

# Local Traditions and Existing Initiatives as Anchors for Adaptation

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## The Policy and Practice Challenge

Climate adaptation is a priority in marginalized urban communities of the Global South: often exposure to hazards is high, household and community resources are scant, and options to avoid risks limited. Yet residents often show little interest in engaging in government-led projects or resist specific measures (such as relocation) meant to help them adapt. How can government, development NGOs, and neighborhood groups foster adaptation? How can local stakeholders best involve the residents in adaptation efforts?

ADAPTO conducted action research in Chile, Colombia, and Cuba, with work in 22 settlements characterized as informal, racialized, low-income, and/or peripheral. The research shows that **introducing climate adaption dimensions into other local initiatives is an effective and culturally-appropriate way to deal with climate risks**. Projects benefited from financial support from ADAPTO to identify, and promote, adaptation efforts of relevance to the community. With such approaches, policymakers can ensure context-relevant and sustainable adaptation initiatives.

## Action-Research Approach

ADAPTO explored how residents in informal settings in Latin America and the Caribbean implement adaptation strategies to reduce vulnerabilities and enhance resilience. As part of the research, ADAPTO funded 22 local projects in Colombia, Chile, and Cuba. The projects tackled known risks for the population—such as eroding hillsides, seasonal flooding, and ecosystem degradation, and were conceived as collective efforts. Additional priorities were that the projects are locally meaningful, culturally relevant, and generative of dialogue, which all together can foster trust among stakeholders. These priorities translated into surprising and instructive practices: climate change was addressed through activities familiar in public and collective spaces, such as urban agriculture, sports, art, education, training, and cultural events.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Climate adaptation initiatives anchored on local traditions and existing community-based initiatives are more likely to endure than those relying heavily on external inputs and directives.
- Activities of community value, such as community gardens, pottery workshops, festivals, and sports, can be expanded to include a climate change adaptation dimension.
- Financing of community-initiated and locally managed projects can allow residents to experiment with solutions to the multifaceted risks they face.
- Experimentation and self-management foster social learning, a key attribute of resilience.



## Reducing Vulnerabilities and Enabling Adaptation Through Local Initiatives

**Policies and plans for some of the 22 localities already included disaster risk and climate adaptation considerations.** However, these were rarely implemented. Even when governments were committed to acting in response to climate risks, residents showed little interest in the government-led projects, or were against risk-reduction measures (e.g., relocation). Part of the difficulty is that, for residents, climate change is one of many risks. Yet, as the research revealed, policymakers dismissed residents' preferences and their social expectations in responding to multifaceted risks in their daily lives. An opportunity exists to reduce vulnerabilities by taking in consideration people's values and perceived threats while building on local traditions and existing initiatives (see Box 1 on Carahatas).

