Davos
Baukultur
Alliance

INNOVATIVE
PRACTICE
CASE STUDY

Lamu Old Town

Lamu Old Town faces multiple threats from climate change, energy needs and rapid social and economic transformation. The Lamu Old Town Management Plan and the Lamu Municipality Waste Management Policy focused on integrating physical, social and environmental solutions with traditional practices that could help in building resilience to climate change.

GEOLOCATION	Lamu District, Coast Province, Kenya
TIMEFRAME	2013 to present
PRESENTED BY	UNESCO

HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE DAVOS BAUKULTUR QUALITY SYSTEM

Definitions

GOVERNANCE	DIVERSITY
FUNCTIONALITY	CONTEXT
ENVIRONMENT	SENSE OF PLACE
ECONOMY	BEAUTY

The Old Town of Lamu – inscribed on the World Heritage List in 2001 – is situated on an island of the same name in the Lamu Archipelago on Kenya's northern coast. Due to its location on a sandy island, Lamu Old Town is especially vulnerable to the effects of climate change, particularly rising sea levels. The spring tide overflows at various points along the waterfront, adversely affecting the buildings through capillary action and erosion. In addition, the destruction of mangroves in some areas, which used to serve as a natural defence against strong winds, tsunamis and advancing waves, has exacerbated these risks.

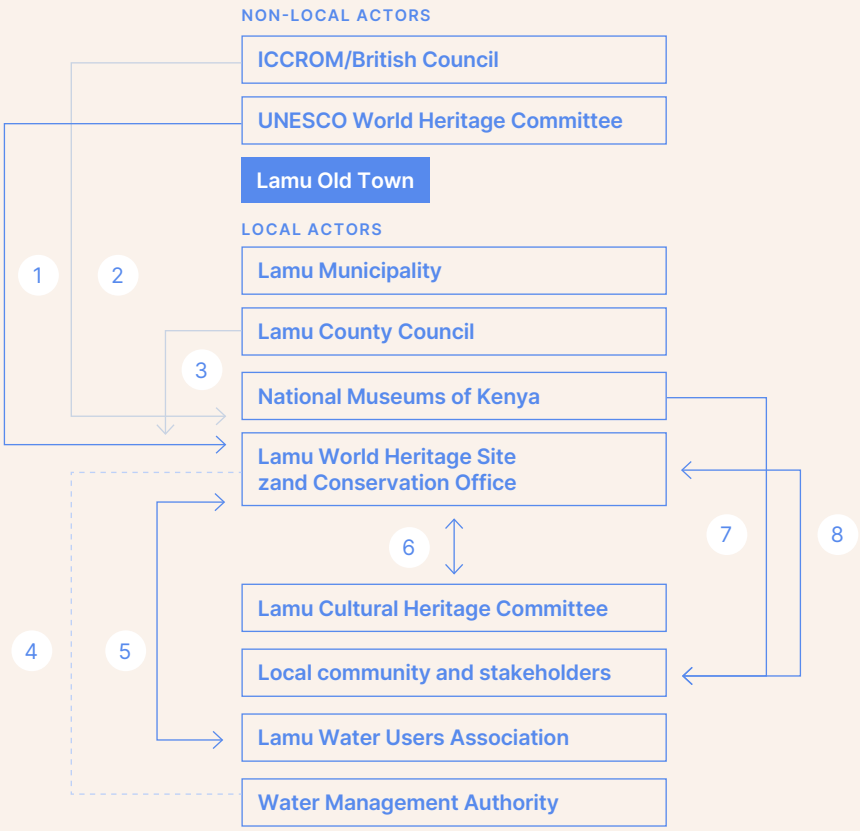
Other threats affecting Lamu Old Town include rapid social and economic transformation and pressure from urban development, transport infrastructure, encroachment of the archaeological sites, non-renewable energy facilities (coal power plant), and intensified water shortages, as a result of the Lamu Port-South Sudan-Ethiopia Transport (LAPSSET) project.[1]

The traditional knowledge and practices local to Lamu offer insights into sustainable solutions for mitigating and adapting to the impacts of climate change. Lamu Old Town was founded on a rising dune, ensuring natural stormwater drainage towards the sea. The mangrove forest on Manda island and nearby islets acts as a natural defence against strong winds, tsunamis and waves. The town's thoroughfares are aligned with prevailing seasonal winds and daily sea breezes, allowing natural cooling. The narrow streets formed by nearby buildings provide shading, keeping street-level temperatures cool. The thick walls and floors of the stone structures enhance the hygrothermal comfort of the buildings. Local knowledge of weather patterns, sea movement and safe areas during adverse conditions, accumulated by fishers, farmers and sailors over centuries, further enhances the community's resilience.

The project helps to safeguard Lamu's local built and natural context by prioritizing local cultural values as well as long-term investment by knowledge-sharing and training the community through using low-cost, nature-positive solutions as part of climate change mitigation action. Primarily, this was facilitated through the production of both the Lamu Old Town Management Plan[2] and the Lamu Municipality Waste Management Policy[3] and supported by engaging local communities in the documentation and mapping of Indigenous knowledge in a series of community empowerment and capacity building workshops.

GettyImages/Anja Koeberle

Stakeholders



1 Support in management (Management Plan), and site monitoring and community empowerment.
2 Stakeholders training support providing advice
3 Conservation advice
4 Conflicting interests
5 Dune monitoring
6 Development of action plans
7 Capacity-building, training and awareness-raising
8 Training, collaboration including monitoring activities

Source: UNESCO. (2024).

