



WORLD
RESOURCES | ROSS
INSTITUTE | CENTER

WRI ROSS CENTER PRIZE FOR CITIES

Catalyzing Healthy Cities

2025–2026







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Cities today stand at the center of some of the most urgent challenges of our time. Climate impacts are intensifying, inequality continues to shape who benefits from economic growth, and pressures on infrastructure and public space are growing rapidly. At the same time, cities are uniquely positioned to respond. As engines of innovation and collaboration, they are where bold ideas can take shape and deliver meaningful improvements to people's lives.

This cycle of the WRI Ross Center Prize for Cities was guided by the theme "Catalyzing Healthy Cities." Amidst global disruptions, we sought projects showing how cities can strengthen health and well-being, whether through access to nature, mobility, quality public space or vital services. The responses reflect both the urgency of this moment and the creativity with which cities are meeting it. We received a record 334 submissions from 230 cities across 77 countries, representing an extraordinary range of ideas and local leadership.

The 2025–2026 finalists and Grand Prize Winner show what is possible when ambition is matched with action. Their work demonstrates that healthier, more inclusive cities are not distant aspirations, but achievable outcomes when communities, leaders and institutions work together.

Over five cycles, the Prize has become a global platform for identifying and spotlighting transformative urban solutions. Together, these projects offer compelling evidence that meaningful change is already underway in cities around the world. They also remind us that the work ahead remains critical. The choices cities make today will shape health, resilience and opportunity for decades to come.

We hope their stories inspire bold action in cities everywhere.



A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a large, sweeping initial 'R' followed by a series of connected lines that form the rest of the name.

Rogier van den Berg
Global Director
WRI Ross Center for Sustainable Cities

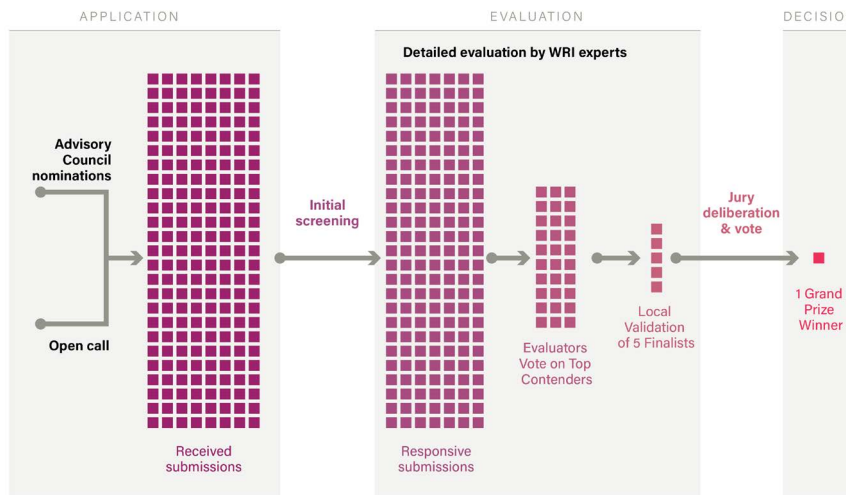
About the Prize

The WRI Ross Center Prize for Cities is awarded to trailblazing projects and initiatives based on their contribution to inclusive urban transformation and relevance to a cycle-specific theme.

WRI seeks to inspire urban changemakers across the globe by amplifying lessons learned and telling impactful stories of inclusive urban transformation. With the generous support of Stephen M. Ross, the Prize was awarded for the first time in 2019.

Submissions are sourced through an open call and from recommendations made by an Advisory Council, a network of leading urban practitioners and thinkers. From this pool, an international and multi-disciplinary evaluation team selects five finalists based on how they exemplify qualities to be emulated: they should apply big ideas to critical urban problems; demonstrate life-changing impact on people's lives and on their communities; and have ripple effects on institutions, the wider city and other cities.

The independent Prize Jury, composed of distinguished leaders in urban affairs, selects the Grand Prize Winner from five finalists through deliberation and voting based on their unique and diverse experiences and expertise. A cash prize of \$250,000 is awarded to the Grand Prize Winner and each finalist receives \$25,000.



A Movement of Changemakers

The Prize brings together people who dedicate their lives to creating more inclusive and sustainable cities.

- **Applicants** — the pool of exceptional projects identified as finalists and Grand Prize Winners expands each cycle, with applicants from the public, private and non-profit sectors submitting their projects and initiatives.
- **Jury** — leaders and visionaries from civil society, business, academia and government, who each have an exceptional track record and commitment to sustainable, inclusive cities.
- **Advisory Council** — several hundred urban practitioners and thought leaders from across the globe recommend applicants every cycle and help spread the word about exemplary work.

This growing community of urban changemakers is driving a common agenda in pursuit of inclusive and sustainable urban transformation. Together, we are building new knowledge and elevating successful examples of urban transformation on the global stage.



