

Examining Community-Drive Resilience and Participatory Adaptation in Latin American Informal Settlements:

Insights from Argentina and Chile

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Executive Summary

Background

This research explores how communities in informal settlements develop adaptation strategies and engage in participatory processes to address climate-related risks, focusing on two case studies: El Esfuerzo, in Valparaíso (Chile), and Nuevo Alberdi, in Rosario (Argentina). Both settlements face chronic infrastructure deficits, insecure tenure, and exclusion from formal planning, combined with high exposure to hazards such as floods, wildfires, droughts, and landslides. These conditions provide an entry point to examine how adaptation practices emerge, how they interact with governance structures, and how they can inform more equitable and resilient urban responses.

Conceptual Framework

The report draws on perspectives from international relations, political economy, and critical urban studies, engaging with debates on equitable resilience (Pelling, 2011; Cretney, 2014), the right to the city (Lefebvre, 1968; Harvey, 2008), and the politics of adaptation (Joseph, 2013; MacKinnon & Derickson, 2012). It critically examines approaches to resilience that prioritise technical solutions or individual and community coping capacities, which risk obscuring the historical inequalities and governance arrangements that produce vulnerability. The research instead conceptualises resilience as a socio-political process, shaped by struggles over rights, redistribution, and recognition, and deeply linked to state responsibility and urban governance.

Methodology

A qualitative, multi-method approach was implemented over seven months. Primary data were collected through 28 semi-structured interviews, four focus groups, participatory mapping exercises, and nine field visits, complemented by secondary data from census records, municipal planning documents, NGO reports, policy frameworks, and academic literature. A gender-sensitive lens informed the design and analysis, providing insights into how climate risks, adaptation practices, and access to decision-making are differentiated by gendered social roles and power relations.

Key Findings

Residents in both settlements actively implement a range of adaptation strategies — including incremental housing improvements, neighbourhood-level infrastructure works, collective emergency practices, and the formation of mutual aid networks — often to address gaps in state provision. While these initiatives demonstrate significant organisational capacity and knowledge, their scope and sustainability are shaped by broader structural conditions. Tenure insecurity, fragmented governance, and irregular public interventions limit their effectiveness, whereas secure tenure, institutional continuity, legal recognition, and participatory mechanisms strengthen their long-term impact.

The research also finds that state action is a decisive factor in shaping adaptation trajectories. Effective and equitable outcomes require states to fulfil complementary roles: a regulatory role, by securing tenure and integrating risk into land-use planning; a redistributive role, by investing in

infrastructure and essential services; an enabling role, by institutionalising participatory governance and integrating community knowledge into policy.

A rights-based development approach underpins these findings, asserting that adaptation must be treated as a public responsibility rather than a burden placed on those most affected. Gender equality emerges as a critical dimension: women often lead collective responses but remain under-recognised, highlighting the need for policies that incorporate care infrastructure and address differentiated vulnerabilities.

Policy Recommendations

The report identifies several priority actions to transform fragmented, short-term responses into systemic and just adaptation strategies: secure land tenure and legal recognition to enable long-term planning, investment, and access to services; establish institutionalised participatory planning frameworks that move beyond consultation and allow communities to shape priorities, design, and resource allocation; integrate and expand essential infrastructure and services — including water, sanitation, mobility, energy, and risk mitigation — as part of long-term urban planning; incorporate gender-responsive approaches into adaptation policies, recognising the central role of women in collective organisation and embedding care and safety considerations into planning and service delivery.

Conclusion

The research demonstrates that adaptation in informal settlements is shaped by the interaction between local practices, institutional conditions, and state action. Addressing the structural causes of vulnerability — through tenure security, inclusive governance, equitable service provision, and rights-based policy — is essential for advancing equitable resilience beyond short-term coping. Embedding these principles into planning and decision-making can create the conditions for equitable climate-resilient urban futures.