Key outcomes

Using both traditional knowledge and practices and the local regulations, Lamu Old Town is considering and implementing a number of opportunities to resolve the threats posed by climate change, energy needs and modern lifestyle changes.

GOVERNANCE The project promotes place-specific processes, with the participation of the local community in documenting, assessing and adapting to climate change while strengthening partnerships between the public, private and civil society sectors. This includes the documentation and mapping of indigenous knowledge.

- In January 2022, the Kenyan National Commission for UNESCO conducted a community empowerment workshop with the support of the UNESCO Participation Programme. Enabling youth to identify and document this body of knowledge ensures its continuity and widespread use by current and future generations.

- In addition, various workshops were organized under the "Emergency Preparedness Project for the Lamu Museum in Lamu Old Town" including "Capacity Building Workshop for National Museums of Kenya Staff and Community Emergency Responders" (June 2021), the "Emergency Preparedness Project for the Lamu Museum in Lamu Old Town" (February 2021),[4] and "Climate Action and Disaster Risk Management for Cultural Heritage Sites along the Coast of Kenya (CADRM–K)".[5]

ENVIRONMENT The project aims to integrate climate change measures into local policies, strategies and planning while increasing local community capacity for climate change mitigation action through awareness-raising and participation in mitigation actions. This includes:

- **Plastic waste:** Local communities, with the help of state and non-state institutions, are implementing recycling programmes to reduce the volume of waste that cannot be adequately incinerated locally, thereby lowering harmful emissions like carbon monoxide from partial combustion.

- **Flood monitoring:** The site manager continues to monitor the periodic flooding of the seafront street annually.

- **Protection and regeneration of native mangrove forests:** The mangrove forests surrounding the town serve as a natural barrier, protecting the area against advancing waves and potential tsunamis. To help protect the forests, UNESCO formally extended the buffer zone of the old town in 2008 to include the mangrove area as part of the town's protected natural landscape and the Manda-Kitau skyline. Ongoing restoration works on mangrove forests are being conducted by Wetlands International, the Mangrove Action Project and the Kenya Forest Services.

- **Safeguarding Lamu's source of drinking water:** Recent construction activities threatened this vital water source. Local communities, in collaboration with state agencies and the UNESCO World Heritage Centre, strongly objected to these activities. The community-led protests against the Water Management Authority's development plans have gained national prominence as one of the best examples of community-led aquifers protection in the country.

DIVERSITY

The site management authority works closely with stakeholders to address the site's challenges, including hosting regular meetings with local communities, maintaining formal working relationships with the Lamu Water Users Association to assist in monitoring the dunes, establishing the Lamu Cultural Heritage Committee to develop action plans, and training local stakeholders on community-based adaptation and alternative livelihoods.

Replicability

- Inventorying and mapping of historical layers in the local context, preferably in collaboration with the local community.
- Revival of traditional building techniques and knowledge systems.
- A participatory approach to management and conservation of heritage sites together with capacity-building activities, including training of the local community and stakeholders.
- Value assessment prior to undertaking conservation plans and works.

Lessons learned

- The local community holds extensive knowledge of local geography and historical weather patterns over long periods of time and a deep understanding of how flora, fauna and other environmental characteristics can provide critical information on changing weather patterns.
- Ensuring that the envisioned disaster risk management plans for each of the participating sites strongly advocate for the active participation of women and girls especially in governance structures of the respective sites.
- The important role in providing linkages between alternative non-destructive livelihoods and climate change.

Read more

Explore more studies in the full publication:
Innovative Practice

Read the Eight criteria for a high-quality Baukultur:
The Davos Baukultur Quality System

Keep up to date with the alliance:
davosalliance.org

Endnotes

1. According to the recent joint UNESCO World Heritage Centre/ ICOMOS/ICCROM reactive monitoring mission report: World Heritage Centre/ICOMOS/ICCROM. (2019). Report on the Joint World Heritage Centre/ICOMOS/ICCROM: *Reactive Monitoring Mission to Lamu Old Town (Kenya) (c 1055).*
2. The draft management plan was developed by UNESCO in collaboration with the National Museums of Kenya in 2013 to "conserve the outstanding universal value of the cultural heritage assets of the Lamu Old Town and its complimentary buffer zone areas": UNESCO. (2013). *Lamu Old Town World Heritage Site.*
3. Municipality of Lamu. (n.d.). *Solid Water Management Policy*. https://municipality.lamu.go.ke/pdf_files/solid_water_management_policy.pdf
4. This included Significance Assessment (Attribute Identification & Value assessment) and Risk Assessment Reports.
5. Jointly organized by ICCROM, British Council and National Museums of Kenya (December 2020).

Cover image: Photographer: Erik (HASH) Hersman, via Wikimedia Commons CC BY 2.0 DEED

WORLD ECONOMIC FORUM

Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft
Confédération suisse
Confederazione Svizzera
Confederaziun svizra

Swiss Confederation

Federal Department of Home Affairs FDHA
Federal Office of Culture FOC

The text of this case study was adapted from: UNESCO. (2023). *World Heritage Canopy*. The above are some of the conclusions and recommendations provided during the "Emergency Preparedness Project for the Lamu Museum in Lamu Old Town" including the Capacity Building Workshop for National Museums of Kenya Staff and Community Emergency Responders in June 2021, and "Climate Action and Disaster Risk Management for Cultural Heritage Sites along the Coast of Kenya (CADRM –K)," in December 2020.