

The PSN Rundown

Flowing Towards Change 2025

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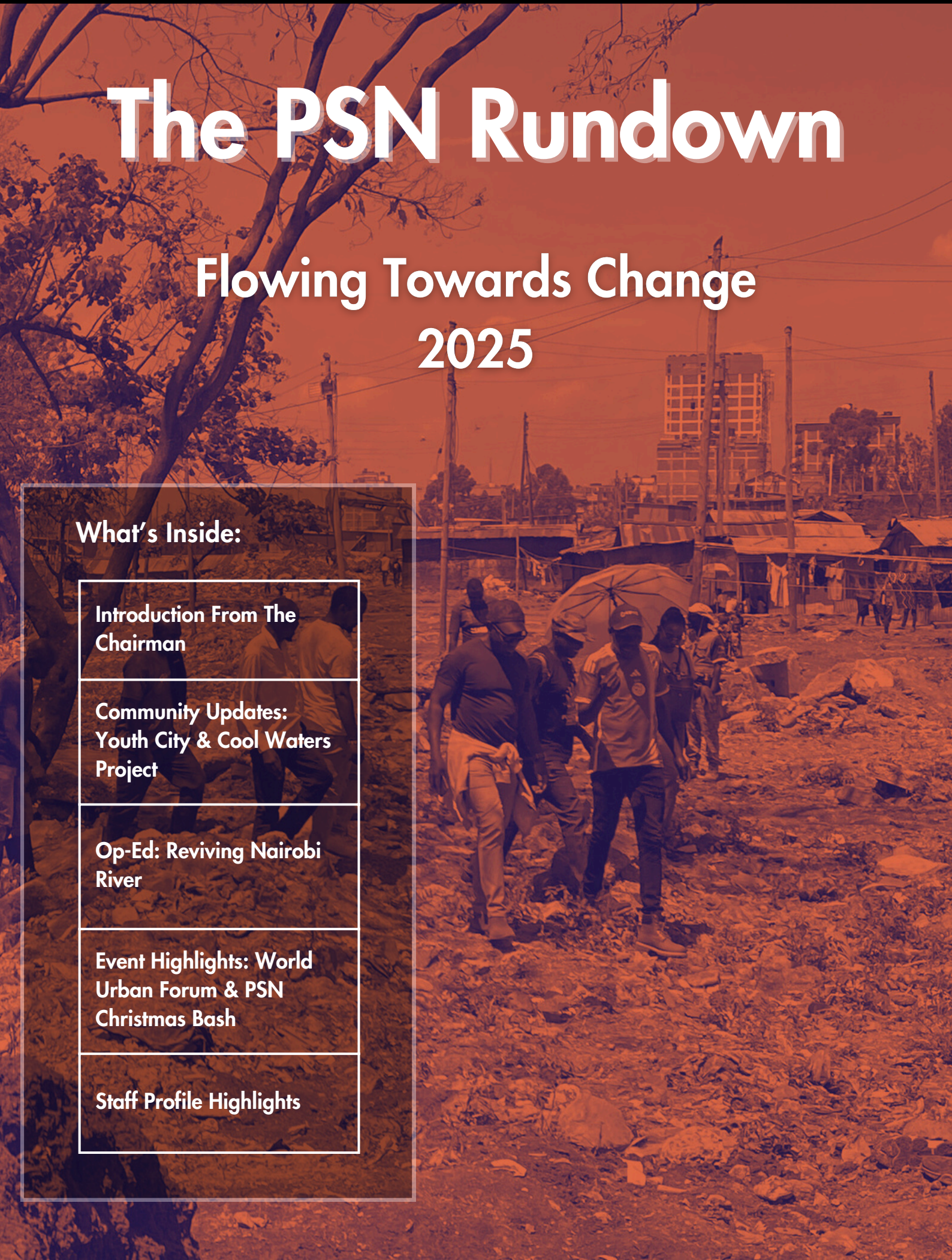
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The PSN Rundown



31 January 2025



Welcome Introduction from the Chairman

Welcome to the first official issue of our newsletter! Hip Hip Hooray!!

When I embarked on this journey with the founding of the Public Space Network (PSN) a little over a decade ago, I was doing so to scratch a personal itch. I fundamentally believe that a people's quality of life is in great measure determined by the quality of their public spaces. The lived experiences of people outside the private doorstep into the public realm determine "rich" versus "poor" neighbourhoods. These experiences either give people their dignity or rob them their self esteem; they may confer mental wellness or drive one to the arms of insanity.