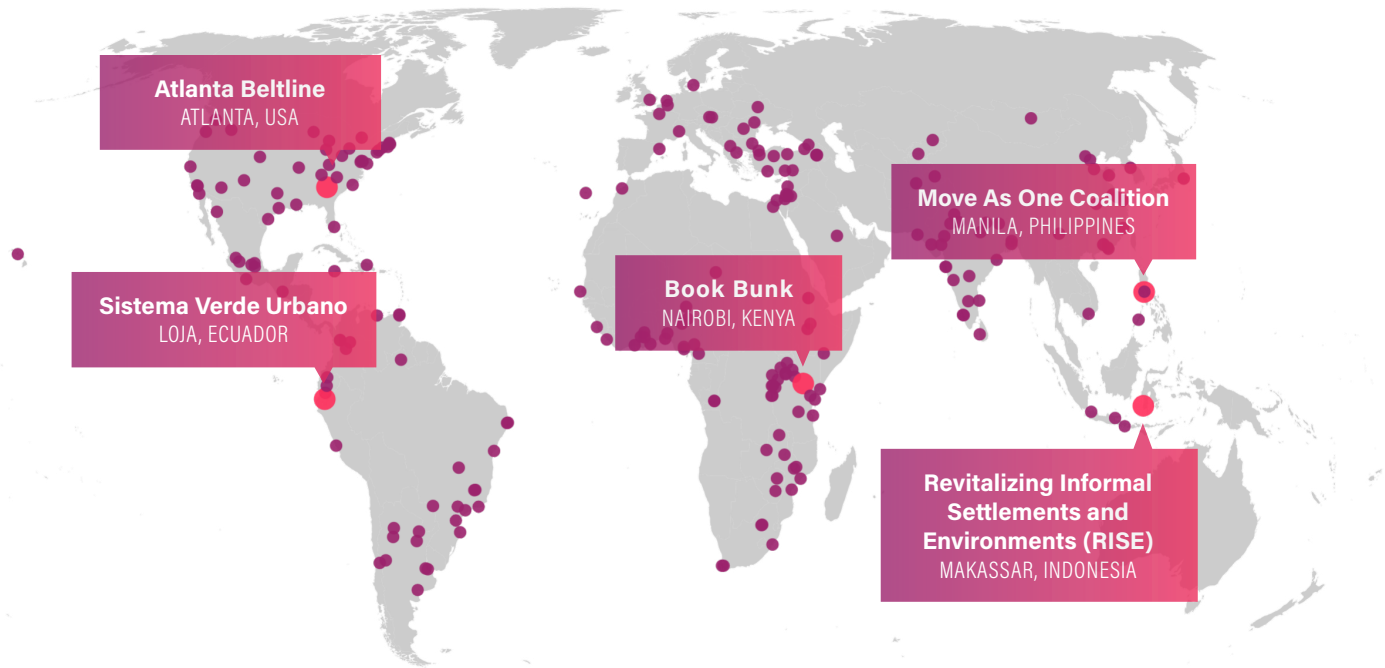
5 Finalists from Around the World

334
SUBMISSIONS

230
CITIES

77
COUNTRIES

6
CONTINENTS



2025–2026 THEME:

Catalyzing Healthy Cities

With more than half the world's population living in urban areas — and that number rapidly growing — cities play a critical role in advancing high-quality, sustainable living. Yet rapid urbanization, climate change and persistent inequality are putting immense pressure on infrastructure, basic services and quality of life for billions worldwide.

Against this backdrop, the 2025–2026 Prize cycle sought pioneering projects under the theme “Catalyzing Healthy Cities.” We looked for projects leading the way in strengthening livability, nature and cities together to create healthy, accessible and thriving communities.

There are many pathways to a healthy city. As the challenges facing cities intensify, the Prize aims to showcase diverse transformations — demonstrating how people and nature can thrive together, and how innovative approaches can improve air quality, mobility, housing, green space, well-being and more.

We received 334 applications from 270 cities across 77 countries this cycle, reflecting a remarkable array of bold ideas and local leadership. These entries illustrate how urban changemakers are not only confronting urgent health and sustainability challenges, but also transforming cities into more resilient, inclusive, low-carbon places and creating ripple effects within and beyond city limits.



2025-2026 Jury



Stephen M. Ross

Jury Chairman; CEO & Chairman, Related Ross; Founder & Chairman, Related Companies

Stephen M. Ross is the Chairman of the Prize Jury and generously funds the WRI Ross Center Prize for Cities. In addition to his support for WRI Ross Center for Sustainable Cities, he is the Chairman & Founder of Related Companies and a noted philanthropist and business leader.



Tatiana Bilbao

CEO, Tatiana Bilbao ESTUDIO



Jennifer Musisi

City Leader in Residence, Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative



Dave A. Chokshi

Sternberg Family Professor of Leadership, City College of New York



Henk Ovink

Executive Director & Founding Commissioner, Global Commission on the Economics of Water



María Neira

Former Director, Department of Environment, Climate Change and Health, World Health Organization



Carlo Ratti

Professor of Practice of Urban Technologies and Planning, Massachusetts Institute of Technology



Weiping Wu

Vice Provost for Academic Programs & Professor and Director of Urban Planning Program, Columbia University



Edgar Pieterse

Director, African Centre for Cities, University of Cape Town



Mark Watts

Executive Director, C40 Cities



Kulapat Yantrasast

Founder, Managing Principal & Creative Director, WHY Architectureities





GRAND PRIZE WINNER

Move As One Coalition

APPLICANT:

**Move as One Coalition via
WeSolve Foundation, Inc.**

LOCATION:

Manila, Philippines

POPULATION:

14 million

How They Won

Urban transport systems shape daily life in profound ways — influencing access to jobs, public health, environmental quality and the amount of time people spend moving through their cities. Yet in many places, decisions about transport infrastructure are made without meaningful input from the people who rely on these systems every day.

The independent Prize Jury selected the Move As One Coalition in Manila as the 2025–2026 Grand Prize Winner for demonstrating how organized citizens can reshape transport priorities and influence public decision-making.

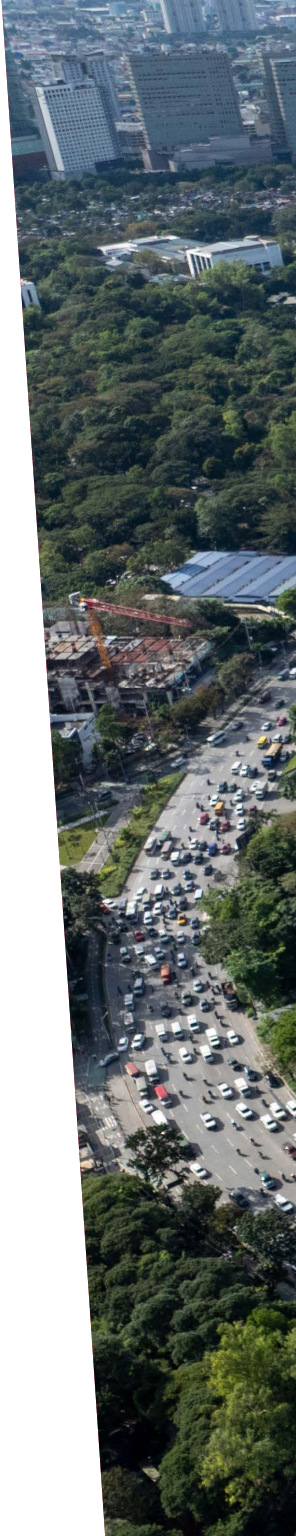
Formed during the COVID-19 pandemic when millions of commuters in the Philippines were left without reliable mobility options, the coalition unites advocates, researchers, commuters and civic organizations around a shared call for safer, more inclusive and people-centered transport systems.

The jury highlighted the coalition's ability to bridge grassroots organizing with formal policy processes. Through persistent outreach and collaboration with government agencies and legislators, Move As One has helped bring commuter perspectives into transport planning, budgeting and legislative discussions. By translating everyday travel experiences into policy-relevant advocacy, the coalition has helped shift public conversation toward safer streets, active mobility and more equitable transport systems, in metropolitan Manila and nationwide.

Jurors were particularly impressed by the coalition's discipline, persistence and collaborative approach. Move As One has strategically built relationships with career civil servants, technical agencies and lawmakers, helping align critique with institutional change and growing the movement from protest to action. This ability to connect communities, experts and government actors has enabled the coalition to influence decisions about how transport funding and priorities are set.

The jury also recognized the coalition's commitment to building long-term civic leadership. Initiatives such as the Young Mobility Leaders Program are cultivating a new generation of advocates who are equipped to engage in policy discussions and contribute to shaping the future of urban mobility in the Philippines.

Ultimately, the jury saw Move As One as a powerful example of how civic action can catalyze systemic change. By demonstrating that citizens can organize, influence policy and help redirect public investment toward healthier and more inclusive mobility systems, the coalition offers a hopeful model for cities around the world.



