

Organization of World Heritage Cities Lamu Meeting

Lamu (Kenya), December 1-3, 2025

The contribution of African World Heritage cities to the habitability of historic centers¹



CONTEXT

The Organization of World Heritage Cities (OWHC) is an international network of more than 120 cities working together to preserve heritage and improve the well-being of their inhabitants.

At the 16th OWHC World Congress (Quebec City, Canada, September 2022), mayors agreed to develop a *New Urban Project* to regenerate historic centers through habitability-focused urban strategies. It will provide tools and support to World Heritage cities to address the increasingly complex challenges posed by climate change, economic pressures, and social crises.

The *New Urban Project* will be officially adopted at the 18th OWHC World Congress in Marrakech, Morocco (October 26-29, 2026).

¹ This report, prepared by the General Secretariat of the OWHC, takes into account the contributions of participants, the Advisory Group, and the report prepared by the rapporteur of the Meeting appointed by the city of Lamu, Mr. Allen Ofafa.

LAMU MEETING

Introduction

The main purpose of the *Lamu Meeting* was to inform sub-Saharan African cities about the work currently being done by the OWHC and its objectives. The participation of mayors and senior officials from seven cities² provided an opportunity to understand the challenges and specific situations currently facing these cities. The discussions enabled them to identify with the OWHC's *New Urban Project* and, at the same time, to enrich the ongoing process.

The *Lamu Meeting* created a platform for dialogue that will be perpetuated through the "Lamu Group." The experiences shared have already made it possible to envisage solutions that can be discussed by each city and contribute to initiating or accelerating collective work between cities in sub-Saharan Africa based on the common language developed on habitability. This meeting allows the incorporation of the sub-Saharan perspective into the *New Urban Project*. The process initiated in Lamu will finally consolidate the links between the cities of sub-Saharan Africa and the OWHC in view of the 2026 World Congress.

Workshops

Discussions took place during several exchanges, including presentations on the priorities and challenges of participating cities in terms of heritage and habitability. The city of Lamu served as a case study for the meeting because it is one of five OWHC member cities participating in the "Urban Heritage Regeneration Accelerator." This activity is led by CHiFA, a OWHC partner, as part of the *New Urban Project* programs.

CHiFA presented this nine-month peer coaching and learning program, which is designed to enable historic city officials to define and accelerate implementation plans and strategies aimed at unlocking the value of cultural heritage and launching heritage-based urban regeneration initiatives that can attract investment, with a view to identifying alternative and mixed financing solutions. Visits to the main sites targeted by the Accelerator helped to position the issues of habitability and thus launch discussions in workshops. The participating cities presented their situations; the invited institutions — UN-Habitat, UNESCO, and the World Monument Fund — also shared their experiences and explained the framework of cooperation through which they support World Heritage cities in Africa.

Habitability challenges and ongoing actions (Summary of city presentations)

Agadez, Niger

- Strengthen cooperation and technical and financial support between the state, the sultanate, the municipality, and communities;
- Finalize planning tools and coordinate them (urban development master plan and sanitation master plan);

² Cidade Velha (Cape Verde), Harrar (Ethiopia), Lamu (Kenya), members of the OWHC, Agadez (Niger), Chinguetti (Mauritania), St. Louis (Senegal), Timbuktu (Mali)

- Stimulate the traditional local economy (promotion of crafts, particularly by women);
- Raise awareness among communities to generate a sense of belonging and responsibility towards heritage and encourage citizen involvement in its conservation and promotion.

Cidade Velha, Cape Verde

- Integrate and involve local communities to help them understand the value of heritage preservation and avoid their marginalization in the development process;
- Strike a balance between heritage conservation and meeting the population's needs for sustainable development, modernization, and recreational spaces;
- Control urban expansion in a context of limited land availability, which puts considerable pressure on the historic district and requires well-planned relocation solutions;
- Maintain and preserve heritage on a regular basis;
- Ensuring that restoration and development projects improve the quality of life for residents and the visitor experience;
- Promote local heritage to strengthen the cultural identity of the community.

Harar, Ethiopia

- Identify alternatives to address insufficient funding and the shortage of qualified professionals;
- Combat unauthorized construction and renovation and encroachment on land;
- Clarify responsibilities, procedures, and legal frameworks;
- Increase community involvement;
- Implement the "Harar Corridor" development initiative to strike a balance between heritage preservation and contemporary urban needs (conservation, rehabilitation, and reuse of historic buildings, as well as restoration of traditional private homes);
- Modernize essential infrastructure—waste management, water supply, drainage systems, and public transportation—to improve the overall functionality of the city.
- Improve and rehabilitate public spaces to enhance quality of life and accessibility.
- Develop green spaces to promote sustainability and enhance climate resilience;
- Stimulate economic growth by creating jobs in tourism, crafts, and traditional trades, providing stronger support for the local economy.