When I looked at my beloved city, Nairobi, I was not just irritated, I was deeply infuriated by the quality of spaces in Nairobi beyond the private doorstep. With very minor exceptions, across the entire city, the roads are in poor state of neglect defined by dust on good days and muddy pools and spewing sewage on a normal day; the drainage systems next to the roads are choking in garbage; there is litter everywhere and frequent encounters with literal mountains of rubbish;

There are few public and freely accessible quality places for the simple joys of an afternoon picnic or for children to play; there are barely pedestrian paths to take a walk on and the few that are there are dominated by boda boda riders zooming at uncaring speeds; the roads are dark and poorly lit at night and decidedly unsafe. In short, the public space experience of city residents in Nairobi (and most cities in Africa) is mediocre at best and at worst, simply downright dangerous and life threatening. This is the nagging itch that I wanted to scratch.

At the time, I wondered, just how hard can it be? In my mind, there is literally no one that looks around a potholed road with a swathe of garbage all around it and remarks; "yeah - this is my happy place!" The strategy at core was simple: if you get many small communities from across the city to come together to transform the spaces around them and then gradually build a network of these communities, with time, you'd be having a whole city transformed. Everyone wants a clean, green, safe and inclusive space - the journey would therefore be an easy and pleasant one - right?! Boy - I was very rapidly disabused of my choirboy naiveté and hasn't it been one hell of a roller coaster ride?!



We have had many hi-five moments that came with new successes. We have shed tears with multiple set-backs. Transformed spaces have been vandalised, people have been arrested and thrown in police cells and others have literally been killed in the line of duty. From our journey, we have stories. Stories of friends and partners that walked with us and got our backs, we discovered unsung heroes that walked on burning embers to see us on the other side and even the stories of villains that sought to bring us down; these stories have not been sufficiently told. We think there are many teachable moments for all of us including the PSN team from these stories and so these stories must be told.

Over the last decade, PSN has worked with more than 5000 young people and helped to transform over 200 spaces across the city. We have received awards, recognition and media coverage both locally that has helped to amplify and tell our stories. However, with this Newsletter, we want to be sharing these stories in almost real time and take you on a ride with us. Every month, starting January 2025, we shall be sharing exclusive insights on the latest trends, events and upcoming projects. We will introduce you to some of the champions that are driving the change at the grassroots level and we shall equally not be afraid to rat out the villains that seek to derail the mission.

Additionally, we will be sharing our thoughts and opinions on some of the challenges that we encounter in pursuit of our mission to make this city a more livable place for you. We have awesome partners that share our mission and do similar work and we shall also be bringing you their stories.

Special thanks and recognition to Dreamtown NGO from Denmark who have been our ride or die partners and have helped us to access funding from the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and not to mention the immense technical support.

We hope you enjoy reading the first issue of what will be many monthly newsletters to come. If you are an avid fan and would like to get even weekly or daily doses, then make sure to follow us on our social media channels.

Robinson Esialimba
Founder & Chairman
Public Space Network (PSN)

Community Updates

Youth City Project



In 2025 we will be entering the second year of our Youth City project and the goal will be to consolidate our gains from 2024 while expanding the reach of the project beyond its centre points.

The Youth City Project is a project designed to empower young people within their communities to have a greater voice in shaping public spaces within their community to make them more responsive to the needs of young people. The project is being implemented in three communities in Kamukunji, Korogocho and Dandora. We theorise that by improving the public space and living experience of the youth, who form the majority of the population, we would be positively impacting a large part of the community.

The first part of the project entails creating a large community space that can host a large number of people from the respective communities. This large community space then serves as a catalyst to stimulate small tactical space transformations branching INSIDE the community. When community members come to the larger space, they can see the quality of life that is possible through community led action. We hope that the haptic experience they get from the parks then inspires them to pursue other smaller scale space transformation interventions right outside their door step. We shall invite community members to submit proposals which we shall fund through mini-grants and in collaboration with the youth community champions from the area.



“ When community members come to the larger space, they can see the quality of life that is possible through community led action. ”

So far the teams from the three areas have done an amazing job and these spaces have become magnets for the community. We are seeing everything from wedding events, sporting tournaments, church meetings, kids activities or people just meeting to catch up with their friends and families in these spaces. What is really cool about this process is that, in all three communities, the youth groups that are leading the transformation are now recognised as community leaders and are respected and consulted by local leaders, the county government officers and even law enforcement agencies. It has simply been rave reviews from all around.

In this first quarter of 2025, we shall firstly focus on community outreach to bring greater awareness of the Youth City concept to the broader community while inviting community members to submit proposals for small tactical interventions that they would like to undertake. Secondly, we want to undertake additional improvements within the parks to make them even more inclusive and user friendly for the community and have them serve as inspiration for broader community action.