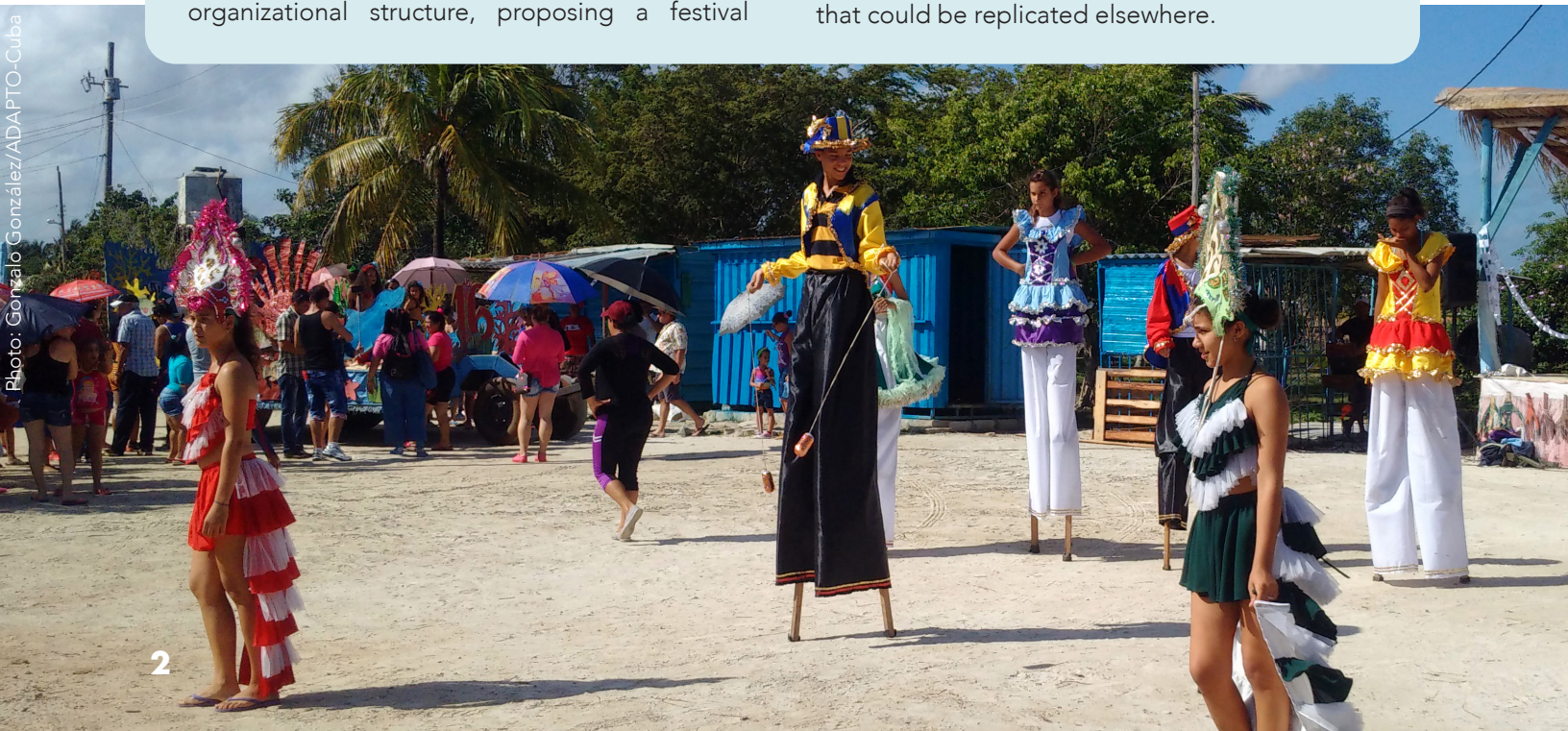
### Box 1: Lessons from Practice

#### Coastal Marine Festival in Carahatas, Cuba

For the last 20 years, a festival livens up the streets and beaches of Carahatas, a fishing community located close to the protected area of Las Picúas Cayo Cristo in Cuba. The Coastal Marine Festival promotes responsible environmental behavior in the community – each year focusing on a different environmental issue. Although the community actively participates in the annual festivities, researchers from the Universidad Central “Marta Abreu” de Las Villas (UCLV) found that the community remains unaware of the increased risks induced by climate change, such as sea level rise and more damaging tropical storms. The UCLV researchers saw the festival as an opportunity to increase the community's awareness of climate change effects and related adaptation responses.

The ADAPTO-funded project sought to build on the event's established reputation and organizational structure, proposing a festival

focused on climate change for the annual event in 2020. For the realization of the project, UCLV researchers and representatives from the Ministry of Environment joined an established team of stakeholders already involved in the management of the festival - an environmental institution called “Biological Station”, community volunteers, and the municipality of Carahatas. The Biological Station, traditionally the main organizer of the festival, received the initial idea positively and then subsequently led the thematic adaptation of the activities, with the support of the university. Unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2020 festival edition was postponed. Nonetheless, the alliance remains committed to implement it once restrictions allow it. Local researchers' positive experience in working with the community to expand a local festivity to include climate change awareness is a strategy that could be replicated elsewhere.





