

## Transformative Leadership- Decision Makers at the Forefront of Change



### Problem Setting

Mayors around the world are implementing innovative urban forestry programs that mitigate climate change impacts and improve conditions for local residents. However, trees are not quick fixes. To be truly effective as a climate solution, urban forestry initiatives require political and economic commitments on timescales that often transcend political tenure. This panel features four leaders from around the world who discuss details of their urban forestry programs and share tactics on how to sustain transformative change.

**Speakers:** Mayor-Elect Yvonne Aki-Sawyerr, Freetown, Sierra Leone; Mayor Matus Vallo, Bratislava, Slovakia; Vice Mayor Ioannis Anastasakis, Heraklion, Greece; Mayor Justin Elicker, New Haven, USA.

**Moderated by**  
Dr Jessica Seddon.

### Key Takeaways

#### 1. INCORPORATE JOBS IN URBAN FORESTRY PROGRAMS

It can be challenging for city leaders to prioritize investment in urban sustainability programs, especially in cities with pressing socioeconomic issues. Both Mayor Aki-Sawyerr and Mayor Elicker recommend embedding community employment within forestry programs. Doing so helps sustain community support, alleviate economic burdens and increase municipal capacity to address climate change.

#### 2. CREATE INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURES FOR LONGEVITY

The Mayors discussed different strategies for creating program resilience in the face of changing political leadership. Mayor Elicker and Mayor Aki-Sawyerr both established specific offices dedicated to climate change, citing the importance of developing structures that achieve institutional lock-in and are difficult to dismantle. Vice Mayor Anastasakis undertook intense person-to-person engagement to secure political support for his program for the next ten years. Mayor Vallo echoed Anastasakis' approach, stating that strong citizen support of a program will ensure durability after someone else is elected.

#### 3. MAKE CLIMATE SOLUTIONS MULTI-PURPOSE MULTI-PURPOSE

All leaders agreed that trees are a powerful solution, as they provide multiple benefits beyond cooling. In Freetown, trees are being used to stabilize soil, increase water retention and provide food. Heraklion's investments have allowed for the development of the largest playground network in Greece. Mayor Elicker and Mayor Vallo both spoke to the importance of trees in parks for creating spaces where urban residents can appreciate the natural environment and connect with each other.

#### 4. USE SMALL STORIES FOR BIG CHANGE

The scale of change required to mitigate and adapt to climate change can be daunting to citizens. Vice Mayor Anastasakis found that sharing small success stories that residents can connect with emotionally can help build support for larger environmental plans. Mayor Vallo described the importance of drawing upon the emotional symbolism of trees to gain support for his broader campaign. Mayor Aki-Sawyerr reiterated that it is the leader's job to make sure citizens understand how climate investments will bring improvements to their own lives. Vice Mayor Anastasakis reiterated this point, advising city leaders to connect their vision to the individual needs of residents.

## Implementation Examples

### BRATISLAVA 10,000 TREES



**Urban Greening in Bratislava.**

Source: Vallo Conference Presentation 2023.

Mayor Vallo designed and implemented the 10,000 Trees Initiative in Bratislava, with a focus on improving climate resilience and connecting to communities on the ground. Since 2019, the City of Bratislava has planted 25,390 trees and 25,263 bushes. A unique element of the initiative is that the municipality pays the State forestry enterprise to reduce commercial logging in forests surrounding Bratislava. This initiative saves 5,000 mature trees per year, and the money paid is used to make these forests more accessible to residents.

### FREETOWN THE TREETOWN

Mayor Aki-Sawyers believes in bold leadership, and began her campaign by advocating for 1 million trees to be planted in Freetown. Each tree is equipped with a unique identifier number linked to an online database. Community growers upload photos of the trees and report on their condition via an app in order to receive payment for their planting. Over 850,000 trees have been planted under the initiative since 2020, and over 1,500 young adults have been hired. In the program's next stage, 40% of trees will be planted along waterways, 50% in backyards and 10% in landslide areas.

---

**1,000,000**  
trees to be planted  
in Freetown

---

**850,000**  
trees already  
planted since 2020

**1,500**  
young adults employed  
through program

---

### HERAKLION PEDESTRIANIZATION



**Pedestrianized street and greening in Heraklion.**

Source: Anastasakis Conference Presentation 2023.

Vice Mayor Anastasakis had a bold vision for greening Heraklion, but found that he needed to give his community time to adjust to small changes in order to enact his broader vision. By moving deliberately, Anastasakis was eventually able to pedestrianize a section of inner Heraklion, create the largest playground network in Greece and set up an electric bus system that currently provides 80,000 carbon neutral trips per month.

### URBAN RESOURCES INITIATIVE



**URI GreenSkills tree planting crew.**

Source: URI Staff.

The City of New Haven has a contract with the Urban Resources Initiative to increase the city's urban tree canopy. Thus far, URI has planted over 11,000 trees in the City of New Haven. The program seeks to promote sustainability whilst simultaneously addressing environmental justice issues by employing community members who face barriers to employment. Tree planting efforts are focused in historically disadvantaged areas

---

### **PRIORITY ACTION: SECURE WATER RESOURCES**

Urban trees require secure water supplies over several years. Cities looking to increase their urban tree canopy must strategically identify and allocate water resources.

Watch the entire conference panel [online here](#).