Community Updates

Cool Waters Project



After lots of planning and brainstorming in the last half of 2024, we finally get to kick-off our Cool Waters Project in 2025. The goal of this project is to help selected communities along the corridors of Nairobi River to better adapt to some of the negative impacts of climate change.

This project could not have been more timely than now. The months of March to June of 2024 saw some of the most severe flooding that the country has experienced in recent years and Nairobi was badly hit. Thousands of families were displaced across the country and some of the worst affected are those living on the banks of Nairobi River. Whatever little was not destroyed by the floods was demolished by the government in a knee-jerk directive leading to further displacement, loss of lives and property. In between the intense flooding seasons, we have spells of heat with daily high temperatures reaching new records.

It is clear from the reports by the Kenya Meteorological Department that the rain patterns are changing and flooding episodes are going to be more frequent, to last longer and be more intensive. We are now at the tail end of January and rapidly closing in to the next rainy season in March. Plenty of people could be affected again. We can and should do better.

Up to 60% of Nairobi's populations live in informal settlements and the vast majority of these settlements are to be found along the three arms of the Nairobi River: the Ngong River, the Mathare River and Nairobi River. People living in these areas bear the brunt of the changing weather patterns, especially the flooding.

The Cool Waters project is designed to help the riverine communities to undertake hazard mapping which will enable them to understand at which physical locations along the river they are most likely to suffer from flooding and then enable pre-emptive action. The project will also support the community to design with the help of experts Nature Based Solutions (NBs) that will help them better adapt to the changing weather patterns. Finally, up to 14 youth-led community groups will receive mini-grants to implement the solutions that they will have developed.



In order to prepare the community and give them the skills necessary for hazard mapping and participatory design of NBs, we are excited to launch a Climate Change Academy later in February. The Academy will be in partnership with Kounkuey Design Initiative (KDI) and UN-Habitat both of whom have tremendous experience in urban planning and climate change adaptation initiatives.

The project will target communities living in Zones 4 and 5 of the Nairobi River and will run until the end of 2026.

Opinion Piece

Reviving a Dying Lifeline: What's Blocking Nairobi River's Comeback?

BY ROBINSON ESIALIMBA

On **December 2nd, 2022** the government launched an ambitious effort to reclaim the rivers of Nairobi as a spine to the city's blue and green infrastructure for a better urban environment and quality of life. The effort is led by the **Nairobi Rivers Commission (NRC)**, which is mandated to coordinate various state and non-state actors in the new push. However, for those that have been keen followers of developments around the river, they will be quick to note that this is NOT the first ambitious effort to reclaim and regenerate the Nairobi River. There have been previous and even ongoing efforts to reclaim the river. These include: **Nairobi River Basin Project (UNEP, 2000)**; **Adopt-A-River Initiative (UNEP and Rotary Clubs, 2019 - ongoing)**, **Nairobi River Regeneration Initiative (UN-Habitat and GoK, 2020 - ongoing)**; and **Urban Rivers Regeneration Programme (NEMA, 2019 – 2024)**.

None of the above efforts have yielded the outcomes that were anticipated at the commencement of the projects. A review of the project documents reveal one thread and malaise that runs across the multiple initiatives; **single agency approach with inadequate riverine community engagement**. A single agency was typically given the mandate to drive the regeneration effort and it was assumed that with the right technical support and labour mobilisation, the initiatives would pay off. The communities that live along the river were seen as beneficiaries rather than key stakeholders or even the stewards of the change process.

If nothing else, the failure or limited impact of the past initiatives clearly dictates that a different approach is not only desirable but is imperative if this new initiative is going to be successful. It is therefore very encouraging to see that the NRC has taken a more proactive approach and has established a multi-stakeholder platform bringing together multiple state and non-state actors at the national and county government level with a view to coordinating the efforts of the different actors.



The NRC has also made commendable efforts to map the different communities that live along the river. However, a quick assessment of what is happening on the ground suggests that there is insufficient collaboration, especially among the state actors sitting in the various multi-stakeholder task forces that are being coordinated by the NRC. There is also without doubt insufficient engagement of the riverine communities in addressing those factors contributing to the pollution of the river. We make this argument based on our own primary observations of what is happening on the ground during our regular river tours.



As the Public Space Network (PSN), we have undertaken multiple assessments of the sections of the river with a focus on Zone 4 and Zone 5 where we have established the strongest community relationships. Zone 4 starts from near Gikomba Market and ends at the Outering Road roundabout. Zone 5 starts from Outering Road roundabout leading all the way to the not so well-known Dandora Waterfalls. Our last assessment was conducted on 17 and 18 of October 2024. The assessment was firstly aimed at updating our knowledge of the condition of the river and the riparian areas in the targeted sections of the river.