An aerial photograph of a city, likely San Francisco, showing a mix of urban buildings, green spaces, and a large highway interchange. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent red filter. Large, faint quotation marks are visible in the background, framing the text.

JURORS' THOUGHTS:

“Move As One sends a powerful message that big change can happen quickly — and that it doesn’t always have to be led by large institutions.”

MARK WATTS

“Today, youth-led movements like Move As One are not just protesting, they are building coalitions and figuring out how to work with the state.”

EDGAR PIETERSE

“I love this project as an example of catalyzing a healthy city because it represents health as self-determination. It is a very healthy intervention that came about because people believed that they wanted to shape their own lives in this way.”

DAVE A. CHOKSHI

THE PROBLEM

In many cities, car-oriented investment has left public transport, walking and cycling infrastructure underfunded, worsening congestion, pollution and road safety. In the Philippines, just 6% of residents own cars, yet transport systems still prioritize private vehicles. Millions of low-income commuters and transport workers face unsafe, unreliable and inaccessible mobility, with limited influence over decisions that shape daily travel, livelihoods and public space.

THE BIG IDEA

Reframe transportation as a civic issue by combining grassroots organizing with policy change that centers commuters, workers and everyday users in decision-making.







Metro Manila is one of the world's most congested urban regions. Long commutes, unsafe streets and fragmented transport governance shape everyday life. While the vast majority of residents rely on public and informal transport, planning and investment has historically favored private cars, sidelining the needs of the majority commuters, including many of the transport workers themselves who keep cities moving.

The Move As One Coalition — a national civil society movement of more than 140 organizations and 77,000 individuals across sectors — emerged in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic as a citizen-led petition calling for safer streets, protected bike lanes and emergency support for transport workers. What started as a volunteer-driven campaign quickly evolved into a broad coalition of commuters, transport workers, planners, youth leaders and advocates working to reframe mobility as a shared civic concern.

Supported administratively by the WeSolve Foundation, the Move As One Coalition combines accessible public messaging with rigorous policy and budget analysis. The coalition operates independently of government while engaging closely with career officials, legislators and municipal agencies to influence transport decisions. Its approach emphasizes lived experience alongside technical

evidence, ensuring that people left out of many transport policy decisions — such as low-income commuters, women, persons with disabilities and transport workers — have a seat at the table.

The Move As One Coalition has helped secure major policy and funding wins, including nearly \$1 billion in public transport investment, enabling large-scale bike lane programs, national service contracting for public transport, the launch of the country's first bus rapid transit system, and reforms to improve worker pay and protections. The coalition also tracks budgets, procurement and on-the-ground delivery to ensure commitments are implemented as intended, while supporting local leaders and communities to translate policy gains into tangible improvements in Manila and other cities.

A core focus of the Move As One Coalition is long-term change. Through its Young Mobility Leaders Program and a growing nationwide network of locally led initiatives, the coalition is building a pipeline of advocates who are advancing inclusive transport reforms across the Philippines. Together, these efforts demonstrate how a citizen-led coalition can shift narratives, influence governance and embed people-first mobility into everyday civic life.





LIFE-CHANGING IMPACT

A safer, more dignified and more accessible transport system across multiple modes for users and workers.

- 100,000 transport workers affected by improved pay and working conditions through sustained advocacy on labor protections and service standards.
- \$946 million in transport-related public funding successfully advocated for, prioritizing people-centered mobility and safer streets.
- \$12+ billion in medium- and long-term transport investments influenced by shifting national priorities toward mass transport, active mobility and equitable access.
- 1,200+ kilometers of bike lanes nationwide improved or added, including 800 kilometers in Manila and 400 kilometers beyond Manila, helping to normalize cycling as a viable mode of transport.



RIPPLE EFFECTS

A nationwide coalition reshaping how transport policy is debated, funded and implemented across the Philippines.

- The Move As One Coalition has grown from a Manila-based movement into a nationwide coalition, with its 142 member organizations embedded in transport advocacy and influencing local planning, budgeting and civic action across the Philippines.
- Through the Young Mobility Leaders Program, more than 140 young people now lead campaigns in their own cities, securing wins such as protected bike lanes, safer streets, and green mobility corridors in places like Naga and Makati.
- The Small Grants for Mobility Program has enabled community-led projects nationwide, including bike refurbishment for underserved riders, mobility training for adults with autism, women-led bike repair workshops, participatory mapping efforts and media literacy for transport workers.
- The Move As One Coalition has elevated Filipino voices to global platforms such as the UN-Habitat World Urban Forum, the World Movement for Democracy, and the Global Disability Summit, positioning these grassroots advocates as leaders in inclusive mobility and transport justice.



Nationwide lockdown declared on account of the COVID-19 pandemic, banning all forms of public transportation.

Frustrated by government delays, cycling advocates created makeshift bike lanes in Manila using water- and rock-filled barriers to help health workers commute safely.

