



*Building Urban Community Networks for Sustainable Cities in Africa
Funded by the Belmont Forum*

Lessons learnt as a Consortium Lead for the UComNetSus Africa project



*Dr. Peter Wangai
Consortium Lead, UComNetSus Africa project*

Questions:

1. Name and focus of the consortium

Greetings to all of you dear participants and organizers of this forum, being referred to as “Belmont Collaborative Deep Dive”. My name is Peter Wangai, a lecturer and researcher at Kenyatta University, Kenya. My training background is in Sustainable Resource Management, Ecosystems Management, Ecosystem services, and mapping of Urban and peri-urban ecosystem services. My current research direction is in the sustainability science in analyzing socioecological systems.

Today, I have one agenda of speaking about my experience of leading our Belmont Forum funded project entitled “*Building Urban Community Networks for Sustainable Cities in Africa*”, whose acronym is **UComNetSus Africa**. The project is investigating how to develop novel networks and communities of practice that could jointly address the challenges faced by cities in Africa.

- ### **2. Key points on how the consortium came about, and how I ended up being the lead.**
- Did the consortium members know each other before? If not, how and where did we**



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meet? Did one person invite others? Did members discuss openly who would be the consortium lead and when?)

The consortium has an interesting beginning. I first came to know about the Belmont Forum from a friend in Germany in 2020. She simply forwarded the call for a workshop organized by the Belmont Forum entitled “Virtual Capacity Building Workshop for African Early Career Researchers held on 9th – 10th September 2020”. I enrolled and I was shortlisted to participate in the 2-day online workshop. Pitching of research ideas was part of the programme. On the 1st day of the training, I went ahead to pitch my fancy idea on the sustainability of urban ecosystems. Belmont Forum had organized breakout sessions to assist us refine our research pitches, and on the 2nd day I again presented the revised version of my research idea. After the BF workshop, the call was announced, and I started thinking of how to form a multinational and multidisciplinary team to shape up the ideas I had. Beside preparing a list of whom to invite to the consortium, I was also working on a draft topic and concept to share with whoever would have been interested in the ideas. After struggling with myself, a draft working title emerged as “*Building Urban Community Networks to Birth Ideal and Progressive Cities in Africa*”. Later, we revised the title to read “*Building Urban Community Networks for Sustainable Cities in Africa*”.

Forming the consortium: To form the consortium, I took the initiative to invite people to form the consortium. I reached out to some of the people I met during the Belmont Forum training, old friends that we studied abroad together, and some of the people I had met during scientific conferences. The way I became the lead was funny, I would say. This is because when I convened the team, we started working together and I voluntarily recorded the proceedings as well as updating the proposal as per the team’s deliberations. In fact, all through the period of the proposal writing, I acted the secretary/ chairperson of the team. The question on who was to be the consortium lead came at the tail end of proposal writing. We realized it was a requirement that was to be field on the proposal templates shared by the Belmont Forum- and the team unanimously went “Peter you are our Consortium Lead”. And it came to be.

3. Diversity of the consortium: countries, disciplines, seniority? [Composition of the Consortium]

The consortium has six countries represented: Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda, Nigeria, Ghana and USA. This also informed the cities covered in the project: Nairobi, Mombasa, Dar es Salaam, Kigali, Lagos and Kumasi. The partnering institutions to this project from Kenya are Kenyatta University, University of Embu and the South Eastern Kenya University, In Tanzania we partner with the University of Dar es Salaam. In Rwanda we work closely with the University of Rwanda. And in



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western Africa, we have partner with an organization called Nature Cares Resource Centre, the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology in Ghana, and finally Georgetown University in the USA. From each of these partnering institutions, the project is represented by one (1) Principal Investigator (PI), hence the project has a total of eight consortium members. The consortium comprises of a multidisciplinary team of members who bring different expertise into the project. For example, the consortium has expertise on Information Technology, marine and coastal biodiversity and ecosystem services, Urban and Peri-urban ecosystems, mapping of resources and ecosystem services, conservation biology, architecture and public space planning, and philosophy. One common denominator is that all the consortium members are early career researchers (not more than 10 years after obtaining the last academic degree). However, as a team we acknowledge the internal differences in research experiences.

4. What does it entail to be the consortium lead? Comparison between administrative, intellectual and management roles

A consortium lead cannot deliver on a project if he/she relied only on intellectual capacity. Besides, he/she must possess managerial and administrative skills. My previous leadership positions gave me a strong footing in exercising managerial and administrative roles as the consortium lead. In a nutshell, the position of the consortium lead entails:

- Planning- what, where, when, how, with whom/what
- Processing- methodical, logical, identifying patterns, rarity, commonality, uniqueness
- Proactiveness- sensitive, flexible
- Systems thinking- 'parts' vs 'whole', interactions, interconnections
- Analytical mind- deconstruct complexities, association vs dissociation, objectivity, cost-benefit comparison
- Monitoring- track change, detect deviations
- Decision-making- choices, alternatives

As the consortium lead for the project, I have been performing the following *managerial roles*:

- Keeping project goal on focus
- Communicating news/ updating members



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- Calling for and chairing meetings
- Facilitating funds transfer to project PIs
- Technical reporting to the Belmont Forum
- Ensuring adherence to planned budgetary expenditure
- Representing the project in international forums
- Acting as the chief custodian of the project's records
- Liaison between the project and the Belmont Forum
- Liaison between the project and the funding agencies
- Monitoring of project activities in the study cities

As a consortium lead, I had *little to do with administrative roles*. This is because we simply follow the policies and guidelines set by the Belmont Forum, funding agencies, Kenyatta University (administrator of the project funds), and government authorities responsible for licensing research projects in respective countries. However, in the beginning of the project, I had to spearhead formulation of a consortium agreement for cordial working relations and formal contracts for personnel engaged in the project.

Further, the project focuses on cities, which are as socioecological systems. Therefore, my *intellectual knowledge* on socioecological systems and functioning of urban ecosystems was crucial for the success of the project. My role has thus been to coordinate social and ecological inputs from members for the overall gain for the project.

Slide 5: Personal reflections on the role I expected to play versus the reality of my role today in the project

Apart from the roles discussed, there are unexpected situations that have demanded my attention:

- *Addressing uncertainties and anxiety related to the project*- bureaucracy, pandemic, etc.
- *Managing expectations*- Financial administrative delays
- *Advisory role to the team members*- with budgets blown out of proportion by costly COVID 19 protocols



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From the experience gathered in my role, my advice to any consortium lead is to be ready to:

- i. Lead by example
- ii. Exercise effective communication e.g., avoid communicating rumors, concise and precise message, use different platforms to reach your members (email, WhatsApp, Twitter, etc.)
- iii. Practice accountability and transparency e.g. share budget and expenditure with team members
- iv. Motivate, mentor, and inspire team members e.g. students as research assistants
- v. Be empathetic e.g. know when a member is bereaved, having a birthday, etc
- vi. Respect e.g. different opinions, thoughts, ideas
- vii. Sacrifice e.g. time, resources, expertise
- viii. Exercise patience and restraint
- ix. Collaborate and influence
- x. Empower

Conclusion

Leadership is working with people to efficiently and effectively commit resources allocated for a specific goal/purpose. That is, a project leader must be fully in charge of the project's goal, can lead others toward the goal, and be in the forefront in walking the journey. A leader must be a keen listener, consultative, decisive under all circumstances, firm and friendly. From experience, a research consortium lead should not only focus on the project outcomes, but also on how the team members are transformed by the project. And this is the lifeline for science.