adaptation as a field of reciprocal learning across very different institutional capacities and risk profiles.

7

Conditions for scaling beyond the pilot

The session's third guiding question — what allows bottom-up approaches to scale — drew the clearest convergence. The conditions named recur across all three contributions: an institutional anchor that outlives the project cycle (such as ANAU or a permanent dialogue platform); interoperable, open digital systems that lower the cost of integrating new data; sustained dialogue and trust among public, technical and community actors; political recognition of community-generated knowledge as legitimate; and, ultimately, the translation of all of the above into long-term policy and investment decisions. Pilots that secure these conditions endure; those that do not, dissolve when funding ends.

In conclusion

Returning to the question with which the debate opened — how is resilience made effective? — the panel's answer is that it is made, incrementally and relationally, through the patient work of producing actionable knowledge *with* communities and embedding it in institutions that can act. *“Adapting cities from below”* is therefore not a call to bypass the state, but a programme for connecting bottom-up knowledge production to the evolving governance arrangements through which informal neighbourhoods, communities and public authorities can decide together. For the New Urban Agenda and the WUF agenda on safe and resilient cities, the implication is concrete: invest as much in the interfaces, dialogue infrastructures and trust that make data usable as in the data itself.

Additional resources

UN-Habitat. (2022). *Nature-based solutions to build climate resilience in informal areas: Strategy paper.* unhabitat.org

UN-Habitat. (2025). *Integrating nature-based solutions into urban & territorial planning: Building biodiverse & resilient cities.* unhabitat.org

Sciences Po

<https://www.sciencespo.fr/ecole-urbaine/en/the-lab/action-research/nature-city/>

<https://www.sciencespo.fr/ecole-urbaine/en/news/floods-droughts-nature-to-the-rescue-of-cities/>

https://www.sciencespo.fr/ecole-urbaine/sites/sciencespo.fr/ecole-urbaine/files/NATURE%20IN%20THE%20CITY_GLM_SYNTHESE%202025.pdf

Expertise France

<https://www.expertisefrance.fr/fr/projets/plateforme-urbaine-au-cameroun>

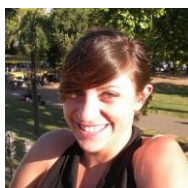
Contributors



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Graduate of AgroParisTech and Sciences Po's Paris School of International Affairs (PSIA), Alina Koschmieder has a background in environmental engineering and political and social sciences. Throughout her academic and professional career, she has developed her expertise in the areas of urban climate action, urban green spaces management, and nature-based solutions. She has experience working with a variety of stakeholders including local governments, NGOs, civil society organizations, academia, funding agencies and international organizations. Currently working as a Climate Change and Environmental Expert at UN-Habitat, within the Planning and Finance Section (PFS) and the Urban Lab, she focuses on mainstreaming climate action and nature-based solutions into urban planning, analyzing local climate vulnerability and ecosystem services provision and developing recommendations, guidelines and projects for urban climate adaptation and mitigation.



Francesca Ferlicca, PhD

Rachel L. Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow, Sciences Po Urban School, France

Francesca Ferlicca brings a global perspective to urban planning through her research on the intersection of policy, sustainability, and social equity. Her scholarship appears in leading journals. Her academic expertise is complemented by extensive professional experience, having served as a consultant for both the Provincial and City Governments of Buenos Aires, the policy think tank CIPPEC, and the Inter-American Development Bank. Currently, she leads "Nature in the City," a four-year research project funded by the Gerard B. Lambert Foundation. This comparative study explores the relationship between urban vulnerable and informal environments and natural ecosystems, investigating how cities approach climate adaptation amid intricate socio-technical interactions between humans, institutions, infrastructures, and ecologies. The project particularly focuses on low-income, informal settlements, examining social equity dimensions of collective ecosystem stewardship across development contexts in both the Global North and South.



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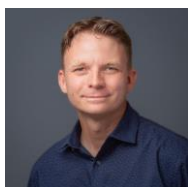
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Diane Bittar is an architect and urban planner working at the crossroads of urban development and international cooperation. After working in architectural firms and for a local authority on social housing, and urban regeneration, she joined the Agence Française de Développement Group. She first worked at AFD's New Delhi office on programmes related to urban planning, affordable housing, and the strengthening of urban services. She now works at Expertise France, supporting urban development projects in Cameroon, Ghana, and Togo, with a particular interest in the dynamics of intermediary cities. Her work focuses on supporting local authorities in the implementation of integrated urban projects, improving urban services, developing territorial planning tools and facilitating multi-stakeholder approaches to help shape more sustainable, inclusive and resilient cities.

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