Secondly, we wanted to assess any ongoing regeneration interventions both within the river and in the riparian sections. Finally, we wanted to continue strengthening existing relationships with youth groups that are emerging from the riverine communities in those sections whom we view as indispensable to the regeneration efforts.

Our ground assessment revealed a number of challenges which suggest that despite the stated formal government position mobilising multi-stakeholder intervention and community engagement, much more could be done. If the current approaches are not revised, there is a very real danger of existing interventions suffering the same fate as previous interventions and essentially setting ourselves up for failure. Our assessment revealed a number of gaps which if addressed would drive the regeneration efforts much more rapidly and would deliver impact at a faster pace than what we are currently observing. What is even more remarkable is that while our recommendations are very simple and even at no cost, their impact could be far reaching. So what are these recommendations?

1. Relocate Nairobi County Waste Collection Points away from the riparian zones:

The Nairobi County government does not have a proper waste management system for the city. Consequently, within informal settlements, it has licensed youth groups to collect waste from households and deposit the waste in what is known as **Collection Points or Holding Centres** for future collection at an undefined date by the county. We observed several designated Collection Points along the river. Frustratingly, often the waste is allowed to pile for weeks on end and inevitably slips into the river, exacerbating the solid waste problem.

Relocating these Collection Points away from the river would significantly reduce the amount of solid waste that ends up in the river. The Nairobi County Government county needs to urgently un-designate **ALL Collection Points** that are within 30 metres of the river and find alternative locations - there are plenty of options. This is a highly impactful administrative decision that comes at literally zero cost. PSN has meticulously mapped out all the Collection Points located within Zone 4 and 5 of the river.

Fully integrate Youth Groups and NOT just individual youths in monitoring waste management in riparian zones: During our tours, we saw youth under the Climate Worx (CW) Mtaani program launched by the president in action under the supervision of NYS officers. The youth did not have any clear targets and some of them self-reported that they had been working in the same area for weeks and there was no notable progress. This was also evident from a quick observation. This is partly because of lack of clear targets and poor supervision. It was also in part because some of the waste that they cleared was immediately replaced by more waste from the surrounding community who do not have proper waste disposal alternatives. Whereas we commend the government for recruiting youth from the local area to undertake their Climate Worx assignments within their own localities, we call for the government to go beyond engaging individuals and actually **engage with Youth Groups**.



Individual youths are paid a daily stipend as long as they show up for work. They have no vested interest in demonstrating progress, indeed they have an inverted interest in NOT having progress because they can work for more days. Youth Groups on the other hand thrive by demonstrating impact. They are keen on showing progress. They know who dumps waste at a given place and what time they do it. Moving beyond individual youth and engaging Youth Groups within the riparian sections and empowering them to be local waste monitors could literally get rid of SISYPHUS conundrum that the Climate Worx team finds themselves in. Again, this is a simple administrative decision with high impact and low cost. This is an approach that PSN has used severally over the last ten years with great success.



3. Enforce connection of sewerage systems to the area sewer lines.

It was a pleasant surprise to notice that within the river corridor in areas that we monitor, there were already government efforts to establish sewer lines. Although more could be done, the already existing sewer systems, if fully utilized, would greatly reduce the amount of raw sewage that is discharged directly into the river from households. The challenge is that quite a number of households which are bordering the river have deliberately chosen to bypass the sewer lines and discharge directly into the river. This is in order for them to avoid the costs associated with connecting to the sewer line. The local national government officers know about this mischief, the county officers are fully aware yet no action is being taken against those culpable. We have received plausible information that this evasion is done in connivance with relevant officers with inducements on offer.

NRC should activate its coordination mandate to hold national and county government actors accountable for raw sewage discharge into the river happening within their areas. PSN has meticulously mapped out all the raw sewage discharge points located within Zone 4 and 5 of the river. This is yet again another low cost administrative intervention that could deliver high impact.

4. Enforce the riparian zones demarcation lines:

The national government coordinated the demolition of thousands of households in informal settlements deemed to have encroached on riparian sections. This mostly happened in the months of May to July 2024. As we did our assessments in October, approximately three months later, we observed a surge of private developers encroaching once more into the riparian zones. There is a need for urgent action by the government. Firstly, those who are encroaching are doing this with the full knowledge of National Government Officers (NGAO). Those officers should be held accountable for any encroachment happening within their jurisdiction. The lives and property that were lost during the demolitions should not be in vain and neither should they allow us to go back to a time when demolitions should be necessary once again. This is yet another administrative decision with low cost and high impact.