2020

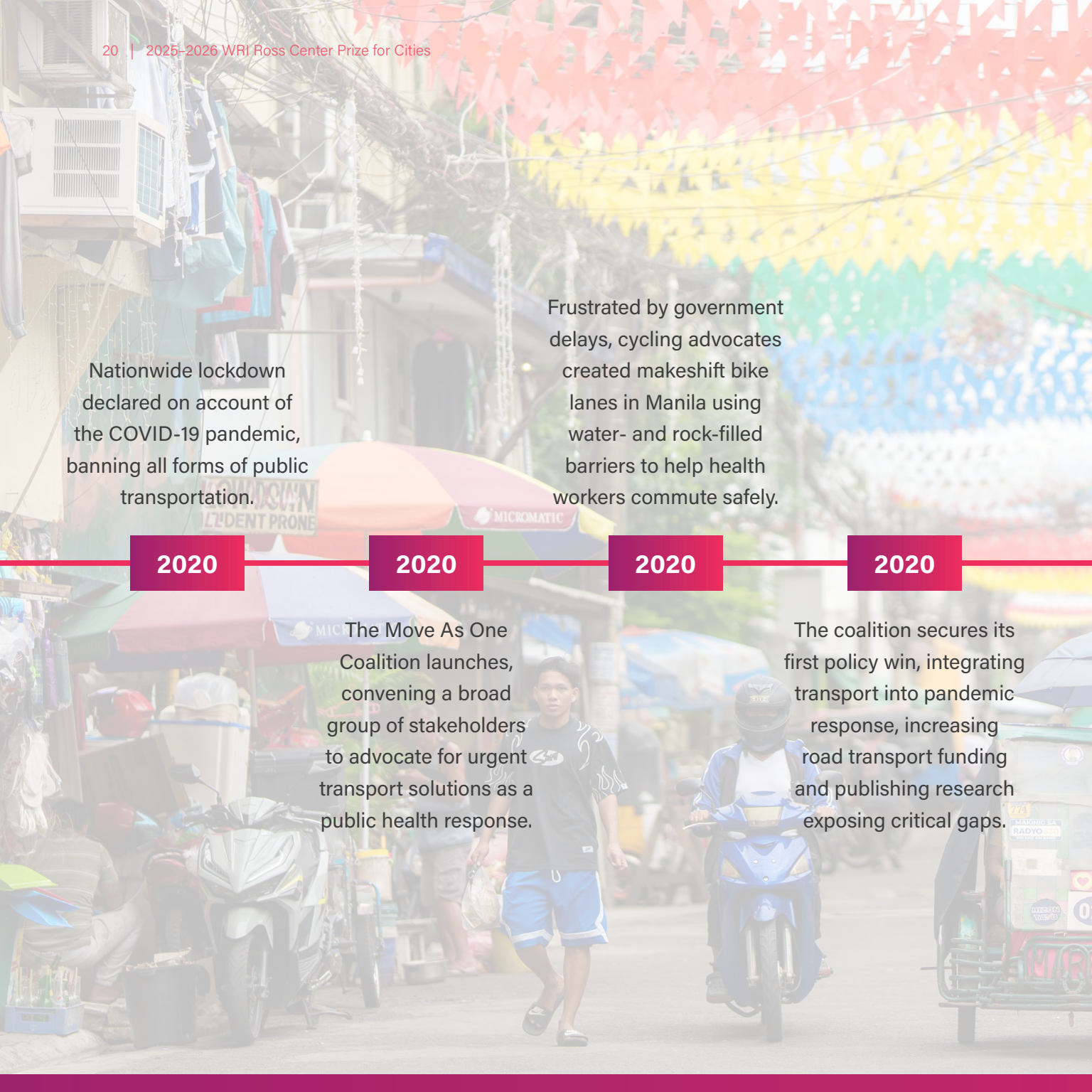
2020

2020

2020

The Move As One Coalition launches, convening a broad group of stakeholders to advocate for urgent transport solutions as a public health response.

The coalition secures its first policy win, integrating transport into pandemic response, increasing road transport funding and publishing research exposing critical gaps.



The coalition briefs presidential and vice-presidential candidates, elevating transport as a critical electoral issue and securing public commitments to sustainable mobility reforms.

2022

Key economic decision-makers engaged to address transport inefficiencies and push for targeted reforms during the country's post-COVID economic contraction.

2022

Coalition leadership shifts from a technical coordinator to a representative from the transport worker community, signaling greater sectoral representation and grassroots leadership.

2023

A new national transport secretary is appointed, pledging to build trust with civil society, and explicitly recognizes the coalition as a co-shaper of reforms.

2025



FINALIST

Atlanta Beltline

APPLICANT:

Atlanta Beltline, Inc.

OTHER CONTRIBUTORS:

City of Atlanta, Fulton County, Atlanta Public Schools, Invest Atlanta, Trees Atlanta

LOCATION:


Atlanta, USA

POPULATION:

520,000





An aerial photograph showing a long, curved concrete path that winds through a wooded area. The trees have some autumn-colored foliage. In the background, there are residential houses and a parking lot with some vehicles. The overall scene is a mix of natural and developed land.

“There have been concerted efforts to address challenging questions and negative impacts in ways that have led to improvements. The Atlanta Beltline demonstrates a city’s ability to take ongoing corrective action.”

HENK OVINK

THE PROBLEM

Urban infrastructure has often reinforced patterns of separation by creating physical, economic and social barriers between neighborhoods, especially in the United States, with its history of racial discrimination. After decades of sprawl and disinvestment, Atlanta's rapid growth left many residents car-dependent and disconnected, reinforcing long-standing physical and social divides.

THE BIG IDEA

Transform a 22-mile loop of defunct railway into a green space that anchors transit, affordable housing and economic opportunity, helping Atlanta grow in a healthier, more inclusive way.







Atlanta has long been shaped by sprawl, car dependence and infrastructure that divided neighborhoods and limited access to opportunity. The Atlanta Beltline is reversing that legacy by transforming 22 miles of former rail into a connected network of trails, parks and housing — reshaping how residents move, connect and experience the city.

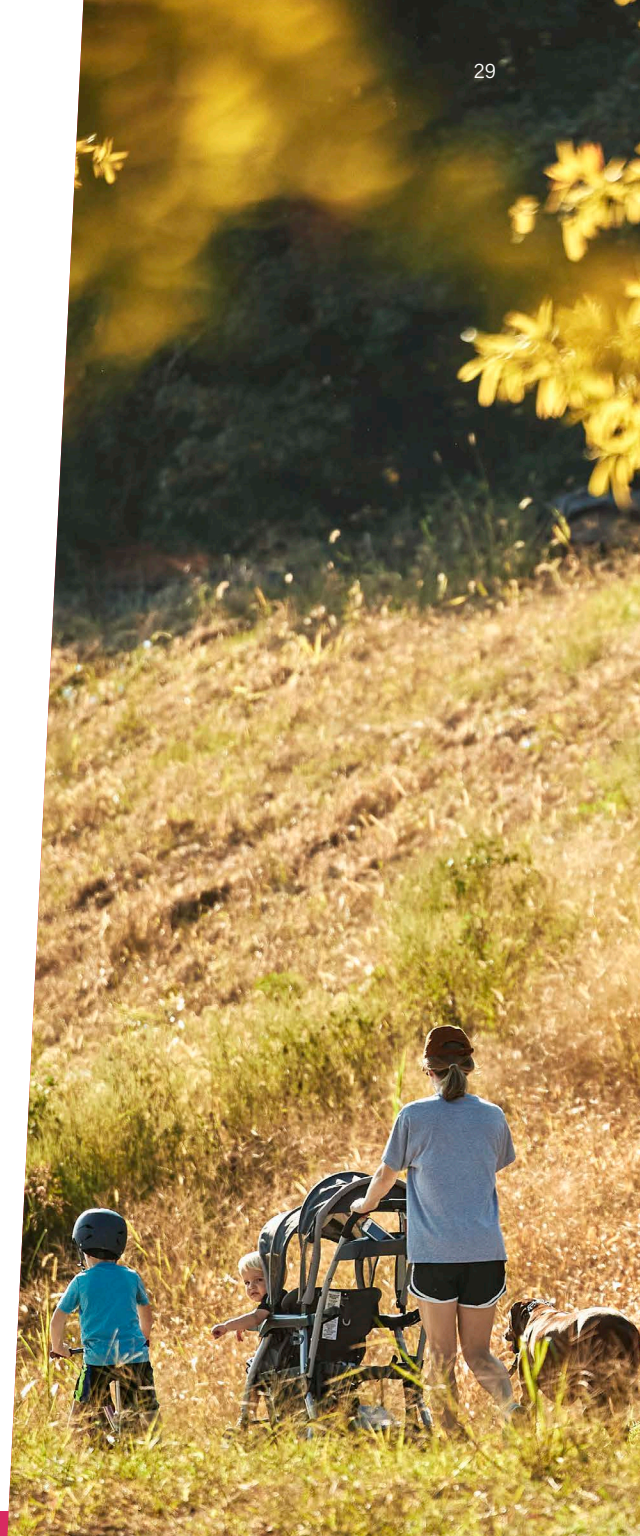
Originally conceived in 1999 as a graduate thesis, the Atlanta Beltline gained momentum through grassroots advocacy and was formally adopted by the City of Atlanta in 2005. Implemented by Atlanta Beltline, Inc., a quasi-public nonprofit, the project reclaims and links underused rail corridors as continuous public spaces that connect neighborhoods, jobs, schools, parks and cultural destinations.

