

# Cultural Practices to Build Trust and Overcome Barriers: Lessons for Policymakers

An ADAPTO Policy & Practice Brief authored by Tapan Dhar, Talha Awan, Camila Flórez Bossio, Em Walsh, Sayana Sherif & Lisa Bornstein. July, 2021



## The Policy and Practice Challenge

People living and working in informal settlements are among those most affected by climate change, natural hazards, and other threats such as crime, pandemics, and food insecurity. In response, residents and local organizations develop ways to address challenges and reduce risk, typically drawing on traditional knowledge and available resources. Yet they often encounter barriers—such as lack of technical expertise, socio-political power, and institutional support—that impede their efforts. Aid organisations, NGOs, academics, and governments can help, but they also encounter barriers. They may be greeted with suspicion, poorly understand the locale, or view local risk-reduction practices as illegal or backwards and, as such, not suitable for promotion by government or its official partners. To overcome barriers, building common ground for collaboration is essential. But what constitutes ‘common ground’ and how can it be built?

**“Citizens claim that trust in institutions has been lost and a new social contract must not be based on capitalism and profit, but rather, on civic values such as liberty, equality, and fraternity.”**

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

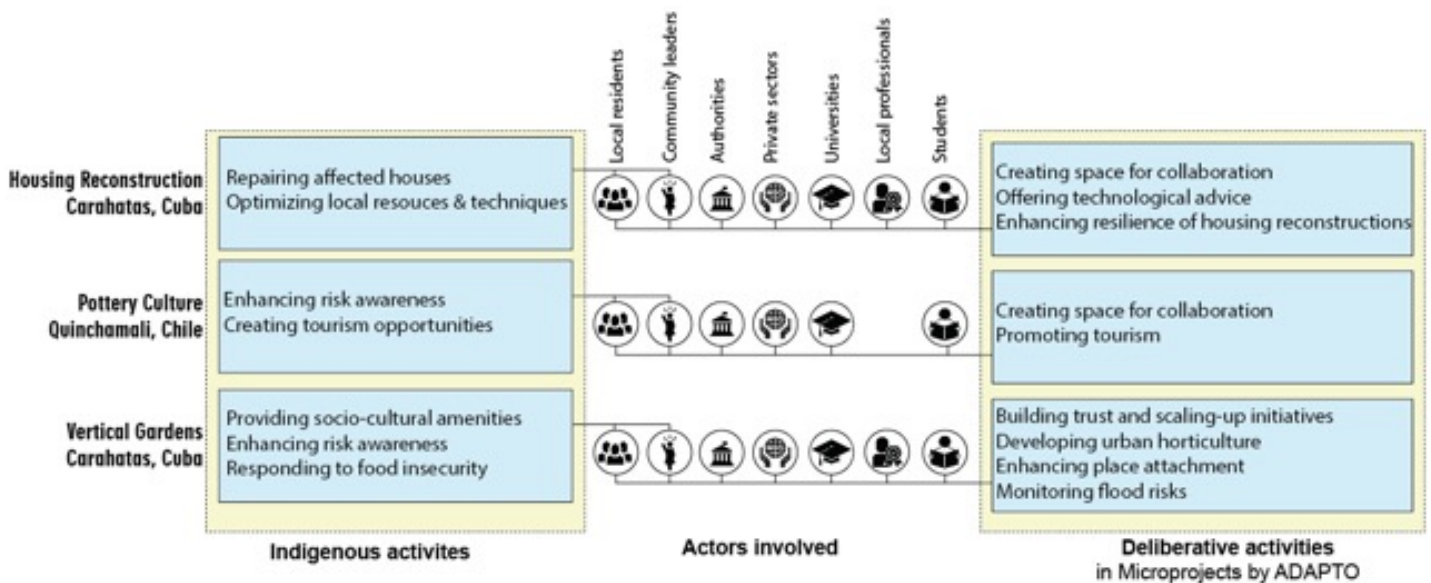
- Culturally-meaningful local practices can be a cornerstone of disaster risk reduction efforts. Respect, recognition, and joint work are key.
- Intermediaries often play a vital role in reducing conflicts, fostering collaboration, and building trust among stakeholders.
- Clear strategies of co-production—that indicate stakeholders’ contributions to joint processes and activities—can reduce misunderstandings and facilitate collaboration.

Research undertaken by ADAPTO in Haiti, Colombia, Chile, and Cuba provides some answers. Common ground, in 22 initiatives studied, is characterised by trust, mutual respect, and the willingness of different people involved to engage in a shared effort. People in these regions did not always have similar interests or ideas about climate adaptation and disaster risk reduction. However, the form of interaction and the common ground of respect, trust, and willingness to engage, became a basis for change.

