

Post-conference article

by Ebou Ceesay

NATURE IN THE CITY ANNUAL EVENT 2025

Urban Nature at the Margins:
Contested Climate Adaptation Governance in Urban Informality

10 and 11 December 2025 | Sciences Po, Paris

With the generous support of the Gerard B. Lambert
Foundation and the Rachel L. Mellon Post-Doctoral Fellowship



Introduction

On 10–11 December 2025, the Urban School of Sciences Po hosted its second annual conference as part of the Nature in the City project. The event was funded by the Gerard B. Lambert Foundation and led by Francesca Ferlicca, Rachel L. Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow at the Urban School.

My name is Ebou. I am a student in the Master's programme Governing the Large Metropolis, and I supported the organisation of the event. Prior to the conference, I had the great opportunity to contribute to a capstone project, in which we conducted a comparative study on nature-based solutions (NbS) for water-related risks. Through visits to Cape Town, Paris, and Mexico City, we created a taxonomy of NbS typologies and examined the governance challenges and socio-ecological impacts in each city. During the conference's opening ceremony, I presented our key findings along with an interactive map of over 260 NbS projects, which we developed to analyse the diversity of approaches to risk management. The insightful presentations and discussions over the subsequent two days greatly enhanced my understanding of climate adaptation governance. Thus, in the following article, I will provide an overview of the event and share my reflections.

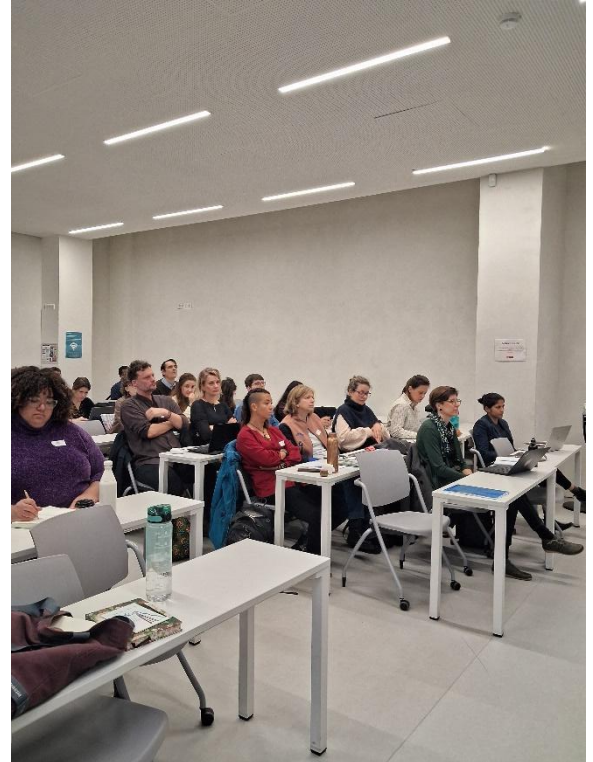
This year's edition focused on the theme "Urban Nature at the Margins: Contested Climate Adaptation Governance in Urban Informality," bringing together over 40 leading scholars and practitioners from Europe, Africa, and Latin and North America. To further enrich the academic exchanges, the conference programme also included an art exhibition curated by La Maison des Arts et de la Création, as well as a site visit to a regeneration project in Porte de Batignolles, hosted by the Ville de Paris.

Opening Keynote: Nature-based Solutions in African Cities

Anna Taylor from the University of Cape Town opened the conference with her keynote, "Nature-based Solutions in African Cities: Weighing Up Space, Safety, and the Legitimacy of Land Uses." She began by critically questioning the relatively new terminology of NbS, highlighting challenges related to its translation into local contexts and the need to further incorporate an interconnected perspective on risk. For NbS to achieve their effective and inclusive ambitions, she emphasized the importance of so-called climate-resilient development pathways. This entails the necessity for temporal and spatial scaling-up, the strengthening of key intermediaries that operate across spheres and sectors, as well as the expansion of circular economy

opportunities. Finally, she underlined the significance of fostering stronger connections between small-scale initiatives and international climate adaptation funding mechanisms.

[Prof. Manisha Anantharaman](#), moderator of the keynote, brought an environmental justice perspective into the discussion by questioning the



purpose and power dimensions of urban green infrastructure: Is it meant to sustain life or to ensure capital flow? How might it reproduce exploitation, particularly in the context of informal community engagement that relies on voluntary labor?