The Atlanta Beltline addresses multiple challenges at once: limited access to green space, inequitable mobility options, lack of affordable housing and a legacy of disinvestment in historically Black neighborhoods. By stitching together fragmented areas into a continuous loop, the project creates safe, accessible routes for walking and cycling while laying the groundwork for integration with public transport. Spur trails extend these benefits deeper into surrounding communities, expanding everyday access to recreation, affordable housing, services and opportunity.

Environmental restoration is central to the Atlanta Beltline's approach. Former industrial lands and brownfields are being transformed into parks and greenways through partnerships with organizations such as Trees Atlanta. Thousands of trees have been planted, contributing to one of the world's longest linear arboretums, while new parks integrate stormwater management, habitat restoration and much-needed recreational space.

The Atlanta Beltline's impact extends beyond physical infrastructure. Public art, cultural programming and community-led events animate the corridor and foster a strong sense of civic identity. At the same time, the project has had to confront unintended but foreseeable consequences, including gentrification and displacement. In response, Beltline partners have course-corrected throughout the project's lifespan, implementing affordable housing and economic development programs to ensure the project's success lifts everyone.

The Atlanta Beltline serves millions of people each year and stands as a global reference point for large-scale, community-centered urban redevelopment, demonstrating how cities can retrofit legacy infrastructure for low-carbon growth while supporting healthier, more connected and more inclusive urban futures.





LIFE-CHANGING IMPACT

Expanded access to walking and cycling, increased green space, supported affordable housing and strengthened local employment, benefiting residents across the city.

- Supports 2+ million annual users, expanding safe walking and biking access in historically disconnected areas.
- Attracted more than \$9 billion in private development from an investment of \$776 million from 2005.
- Catalyzed 24,200 private sector jobs in the Atlanta Beltline planning area and an estimated 49,470 construction jobs.
- Supported 6,300+ affordable housing units through land acquisition, financing tools and partner developers.
- 6,000 business licenses within a half mile of the trail, including many entrepreneurs, small, local and women-owned businesses.
- Entrepreneurial cohort programs have served 100+ local business owners, helping create generational wealth for families.
- Delivered 470+ acres of new and improved green space, with a goal of 1,300 acres.
- Remediated 73+ acres of brownfields and reduced impervious surfaces to improve stormwater management.
- More than 47,000 volunteer hours contributed to maintenance, greening and restoration by the community.



RIPPLE EFFECTS

A global reference point for large-scale urban redevelopment and how to fight sprawl, inspiring cities to repurpose underused corridors into connected, low-carbon public infrastructure.

- The success of the Atlanta Beltline has accelerated public and political support for additional trail networks across Atlanta. New connector trails are being planned and built by the city and regional partners, extending access to recreation, active transportation and outdoor spaces well beyond the corridor.
- As adjacent neighborhoods redevelop, the corridor has helped normalize more compact, vertical development patterns. Regional planning models continue to project major population growth in the Atlanta metro area, and the project is increasingly viewed as a template for how to link new residential density to schools, jobs, parks and cultural destinations through well-designed multimodal infrastructure.
- The Atlanta Beltline has attracted significant national and international attention, drawing delegations from cities such as Hartford, Cincinnati, Birmingham and Los Angeles County, as well as global leaders including the Nairobi County Government. Planners, policymakers and nonprofit leaders regularly visit Atlanta to study the project's governance model, financing structure, trail design standards, affordable housing strategies and community engagement practices.



Georgia Tech student Ryan Gravel's thesis envisions the Atlanta Beltline as a transit corridor to revitalize Atlanta into a healthier, walkable city with co-located work, life and play.

The Great Recession causes the transit scope of Atlanta Beltline to be deprioritized. Efforts instead turn to greening the historic rail trail.

City Council passes Inclusionary Zoning for Beltline Planning Area, requiring set-asides for affordable rentals in any multi-family development over 10 units.

1999

Atlanta approves Beltline legislation and funding through a Tax Allocation District followed by the establishment of the Atlanta Beltline, Inc. to lead implementation.

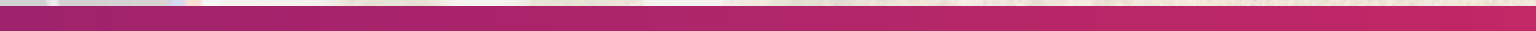
2005

2008

Half of the trail, 11 miles, is completed.

2017

2018



The Atlanta Beltline Special Service District is created and affirmed by property owners to help fund completion of the Beltline loop.

The Tax Allocation District is set to expire. A proposal to extend it through 2055 is underway.

2020

The COVID-19 pandemic leads to significant increases in construction costs and slows work, putting the project offtrack for 2030 completion.

2021

2025

~85% of the trail is complete or under construction.

2030



An aerial photograph of a city, likely Loja, Ecuador, showing a dense urban landscape with various buildings and a mountain range in the background. A prominent red diagonal bar runs across the left side of the image.

FINALIST

Sistema Verde Urbano

APPLICANT:

**Autonomous Decentralized
Government of Loja**

OTHER CONTRIBUTORS:

Universidad Técnica Particular de Loja, GIZ


LOCATION:

Loja, Ecuador

POPULATION:

203,000





“In many cities, green space is treated as a separate plan. In Loja, the green system became part of the city’s basic planning framework, embedded in budgeting, policy and community decision-making. It became part of the DNA of how the city plans and grows.”

WEIPING WU

THE PROBLEM

Rapid urbanization can severely alter ecological landscapes, destroying and isolating green space. Loja's natural assets — including parks, rivers and hillsides — were abundant but fragmented, degraded and disconnected from the city, limiting ecological function as well as people's mobility and access to public space.

THE BIG IDEA

Create a citywide system that integrates ecology, mobility, recreation and watershed protection, positioning green infrastructure as the structural framework for urban development.







Loja, a fast-growing mid-sized city in Ecuador's southern Andes, is surrounded by significant ecological assets: rivers, forested hillsides and areas of high biodiversity. Yet for years, these green spaces were fragmented, degraded and unevenly accessible, limiting their ability to support public health, climate resilience and everyday mobility of residents. Parks existed in isolation, river corridors were polluted and many neighborhoods lacked safe, connected access to nature or the broader city.