5. Share and allow public participation for government plans along the riparian zones:

Finally, the government should very quickly declare their plans for the riparian zones and engage the communities to implement those plans. One of the factors contributing to re-encroachment is the lack of publicly available plans of what the government proposes to do within the recovered riparian zones.



At the moment, stakeholders with a keen interest in the river regeneration process are informed that there are government plans for the riparian sections but the documents detailing the plans cannot be shared to allow full public participation and implementation by the affected communities

This needs to change. This approach assumes the government as the single driver of the regeneration process with the riverine communities as beneficiaries. We have a rich history from previous initiatives that demonstrate that this approach is dead on arrival. All key stakeholders should be given full access to the relevant documents and allow a robust engagement. The sooner there is clarity on proposed interventions on the riparian zones, the sooner the interventions can begin and stem the re-encroachment that is now becoming pervasive along the river. And you guessed it right - another low cost administrative intervention.



The Public Space Network (PSN) together with other civil society organisations and private sector players are fully committed to the river regeneration process. PSN has undertaken a detailed assessment of the river in Zones 4 and 5 and will soon make public our Riverlife Atlas project that will give detailed visual visibility to the condition of the Nairobi River and all ongoing initiatives to support the regeneration of the river.

As one of the actors, PSN with the support of Dreamtown NGO from Denmark and in collaboration with UN-Habitat will be implementing the Cool Waters project within zones 4 and 5 of the Nairobi River which aims to improve the climate resilience and adaptation of the riverine communities along the river.

Whereas regeneration of the Nairobi River basin appears to be a mammoth task, it is our argument that some simple low or free of cost administrative interventions by relevant government agencies could deliver high impact. Is there the political will to push these through? Only time and action will tell!





LEFT TO RIGHT: JOSEPHAT KAROMI(KECC), RASMUS BERING(DREAMTOWN), FREDRICK OKINDA(KOMBGREEN)

Event Spotlight

PSN in collaboration with Dreamtown attended the 12th edition of The World Urban Forum in Cairo, Egypt! This year's theme was: "What does home mean to you?"

Josephat Karomi (KECC) and Fredrick Okinda (Komb Green Solutions) had the opportunity to represent PSN on key panels regarding climate resilient urban food and water systems.

The key takeaway? "It All Starts At Home". There was a call for countries to reflect on how they're creating sustainability for their rapidly urbanizing cities.



Event News

Our annual PSN Christmas Bash was an absolute success last year! It was a delightful celebration of the milestones accomplished throughout the year and an extension of gratitude for the communal support we continue to receive.

KECC, Komb Green and Dandora all came together at Mustard Seed Garden to make merry and pat themselves on the back for a job well done! The vibes were running high, the music was flowing, laughter filled the air and excitement for the new year was ushered in absolute pomp. 2025 is here and the team is ready to shift the tides!

Meet The Minds Behind The Magic



Deborah Wanjugu

Meet Deborah AKA Debbie (The Sharpshooter)! She is our lead coordinator at PSN. She is known for her immense passion and commitment to helping others.

She plays a key role in coordinating projects, liaising with zonal leaders and fundraising efforts. Need a solution? Debbie's your girl.



Edwin Muigai

Introducing Edwin AKA Edu(The Ace)! He is one of our lead project managers at PSN. He is known for his prowess in working with communities.

He plays a key role in executing projects, community dialogues and distribution efforts. Need a quick plan? Edu's your guy.



Robinson Esialimba

Meet the face behind PSN, Robinson AKA Robi (The Chairman)! He is the founder of our organization, steering it in the right direction for over a decade. Robi is a lawyer by training with an advanced degree in law from Lund University in Sweden. He is also an entrepreneur with interests in furniture design and manufacturing, transport and finance.

He is passionate about sports and outdoors and it's partly the energy that is behind his quest for good quality public spaces. Robi is responsible for the overall strategy of the organisation, partnerships and people development.



Edward Kipchumba

Meet Edward AKA Eddie(The Analyst)! He is our lead financial administrator at PSN. He is known for his dedication to efficiency and seamless executions.

He plays a key role in managing project grants, donations and inventory. Need a proper budget plan? Eddie's your guy.



Yvette Otieno

Introducing Yvette (The Trendsetter)! She is our lead communications and advocacy officer at PSN. She is known for her commitment to content ideas that make waves.

She plays a key role in advocating for change on ground and on socials. Need a cool content plan? Yvette's your girl.