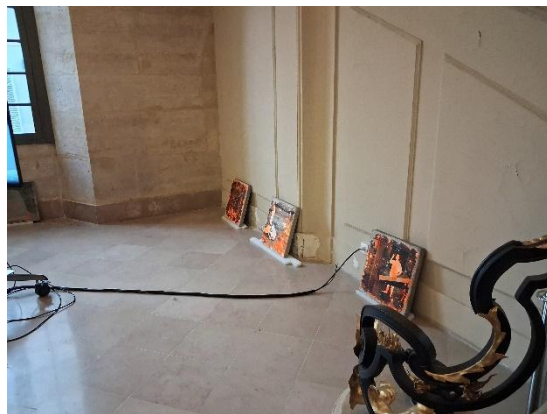
Panel Discussions: Day 1

During the first day of the course, among the many insightful presentations, researchers from the Kounkuey Design Initiative presented, for instance, their green infrastructure planning and co-production projects in Embu County, Kisumu, and Kibera (Kenya). They highlighted the need for participatory flood modelling to support negotiation in urban informal settlements. Scholars from University College London explored the co-production of an interactive map of nature–people initiatives in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam. By outlining the complexities of equitable knowledge generation, they also shed light on its positive effects on visibility, improved access to funding, and the strengthening of support networks for small-scale projects. Other attendees from Utrecht University investigated how

federal NbS policies are reinterpreted at the local level in Brazil's urban peripheries, revealing tensions between official inclusion narratives and everyday needs.

Art Exhibition

The afternoon was complemented by the art exhibition *Edge of the City*, featuring works by Nina Berman and Ismail Alaoui Fdili, two artists who explore the fragile balance between destruction and regeneration in urban environments. On the Sciences Po campus, Nina Berman showcased her photo series documenting community gardens that have transformed abandoned lots in the Bronx, New York, into vibrant green sanctuaries. Ismail Alaoui Fdili presented works from his *Destruction* series, which focuses on the erasure of natural and cultural landscapes through construction and development in countries such as Cambodia, Morocco, the Philippines, and Senegal.



Site visit: Quartier Python-Duvernois

On the morning of the second conference day, the Ville de Paris organized a guided site visit to the Quartier Python-Duvernois (20th arrondissement), where an ongoing urban renewal project spanning 17 hectares is currently underway. Located in a northern, working-class neighbourhood of Paris, the project aims to renovate degraded built heritage while also renaturalising public spaces. At the heart of this initiative is the development of Aretha



Franklin Park, which will serve as a green lung for the area by enhancing biodiversity, improving cooling effects, and increasing permeable surfaces.

Panel Discussions: Day 2

After the tour, the day continued with further presentations and discussions. Among these was the work of a scholar from Erasmus University Rotterdam, examining how local planning authorities enable the transition from NbS pilot projects to long-term institutional adoption in UK cities. Other presenters used scenario planning to expose colonial legacies embedded in NbS and to identify transformative, decolonial pathways for urban nature governance in Curaçao. Finally, work by ICLEI Africa demonstrated how

human rights principles can be applied in NbS practice, drawing lessons from Ghana and Sierra Leone.

Round Table: Translating Urban Nature Knowledge into Equitable Climate Policy



To conclude the conference, an engaging roundtable discussion, moderated by Francesca Ferlicca, brought together Julie Greenwalt (Cities Alliance), Niki Frantzeskaki (Utrecht University), and Vicente Ugalde (COLMEX). The session focused on how knowledge of urban nature can be translated into equitable climate policy. The panellists argued that current approaches still place excessive emphasis on modelling climate risk and that further research is needed on how to adapt to climate change at the local level in practice. The discussion also reflected on the barriers to scaling up Nature-based Solutions (NbS). While funding is a vital driver, questions remain as to whether – and whether it should even be an objective – to apply economic mechanisms for financing NbS in informal urban contexts. Finally, participants introduced a critical perspective, acknowledging that numerous structural barriers still prevent marginalized communities from gaining agency and visibility within research on urban nature and informality.



My Takeaways

As an organiser and attendee of this year's conference, I was not only impressed by the diverse environmental initiatives currently taking shape, but also found the discussions highlighting the gaps that persist within NbS discourse particularly enriching. Although informality is framed as central to NbS conversations, stakeholders from these contexts remain underrepresented in academic and decision-making spaces. Research forums, including this year's conference, would both benefit from and hold a vital responsibility to further diversify voices and knowledge systems. This also points to the need for a more equitable allocation of funding to support local actors from affected areas in participating in such arenas.

Another recurring theme at the conference was the dominance of global NbS narratives and terminology, often shaped by financial institutions and policy frameworks. Research frequently is oriented toward how

internationally endorsed concepts can be translated into informal or local settings. Far less attention, however, is given to how community-based practices and languages might inform, reshape, or even challenge prevailing NbS paradigms. I believe this asymmetry risks reproducing hierarchies and limiting the transformative potential of NbS in informal urban environments.

Finally, my observations during my field trip to Cape Town as part of the capstone project strongly resonated with the conference presentations, illustrating how urban nature is deeply entangled with socio-political systems. For instance, water rehabilitation efforts are unlikely to produce sustainable or equitable outcomes if they are not systematically accompanied by improvements in basic infrastructure – such as waste management and sanitation – as well as trust-building initiatives between local governments and residents and income-generating opportunities. As emphasised by Anna Taylor in her opening speech, there is a need for more intersectional and interconnected approaches to climate-resilient development. Such holistic approaches may seem challenging in practice or go beyond the traditional mandates of urban nature actors. However, this conference highlighted that, by embracing these interdependencies, NbS initiatives can move closer to delivering effective, just, and context-sensitive solutions.

Thank you to all the participants who made this unique experience possible, and to the Gerard B. Lambert Foundation for their generous support.

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