Sistema Verde Urbano ("Green Urban System") addresses these challenges by organizing urban development around an integrated system of green infrastructure. Led by the Municipality of Loja, the project links parks, rivers, peri-urban hillsides, urban agriculture areas and mobility corridors into a single, citywide network that guides land use, climate adaptation, public space and transportation planning.

At the heart of Sistema Verde Urbano is a network of more than 600 hectares of connected green areas, structured around the Zamora and Malacatos rivers and the wider watershed they sustain. Through regional watershed management, Loja has also protected peri-urban forest lands, improved river health and safeguarded the water

sources that supply nearly all of the city's drinking water, turning rivers once associated with pollution and flooding into foundations of a safer, healthier city.

Sistema Verde Urbano is supported by strong institutional coordination across planning, environment, mobility, public works and water agencies, with technical expertise from the Universidad Técnica Particular de Loja and long-term collaboration with GIZ. Community participation is embedded through neighborhood leadership structures, ensuring that residents help shape design, stewardship and use of green spaces.

Embedded across Loja's planning and climate frameworks, Sistema Verde Urbano has transformed green infrastructure into a city-making tool that aligns health, mobility and watershed protection within a single vision. More than 200,000 residents now benefit from improved access to nature, safer mobility routes and healthier public spaces. As other Andean cities look to Loja's experience, the system demonstrates how mid-sized cities can place nature at the center of urban development through coordinated planning, governance and implementation, while delivering tangible benefits for people and communities.

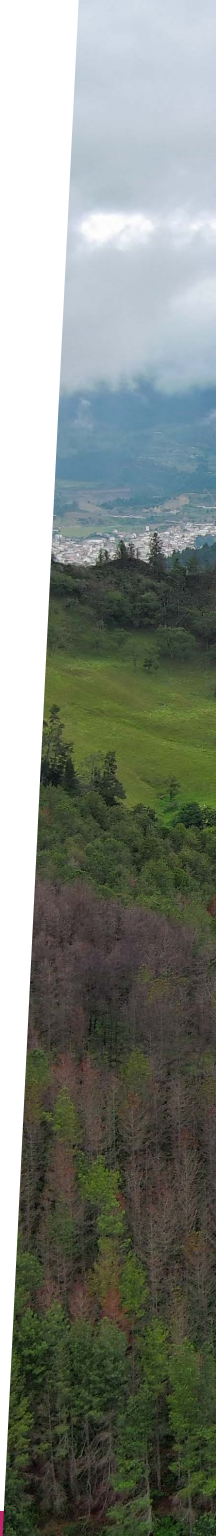




LIFE-CHANGING IMPACT

A connected network of green space and infrastructure improving access to nature, enhancing climate resilience and watershed function, supporting active mobility and mental health, and strengthening equitable access to quality public space.

- 3 distinct parks, 17 plazas, 87 neighborhood parks and 76 communal green spaces created, expanding equitable access to nature.
- 200,000+ residents benefit from expanded access to green space and safer walking and cycling corridors.
- 60% of residents belonging to vulnerable groups, including children and older adults, live next to at least one public green area.
- 32 kilometers of walking paths and active-mobility corridors built, improving non-motorized transport access across the city.
- 98% of Loja's drinking water now comes from a rehabilitated, protected watershed.
- Strengthened cross-departmental coordination and improved integration across urban planning, mobility and environmental management functions.



RIPPLE EFFECTS

A green infrastructure model replicated by other Andean cities, such as Cuenca, Ambato and Riobamba, and shared nationally, establishing Loja as a lighthouse for nature-based urban planning.

- Sistema Verde Urbano has expanded from an ecological framework into a citywide planning tool, integrating 180+ green spaces and shaping land-use decisions, mobility planning, densification strategies and climate adaptation across Loja.
- The project has become a national reference model for nature-based urban planning, with Ecuadorean cities such as Cuenca, Ambato and Riobamba studying its hierarchical green infrastructure approach, river-corridor restoration and integration of agroecological zones.
- Loja's innovative water treatment plant serves as a national training hub to support other Ecuadorean municipalities in end-to-end watershed management.
- Through partnerships with GIZ programs and national planning forums, Loja has shared its methodology, prompting replication of its ecological corridor design, participatory planning processes and watershed-based urban management in other Andean contexts.

Loja begins formalizing its green infrastructure with the creation of key urban parks, large areas that initially functioned in isolation.

2013

The municipality, UTPL and GIZ initiate a technical collaboration and form a working group to align green initiatives under a unified long-term ecological strategy.

2015

City assessments highlight the need to transition from isolated parks to a comprehensive system that addressed sprawl and ecological degradation.

2017

The unified plan is published as a guiding document with a 20-year horizon.

2020



Initial corridors along the Zamora River and community park upgrades begin, linking ecological restoration with inclusive urban mobility.

2021

Residents, schools and community groups are formally included in the co-design and stewardship of green areas.

2022

Loja launches an initiative to expand its urban bikeway system, connecting neighborhoods through green corridors and promoting non-motorized transport.

2022

Sistema Verde Urbano is formally included in Loja's 20-year planning instruments. Green corridors are integrated with non-motorized mobility networks as well as expansion of the city's bus rapid transit system.

2025



FINALIST

Revitalizing Informal Settlements and Environments (RISE)

APPLICANT:

Monash University

OTHER CONTRIBUTORS:

**Hasanuddin University, City of Makassar —
Department of Public Works, BLUD PAL**

LOCATION:

Makassar, Indonesia

POPULATION:

1.4 million



An aerial photograph of a rooftop garden. The garden is built on a tiled roof and features several raised concrete beds filled with various green plants, including tall grasses and leafy vegetables. A person in a blue shirt is visible in the upper left corner, tending to a plant. In the lower left, two women wearing hijabs are also working in the garden. The surrounding area includes a brick building with a rusty corrugated metal roof, a blue water tank, and a large banana leaf in the foreground. The overall scene is lush and green, contrasting with the urban environment.

“The RISE project is innovative because it addresses the problem in place rather than pushing communities out. It is not only improving lives — it is saving the lives of women, children and people with limited mobility.”

JENNIFER MUSISI

THE PROBLEM

For more than a billion people living in informal settlements worldwide, oral-fecal contamination remains a widespread urban health risk. In coastal Makassar, where more than 40% of residents live in such settlements, unsafe sanitation and frequent flooding pose daily risks to health and mobility, particularly for women, children, older adults and people with disabilities.

THE BIG IDEA

Deliver safe water infrastructure and urban services through community-driven, nature-based solutions designed specifically for the physical, social and environmental realities of informal settlements.







Makassar is a coastal city in Indonesia experiencing rapid urbanization. Climate risks, flooding and inadequate water and sanitation infrastructure intersect most acutely in informal settlements. For residents of these neighborhoods, home to almost half of the population, unsafe water, fecal contamination and limited drainage are daily realities that undermine health, access to opportunity and dignity. Conventional water infrastructure solutions can seem too costly or impractical in dense, flood-prone informal settlements, leaving residents exposed to many preventable health risks.