Useful pathways to building common ground, though applied in different ways in different places, were: (a) incorporation of locally meaningful socio-cultural practices; (b) involvement of intermediaries who could help bridge differences in experience, language, understanding, felt-realities, and expectations; (c) a strategy for building trust and the processes to support joint work; (d) clear procedures for both project implementation and the exchanges foundational to building trust; and (e) sustained collaboration over time.

## Common Cultural Practice as an Opportunity for Building Common Ground

ADAPTO found that responses to disaster risks in informal settings\* in Latin America and the Caribbean are deeply rooted in local practices, local meanings, and culturally established customs and rituals. These socio-cultural activities often require collective and local knowledge of carpentry, construction, management, accounting, agriculture, fishing, water management, waste management, and cooking. ADAPTO discovered surprising connections between these activities and disaster risk reduction objectives, which appear unrelated at first glance. For example, in ADAPTO initiatives, the pottery tradition in Quinchamalí, Chile (see Box 3) became a way to organize activities to increase risk awareness, and housing reconstruction in Cuba (see Box 1) acted as a tool to foster environmental awareness. ADAPTO considers the potential of these activities and facilitates the process so that different stakeholders can work together to build trust.



\* Informal settings, for ADAPTO, refers to the time, places, and circumstances in which people use their own initiative—outside or in parallel to institutionalized procedures and standards—to respond to local conditions, secure access to shelter, livelihoods, or services, and improve their general wellbeing in the face of hostile conditions.



### Box 1: Case Study

## Resilient housing reconstruction — A milestone project in Carahatas to build trust

In 2017, Hurricane Irma damaged 60% of the housing in Carahatas, Cuba. Residents themselves have carried out most of the reconstruction and repairs. Building on local knowledge, ADAPTO brought together residents, a community architect, experienced builders, university researchers, and representatives from local and central government (such as the Ministry of Science and the Ministry of Physical Planning) to identify ways to improve shelter. Participants—by sharing information on priority concerns and construction techniques—developed building strategies that used traditional practices and available materials while complying with Cuba’s climate change regulations. The exchange among the diverse participants led to provision of technical advice and loan of construction tools. Beneficial outcomes included the repair of 67 houses and, of equal importance, formation of a new bridge between the community and government representatives. Alongside the centralised decision-making processes of the country, collective actions and local knowledge are now being integrated legitimately into government policies—a milestone in adaptation policy in Cuba.



## Box 2: Case Study

### Vertical garden in Concepción – Building trust takes time and effort

Food insecurity—lack of regular access to affordable, nutritious food—is a perennial challenge for those at the margins of Chile’s cities. A traditional approach to growing vegetables is the community garden. ADAPTO’s vertical garden project in Concepción, Chile, built on this local tradition, linking social and recreational activities to improving access to fresh foods. Members of the community, university, and public institutions participated in design and training activities, building trust enroute to the installation of a pavilion for cultivation of edible, flowering, and medicinal plants.

The initial phase consisted of encounters among residents with traditional knowledge of gardening, the university, and local government representatives. Though all were in favour of the project, local government decided not to provide water to the proposed garden and the project stalled. In response, each set of participants made important contributions towards the project’s realisation. Local women petitioned businesses and government to contribute support and resources for the project’s advancement. The university acted as a mediator that set meetings, provided communication tools, and resolved misunderstandings. For non-community stakeholders, the university’s involvement conferred legitimacy to the project. For example, ADAPTO-Chile university researchers, in coordination with Corporación Desarrollo ConCienca, the Waste Commission of the Tomé Community Environment Committee, and the municipality, helped reduce conflicts and community tension regarding management of the garden’s water supply and dismantling of the abandoned pavilion. Additionally, the municipal government finally approved the project. Interactions among civil society, the business sector, the university, and community-based organizations over three years helped consolidate trust between leaders and the community. Later, the vertical garden project became part of the “Quiero Mi Barrio (I Love My Neighborhood)” program (QMB) established by the Chilean Ministry of Housing and Urbanism.

**“I love that the students work with us, we already had a previous experience with another university and that the UBB Architecture boys join in will be beautiful. I love the program and I think it is fantastic for us because it is to recover lost spaces so that they are not a focus of crime, for example, and live in a place where you like to walk.”**

– a resident of Concepción .