**ADAPTO provided an opportunity to local communities to design and implement their own projects.** An outstanding finding of this approach is that local leaders across the three countries decidedly rooted the initiatives in local practices and existing initiatives. In this sense, the projects proposed were deeply connected with traditions and activities with social and cultural value within their communities (see Box 2 on Nonguén). In the beginning, the project activities proposed could be thought of as “out of scope.” How can sport, artistic, or cultural activities decrease vulnerability and enhance risk management?

## Box 2: Lessons from Practice

### Natural Environment Classrooms in Nonguén, Chile

The Nonguén valley is a territory defined by a collective memory linked to the presence of the Nonguén reserve which is the last relict of coastal deciduous forest in the province of Concepción. The community proposed a project focused on recognizing and valuing the natural places of Nonguén, specifically the Pichimapu urban wetland. The project aimed to enhance the wetland, with minimal intervention, by creating permanent spaces for learning experiences. The project was planned within two existing school communities and set weekly outings, where children, their educators, and parents, learned about their territory and its socio-ecological importance. This initiative further motivated different groups of neighbors like environmentalists, activists, and elderly people to participate in the learning outings, as well as take care of the natural spaces where the pedagogical

activities were carried out. The project encouraged local residents to appropriate and learn about the place they inhabit, which led them to generate bonds of greater belonging to the place. Furthermore, it promoted the recovery and conservation of the surrounding environment. This collaborative project has helped the community understand and recognize the importance of working together. It has highlighted the value of using processes of territorial appropriation as learning methods in traditional school communities. This type of project has the potential to incentivize prevailing school systems to adopt a new understanding of their surrounding habitat and its care. Doing so leads to healthier ecosystems that support the communities' wellbeing, as conserving the wetlands of Nonguén has ensured that storm surge protection is in place.







Photo: Juan González/ADAPTO-Chile

While these initiatives were ‘far’ from the usual adaptation activities, they provided an opportunity to **experiment with new ways of tackling risks that were culturally appropriate and relevant to dwellers**. Funding these projects has paid off with two key benefits:

1. **Dwellers in informal and low-income settings have identified, designed, and implemented projects that are meaningful to their communities.** This exercise gives residents the power to define the issues that matter to them and decide how to tackle them. In comparison with top-down projects from non-community actors, this type of project can **empower communities** to continue to seek solutions as **trial-and-error processes** thereby becoming comfortable with both successes and failures. Developing this skill at the community level fosters social learning, which is deemed critical for dealing with climate risks.
2. **Residents have developed new models of working together, such as setting specific goals within existing organizational arrangements.** As communities **built on their own practices, knowledge, and skills, project participants relied less on external expertise**. Thus, this type of project has more chance to **sustain over time** than projects relying only on new activities that depend on external actors’ leadership and expertise (if not assumed by community leaders or local stakeholders). Adopting a new ‘adaptation’ dimension appeared to be faster than the appropriation of other projects initiated as entirely new projects, where a longer timeframe was required to build trust between project leaders and the communities.

**Policymakers and practitioners working in Latin America can build on local traditions and existing initiatives** to incorporate a climate change dimension. Funding community projects allows dwellers to experiment with solutions to their perceived socio-environmental risks while incorporating their knowledge and skills in the process. This process is not a direct path to success, it is rather a learning process that develops individual and social capacities to deal with risks. Thus, practitioners should focus on providing sufficient support and monitoring to allow ideas to germinate, trust to become rooted, and social learning to flourish. This approach then opens a path for better integration of residents’ preferences and values in climate risk management.



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 ([Cuvre 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

- › Aragón-Duran, E., Lizarralde, G., González-Camacho, G., Olivera-Ranero, A., Bornstein, L., Herazo, B., & Labbé, D. (2020). The language of risk and the risk of language: Mismatches in risk response in Cuban coastal villages. *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, 50, 101712.
- › Gonzalez Camacho et al. (2019) The Challenge of Disaster Risk Management in the Sustainability of Coastal Settlements. *Arquitectura y Urbanismo* (Mayo-Agosto 2020) 41(2):05-16
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