Revitalizing Informal Settlements and Environments (RISE) was created to address these risks. Led by Monash University and implemented in partnership with the City of Makassar, Hasanuddin University and local agencies, RISE delivers affordable, on-site water and sanitation solutions through simple, decentralized systems and community-driven design. The project transforms the physical and social conditions of informal settlements through improvements such as water purifying wetlands, rainwater harvesting, elevated walkways and safe public spaces.

At the core of RISE is a nature-based, water-sensitive approach that combines interventions like decentralized sanitation, climate-adaptive drainage, rainwater harvesting and wastewater treatment, designed and adapted for each neighborhood. These integrated systems clean water, reduce flood risk and improve urban conditions while functioning within the tight spatial constraints of informal

neighborhoods and the unique conditions of Makassar. Raised pathways and improved drainage also enhance everyday access to and from neighborhoods, particularly during heavy rains.

Community engagement and co-design are central to the project's success. Residents work alongside designers and city officials to identify priorities, map contamination pathways and shape solutions that respond to local needs, land tenure realities and people's lived experiences. This process builds ownership, strengthens trust and enables communities to engage more effectively with local government.

RISE addresses sanitation alongside broader urban challenges, including public space, safety and accessibility, ensuring that infrastructure investments generate multiple benefits at once. The result — confirmed by rigorous randomized control trials — is not only improved health outcomes, but stronger relationships between communities and institutions responsible for long-term service delivery.

RISE has transformed conditions across six settlements in Makassar and is shaping how the city approaches informal settlement upgrading generally. With additional sites identified locally and demonstration projects underway internationally, including six sites in Fiji, RISE shows how cities with large informal populations can improve health and resilience through inclusive, evidence-based, community-led urban transformation.





LIFE-CHANGING IMPACT

Improved access to safe water and sanitation and reduced flood risks, delivering healthier environments, safer mobility and more dignified living for residents.

- 1,400 residents directly benefiting from improved sanitation, drainage and access to infrastructure.
- 6,000 residents indirectly benefiting from better environmental health, safety and public space conditions.
- 332 toilets connected to 66 pressure sewer tanks, enabling safe, decentralized wastewater collection.
- 32 septic tank and wetland treatment systems constructed, delivering neighborhood-scale wastewater treatment.
- 53 new toilets constructed to expand access to basic sanitation.
- 304 rainwater tanks installed, increasing household water security and climate resilience.
- 4,872 meters of drainage constructed or upgraded, reducing standing water, flooding and contamination risks.
- 2,984 m² of raised pathways built, improving mobility, safety and flood resilience.





RIPPLE EFFECTS

Reshaped participatory planning and urban health governance in Makassar, influencing policy, institutional practice and settlement upgrading efforts within Indonesia and internationally.

- RISE has influenced local planning and resilience frameworks, embedding co-design, water-sensitive design and community participation into future informal settlement interventions in Makassar.
- The City of Makassar has identified 30 additional informal settlements for future upgrading explicitly using the RISE approach and committed to assuming operation and maintenance of these sites.
- Since 2024, RISE methods have been tested in West Java through the Citarum Action Research Program to improve waste and sanitation services for communities along the Citarum River, showing relevance across diverse water governance contexts.
- RISE has expanded internationally through demonstration sites in Fiji, with implementation underway in six informal settlements in Suva with Fiji National University, showing the transferability of its methods.

Monash University initiates RISE to address health and environmental risks using an integrated model of co-design, nature-based infrastructure and rigorous research.

2017

2018

12 sites selected in Makassar to participate in a randomized controlled trial. Household surveys and community meetings begin, underpinning the inclusive co-design.

The COVID-19 pandemic pauses construction. RISE pivots to locally led co-design and deepens partnerships, reinforcing resilience in its delivery.

2020

2021

Construction begins in six intervention sites in Makassar, including wetlands, sanitation and raised accessways alongside trainings for operations and maintenance for community representatives and municipal staff.



Infrastructure serving 1,400 residents in Makassar's six pilot settlements is operational.

2022

RISE's experience informs changes to Indonesian settlement upgrading and the project team releases co-design toolkits, which are integrated into urban resilience training and national workshops.

2022

Makassar identifies 30 settlements for program replication, initiating discussions on bringing RISE principles into budgeting and planning.

2023

City authorities and national ministries take on responsibility for operating and maintaining Tranche 1 infrastructure, aided by RISE's capacity-building and policy integration.

2025

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FINALIST

Book Bunk

APPLICANT:

Book Bunk Trust

OTHER CONTRIBUTORS:

Nairobi City County


LOCATION:

Nairobi, Kenya

POPULATION:

5.7 million



A photograph of a library interior. The room features a large wooden bookshelf filled with books, topped with several green plants. In the foreground, there are several wooden tables and chairs arranged for reading or study. A circular arrangement of colorful book covers is mounted on the wall above the bookshelf. A framed portrait of a woman with an afro is visible on the right wall. The lighting is warm and ambient.

“Knitting libraries into the social fabric of the city is critically important. It’s not only about books, it’s about building a city within a city where people connect and strengthen the social structure.”

HENK OVINK

THE PROBLEM

In many cities around the world, safe, inclusive public spaces beyond home and work, where people can gather, learn and connect, are rare. In Nairobi, colonial-era restrictions and decades of neglect left public libraries derelict and inaccessible, depriving many communities of “third spaces” for social connection.

THE BIG IDEA

Restore and reimagine public libraries as “Palaces for the People” — inclusive civic hubs that support learning, health, creativity and environmental resilience in Nairobi’s dense informal neighborhoods.







Nairobi's rapid growth has not been matched by investment in public space or social infrastructure. In many dense, lower-income neighborhoods, residents lack safe, accessible places not only to learn, but also to gather and connect. The city's public libraries — once intended as civic anchors, yet also segregated by race until independence — fell into decades of neglect, becoming physically degraded, under-resourced and largely disconnected from everyday life.

Book Bunk is reversing that trajectory by restoring and reactivating Nairobi's public libraries as inclusive civic institutions. Led by Book Bunk Trust, a Nairobi-based nonprofit working in partnership with Nairobi City County, the project rehabilitates historic library buildings and transforms them into vibrant, multifunctional "Palaces for the People." The renovated libraries are free, trusted and open to all, serving as places where learning, well-being and community life intersect.

Book Bunk begins with deep community engagement. Before any restoration or programming decisions are made, staff work with residents to understand hyperlocal needs, barriers and aspirations. This process ensures that each library responds to its neighborhood context while contributing to a shared citywide vision. To date, libraries in Eastlands and Kaloleni — areas with large informal neighborhoods, long excluded from sustained public investment — have been restored and reintroduced as safe, dignified public spaces.