### Box 3: Case Study

#### Pottery workshops in Quinchamalí – Intermediaries and transparency in building trust

Chile’s handmade pottery has been part of local culture since pre-Hispanic and colonial times. It is officially recognised as part of the country’s ‘intangible’ heritage. ADAPTO’s project in Quinchamalí explored this living cultural heritage as a focus for: (a) collaborative dialogue, (b) socio-cultural awareness of environmental, economic, and social risks, and (c) culturally relevant adaptation. To (re) design a pottery workshop in Quinchamalí that would meet potters’ socio-cultural needs, the Chilean team at the University of Bio-Bio brought potters together with other local stakeholders. Collaborations were expanded horizontally (among university, government, professional, and artisan participants) and vertically across different levels of government (among the municipality of Concepción, tourism authorities, and the national program ‘I love my neighbourhood’). The resulting craft workshop is both flexible and replicable.

The role of university intermediaries—the professors and students from the School of Architecture—was to ease introductions, structure dialogue, and establish communication amongst groups who had not previously interacted. For example, Chilean public institutions participated in such a workshop for the first time and worked with community members in a collaborative manner. The process gave policymakers the chance to appreciate traditional knowledge and practices. It allowed all parties to build trust and an understanding of others’ perspectives. Of key importance was the maintenance of communication channels between stakeholders to avoid misunderstandings and ensure a transparent process.



Photo: ADAPTO-Chile

## Policy Implications for Building Trust and the Key Takeaways

Building trust needs time and continuous deliberate efforts. The case studies in this brief highlight the potential of traditional and socio-cultural activities to facilitate building common ground for all stakeholders. For policymakers aiming to overcome the barriers of disaster risk reduction (DRR) actions in informal settings, key takeaways are:



### Work together for mutual progress

1. Work together to recognize the interests and role of each stakeholder in supporting and implementing DRR practices. Trust may take time to build, but understanding local culture and rituals, and treating them with respect, can accelerate the forging of trust. Local cultural practices offer an opportunity for diverse stakeholders to exchange, converse, and collaborate. Joint involvement in locally meaningful activities can foster communication channels and logistical coordination between community members and authorities that are important to successful implementation of DRR actions.



### Consider mediators

2. “Intermediaries” often play a key role in facilitating collaboration among stakeholders to build and maintain trust. Academics or social workers can perform this role by connecting people and dealing with any conflicts that may arise in the process. Involvement of third parties, such as business sector representatives and government agencies, can also help overcome or bypass barriers and further facilitate the collaborative processes.



### Adopt transparent strategies

3. Set clear strategies of co-production that indicate the specific role and contribution of each stakeholder. A transparent process of collaboration (i.e., who is doing what and when) can prevent misunderstandings, facilitate inclusion of traditional activities that promote community wellbeing, and establish the common ground needed for further joint work.



ADAPTO is a multidisciplinary research project funded by the International Development Research Center ([IDRC](#)) and coordinated by the Disaster Resilience and Sustainable Reconstruction Research Alliance ([Euvre Durable](#)) from 2017-2021. It investigates climate change adaptation in informal settings in understanding and reinforcing bottom-up initiatives in Latin America and the Caribbean. For more information, see: [http://www.grif.umontreal.ca/acciones/en\\_index.html](http://www.grif.umontreal.ca/acciones/en_index.html)

## Resources

- › García Rosselló, J., and Letelier Cosmelli, J. (2021). The origin of Chilean pottery-making policies (1930-1990). *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 1-17.
- › Gatica, Paulina (2017). Architecture students start Vertical Neighborhood Workshop in Lo Méndez and Lo Custodio. NOTICIASUBB. Universidad del Bío-Bío. <http://noticias.ubiobio.cl/2017/08/25/alumnos-arquitectura-inician-taller-vertical-barrios-lo-mendez-lo-custodio/>
- › González, Gonzalo (2021). “Building on popular knowledge: Triggering housing adaptation to climate change with technical support and a tool library.” In *Artefacts of Disaster Risk Reduction: Community-based initiatives to face climate change in Latin America and the Caribbean*. Lizarralde, et al., (Eds). Montreal: Oeuvre durable. [http://www.grif.umontreal.ca/acciones/en\\_results\\_mp-cu-01.html](http://www.grif.umontreal.ca/acciones/en_results_mp-cu-01.html)
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- › Moraga, Nicolás and Araneda, Claudio. (2021). Our seeds are life: The recovery of a community space through the construction of a vertical garden in Concepción, Chile. In Lizarralde et al. (Ed.), *Climate Change Adaptation in Informal Settings: Understanding and Reinforcing Bottom-Up Initiatives in Latin America and the Caribbean*. Montreal: Oeuvre durable. [http://www.grif.umontreal.ca/acciones/en\\_results\\_mp-ch-01.html](http://www.grif.umontreal.ca/acciones/en_results_mp-ch-01.html)