Lamu, Kenya

- Manage the impacts of climate change (sea level rise, saltwater pollution of water resources, and increasingly intense rainfall);
- Compensate for the lack of resources of historic building owners who cannot afford costly restorations (traditional materials and skilled labor);
- Slowing the gradual loss of local skills, particularly among young people, which is jeopardizing centuries-old Swahili craftsmanship in the fields of construction and furniture making;
- Organize better governance, in particular by improving coordination between services and the enforcement of building codes;
- Address the growing pressure of rapid development (urbanization and major projects such as the LAPSET corridor);

- Modernize drainage systems in the old town to reduce flooding;
- Reduce traffic congestion and improve pedestrian traffic along the waterfront with the completion of the Amu bypass;
- Remedy the current disorder on the quays by establishing organized mooring points along the waterfront;
- Increase open public spaces (development of Wiyoni Beach Park, Domoni);
- Launch a training program in crafts related to restoration projects, while recognizing that these crafts are not profitable due to a lack of sufficient markets;
- Strengthen waste management by introducing sorting systems to reduce the overall volume of waste;
- Implement pilot projects (restoration of historic houses).

Saint-Louis, Senegal

- Manage the city's exposure to climate risks (coastal erosion, flooding, rising sea levels) that threaten its built heritage and the living conditions of its inhabitants;
- Take action on the advanced deterioration of buildings, exacerbated by joint ownership of inherited property and the lack of resources among private owners;
- Strengthen structured heritage governance based on regulatory tools (PSMV), dedicated bodies (Maison du Patrimoine, Regional Authorization Commission, Hazard Management Committee) and better coordination between the State, the municipality, local actors, and international partners;
- Develop a strategy based on an integrated approach combining heritage rehabilitation, the redevelopment of public spaces, the promotion of heritage resources, and the participation of local communities;

Timbuktu, Mali

Following the security crises that caused tourism to disappear in the 2010s and weakened the local economy, the reconstruction of destroyed heritage represented an opportunity for social cohesion, job creation, and conflict prevention linked to radicalization through economic integration. Today, the threats remain multiple and combined:

- Developing strategies to tackle poverty and the lack of resources for the conservation of old buildings;
- Finding alternatives to the fragility of earthen constructions in an arid climate;
Combating climate change (desertification, sandstorms, insufficient green belts, regular sand removal programs);
- Correcting the misappropriation of the concept of heritage by certain communities;
- Manage population growth encroaching on protected areas, incivility, and non-compliance with urban planning rules, including by the authorities;
- Finding solutions to acute problems of sanitation, waste management, and access to drinking water, particularly in the medina;
- Restore the transmission of traditional skills, innovate, and adapt to markets transformed by the absence of tourism;

- Support awareness-raising and cultural initiatives aimed at restoring mosques, public squares, libraries, and manuscripts, in order to strengthen the transmission of values, heritage education, and its appropriation by younger generations.

Results

1. The presentations illustrated in concrete terms how habitability, as defined by the OWHC, can provide a **framework for action in historic centers**. Cities have taken original and bold steps to maintain their historic centers as inhabited and living places in the face of:
 - A built heritage that is vulnerable to the climate crisis (flooding, storms, desertification, rising sea levels) and complex legal situations (joint ownership of inherited property).
 - A breakdown in the transmission of know-how and the weakening of traditions (traditional building trades, crafts, the scarcity of traditional materials, which leads to the use of inappropriate alternatives).
 - Social vulnerabilities and identities and customs disrupted and challenged by contemporary needs (access to electricity, water, roads) without losing the authenticity and soul of the sites.
 - Fragile local economies that do not generate enough resources to finance the maintenance and restoration of heritage.
 - Pressure from growing tourism and population migration
 - Aging or inadequate health and sanitation infrastructure.
 - Motorized transport unsuited to the narrow streets of historic centers.
 - Fragmented governance (difficulty coordinating stakeholders or enforcing legislation on heritage and urban planning—civic or institutional indiscipline—or developing a comprehensive strategy).
2. Indeed, the participating cities have rallied around certain values that clarify the aspirations of the *New Urban Project*:
 - The historic center is first and foremost a living environment for residents.
 - The resilience of old neighborhoods allows them to adapt without losing their identity.
 - Tangible and intangible heritage is a living resource.
 - Maintained and renewed urbanity is the driving force behind development rooted in historical continuity and heritage preservation.
 - Reinvestment in traditional skills to maintain social cohesion, mutual aid, and a locally rooted economy.
3. The various actions carried out, ongoing, or planned reflect **the key principles of habitability and establish the convergence between the ambitions of African cities and the objectives developed by the OWHC**. The cities of the "Lamu Group" confirm the OWHC's approach and make a concrete contribution to strengthening the *New Urban Project* in the perspective of Marrakech.
 - Acting in historic centers by considering them first and foremost as living environments in their own right, where heritage is a resource that guides urban development and transformation choices that prioritize quality of life and well-being.