Restoration addresses both physical and social access. Buildings are upgraded for accessibility, ventilation and sanitation, while digital infrastructure, modernized collections and assistive technologies expand who can use the space and how. Environmental sustainability is built into redesigns through solar power, rainwater harvesting, low-energy lighting and outdoor green spaces that offer rare pockets of nature in dense urban areas and help address colonial-era environmental injustices.

Programming is central to daily life in the libraries. Educational support, creative arts, digital skills, health clinics, free meals and childcare are woven into a flexible framework that responds to community priorities. By bringing learning, care and creativity together under one roof, the libraries reduce barriers to participation and foster trust and belonging.

Book Bunk's libraries serve as anchors of public life — places to study, seek care, share meals, create and connect. The model is expanding within Nairobi, including the restoration of the McMillan Memorial Library, the city's oldest library, and nationally through the mapping of more than 1,000 public library sites. The project shows how investment in shared spaces can drive healthier, more inclusive and more resilient cities through stronger civic fabric.





LIFE-CHANGING IMPACT

Rehabilitated, free libraries — including in long-neglected neighborhoods — serving as trusted places for learning and community services, expanding access to opportunity and strengthening community cohesion.

- 192,000+ direct library users reached since 2017, with an estimated 150,000 indirect beneficiaries across surrounding communities.
- 250% increase in library usage in Kaloleni and Eastlands following restorations.
- 45,326 participants engaged in free programs across arts, education, wellness and digital skills.
- 140,000+ free meals provided to children attending library programs, supporting nutrition and sustained participation.
- 93 jobs created through restoration and operations, including 21 permanent positions, with many roles filled by former volunteers and library users.
- 407 local vendors and small businesses supported through construction, programming and operations.
- 850+ m² of dilapidated public infrastructure rehabilitated into accessible, safe and active library spaces.



RIPPLE EFFECTS

Expanding across Nairobi and shaping national conversations about public libraries, with more than 1,000 sites mapped for future transformation across Kenya.

- The model is expanding within Nairobi, with restoration of the historic McMillan Memorial Library in progress, extending the approach beyond the initial Eastlands and Kaloleni sites.
- The 1,196 public library sites identified nationwide through Book Bunk's Library Ecosystem Research reveal the latent civic infrastructure available at a national scale and indicates growth potential.
- The *Book Bunk Blueprint* is a practical reference document on governance, restoration, financing and community engagement designed to assist other organizations seeking to restore libraries or any public "third spaces."
- Book Bunk has attracted interest from cultural institutions, urban practitioners and philanthropic actors across Africa, positioning the project as a reference model for library-led urban regeneration in emerging cities.



McMillan Memorial Library, previously restricted to Europeans, opens to African users for the first time.

1958

23 community events are held asking Nairobians to imagine their dream libraries. First digital cataloging of the three Book Bunk library collections is completed.

2017

Book Bunk Trust is established and secures a formal agreement with Nairobi City County to restore three historic libraries, preceding national devolution of library services.

2019

First Book Bunk site, Kaloleni Library, is restored with local labor during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2020

Restoration of second Book Bunk site, Eastlands Library, is completed with the help of community members, some of whom stay on in full-time library support roles.

2021

Library patronage increases 250% from 2019, with 45,000+ program participants.

Approvals secured from government authorities to begin restoration of McMillan Memorial Library, the city's most iconic library.

2022

2023

2024

2024

First-in-the-nation library accessibility report issued. Ten African titles translated into braille and large-print resources added.

1,196 libraries mapped nationwide and new digital catalog system goes live, with 18,000+ books uploaded to a searchable platform.

EXPANDING OUR LEARNING PARTNERSHIPS



Insights from Prize finalists and winners shape urban strategies worldwide. Across five cycles, the Prize has documented lessons from more than 1,200 submissions and 25 finalist projects, integrating this knowledge into WRI Ross Center’s global research, city engagements, data tools and capacity-building programs.

Launched in the 2023–2024 cycle, WRI’s partnership with the **Yale University Hixon Center for Urban Sustainability** has evolved into a sustained effort to deepen learning from the Prize and advance excellence in urban sustainability. By pairing Yale’s academic rigor with WRI’s global and local networks, the collaboration is surfacing new insights into what enables transformative urban change to take root and scale.

In partnership with the Hixon Center, we have published 15 new thematic issue briefs, had finalists contribute to the Yale Urban Climate Leadership Certificate Program, and developed and launched the **WRI Ross Center Prize for Cities Database**. Going live in January 2026, the database is an interactive tool featuring 150 longlisted submissions. It allows urban practitioners and researchers to explore city-led solutions addressing challenges from air quality and climate resilience to mobility and social inclusion. Users can search projects by geography, theme and focus area, helping cities discover relevant examples and learn from peers tackling similar challenges.

These efforts strengthen the Prize as a platform for learning and exchange, translating insights from finalist projects into lessons that can inform leaders, practitioners and cities worldwide.

HOW TO MAKE A CITY: THE NEXT DECADE OF URBAN ACTION

In the 2025–2026 cycle, WRI’s collaboration with the Hixon Center expands to include HOW TO MAKE A CITY, a special retrospective exhibition that draws lessons from 25 winning projects across five Prize cycles.

Debuted at the Morgan Library & Museum during the Awards Celebration and presented in partnership with the Hixon Center, the exhibition will explore how we can accelerate bold action to build cities where everyone can thrive.

Showcasing transformative projects and themes from around the world, the exhibition traces how locally rooted change can generate global inspiration. HOW TO MAKE A CITY highlights lessons that cut across cycles and geographies, revealing strategies cities can adapt to today’s most pressing challenges.

The exhibition debuted at the 2025–2026 Awards Celebration, traveled to Yale and will be shown around the world, helping engage audiences in dialogue about the future of urban transformation.



OUR VISION

We focus on integrated solutions to long-standing and new urban challenges. Through innovative research, deep engagement with urban leaders, and global partnerships, our network of local and international experts puts cities on a trajectory of more sustainable and equitable development. We catalyze and accelerate transformative urban initiatives that turn cities into resilient, inclusive, low-carbon places that are good for people and the planet.

ABOUT WRI ROSS CENTER FOR SUSTAINABLE CITIES

WRI Ross Center for Sustainable Cities is World Resources Institute's program dedicated to shaping a future where cities work better for everyone. Together with partners around the world, we help create resilient, inclusive, low-carbon places that are better for people and the planet. Our network of more than 500 experts working from Brazil, China, Colombia, Ethiopia, India, Indonesia, Kenya, the Netherlands, Mexico, Türkiye and the United States combines research excellence with on-the-ground impact to make cities around the world better places to live.



WRI works to improve people's lives, protect and restore nature and stabilize the climate. As an independent research organization, we leverage our data, expertise and global reach to influence policy and catalyze change across systems like food, land and water; energy; and cities. Our 2,000+ staff work on the ground in more than a dozen focus countries and with partners in over 50 nations.









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