- Strengthen the identity of World Heritage cities, their authenticity, and their ability to adapt to contemporary needs by preserving their tangible and intangible heritage and supporting traditional uses of the city and local know-how.
- Create places for people to meet and share ideas about the city, its history, its future, its traditions, and its authenticity, to ensure that heritage awareness is passed on and to encourage innovation based on heritage.
- Strengthen the resilience of historic neighborhoods to environmental risks, drawing on local urban forms, materials, and practices.
- Establish mobility solutions adapted to inhabited historic centers, compatible with their scale, the morphology of streets/alleys, their fragility, and the daily habits of residents.
- Reconcile attractiveness, tourism, and local life by managing economic and demographic pressures as well as economic activity related to local crafts.
- Establish governance that promotes coordination between local stakeholders and mutual assistance between heritage cities.
- Enable buildings to be adapted to contemporary uses while preserving their architectural character and authenticity
- Design the city in an integrated manner
- Manage the arrival of new residents in line with reception capacity
- Foster collaboration with other OWHC cities.

CONCLUSIONS

Discussions at the *Lamu Meeting* show that heritage, when mobilized as part of an integrated approach, becomes a lever for urban transformation in the service of habitability, urbanity, and residents. They contribute fully to the OWHC's ambition to make historic centers places capable of responding to contemporary challenges, while preserving their identity and universal value.

African cities, like all OWHC member cities, face broadly similar challenges. By learning from each other and cooperating on bold projects, member cities can make a difference, reverse negative trends, and take back the initiative to decide how to drive the necessary change.

OWHC's ongoing activities aim in particular to ensure that all member cities, large and small, with high or low incomes, share the findings already established and are convinced of the benefits of working together. *The Lamu Meeting* provided an opportunity for the Organization to convince more African cities to join the ongoing work and integrate the OWHC's *New Urban Project*.

ANNEX 1: PARTICIPANTS

1. H.E. Dr. Mbarak Mohammed - Deputy Governor of Lamu County
2. Mr. AbdulNasir M. Issa – Lamu County Chief of Staff
3. Ms. Aisha Miraj - Lamu County Executive Committee Member
4. Mr. Mbarak Abdulqadir Abdallah - Swahili Heritage, Expert/Member of Friends of Lamu Cultural Heritage
5. Mr. Abdulswamad Abdallah Ali - Lamu Municipality Manager
6. Ms. Ameera Abdullahi Abdiwahab – Executive Secretary to the Governor of Lamu County
7. Mr. Ali Ahmed Al-Amoody - Director of Tourism, Lamu
8. Ms. Mary Stone - Friends of Lamu Cultural Heritage
9. Ms. Khaulah Abdulkadir - Project Coordinator, Friends of Lamu Cultural Heritage
10. Ms. Khadija Erns - Member of CHiFA Accelerator Project
11. Mr. Mohamed Mwenje – Curator at Lamu Museum
12. Mr. Hajj Mohammed - Buildings Conservation Officer, Lamu
13. Mr. Ridhwan Rexcel Obatade - Urban Heritage Research, Student/Member - Friends of Lamu Cultural Heritage
14. Ms. Aisha Nizar - Member of CHiFA Accelerator Project
15. Mr. Omar Ahmed Saggaf - Architect, Lamu County Government
16. Dr. Minuo Fuglesang - Friends of Lamu Cultural Heritage
17. Mr. Assarid Almoustapha – Managing Director, Agadez Urban Municipality
18. Mr. Ali Salifou – Curator, Old Town of Agadez
19. Mr. Sid’Ahmed Habott – Mayor of Chinguetti
20. Mr. Moustapha Mohamed Saleh – Manager, National Function for the Preservation of Ancient Cities (FNSVA)
21. Mr. Nelson Vaz Moreira – Mayor of Cidade Velha
22. Ms. Elizabeth Dos Santos Cardoso – Senior Tourism Technician and Director of Tourism, Culture, and Heritage, Cidade Velha
23. Mr. Arif Adus – General Manager of Harar City
24. Mr. Amady Diallo – Municipal Councillor, Commune of Saint-Louis
25. Mr. Yéhia Tandina – President, Special Delegation of the Urban Commune of Timbuktu
26. Mr. Alboukary Ben Essayoutti – Head, Cultural Mission of Timbuktu
27. Mr. Steven Battle – Senior Regional Director, World Monuments Fund
28. Ms. Louise Haxthausen – Regional Director, UNESCO Regional Office for Eastern Africa
29. Ms. Yuka Miyoshi – Culture Junior Program Officer, UNESCO
30. Mr. Florian Lux – Project Manager, Regional Office for Africa UN-Habitat
31. Mr. Gary Hattem - Co-founder and Managing Director, CHiFA
32. Mr. Luc Gagnon – OWHC Advisory Group Expert. Consulting expert in urban planning and mobility
33. Mr. Yves Gendron – OWHC Advisory Group Expert. Deputy Director General. Strasbourg Rhin Supérieur Urban Planning Agency
34. Mr. Mikhaël de Thyse – OWHC Secretary General
35. Mr. Allen Ofafa – Rapporteur