



Resilient Coasts:

A values-based approach to coastal adaptation

Policy Brief

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General acknowledgments

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Land acknowledgment

We respectfully acknowledge that some of the learning, discussions, and activities of this project are taking place on the traditional and treaty lands of the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation, part of the Anishinaabe Nation. This territory is governed by the Dish With One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant, a treaty between Indigenous Nations to share and care for the lands and waters around the Great Lakes.

Our project also takes place on the unceded traditional territories of the Coast Salish Peoples, including the xʷməθkwəyəm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), Səlílŵətał (Tsleil-Waututh), s̓cəwəθən məsteyəxʷ (Tsawwassen), and SEMYOME (Semiahmoo) Nations. The coastal area our research engages has always been a place of learning for the Coast Salish Peoples, who for millennia have passed on their culture, history, and traditions in this region.

We are grateful to be doing this work across these territories and commit to building relationships grounded in respect, reciprocity, and responsibility.

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Executive Summary

— EXECUTIVE SUMMARY —

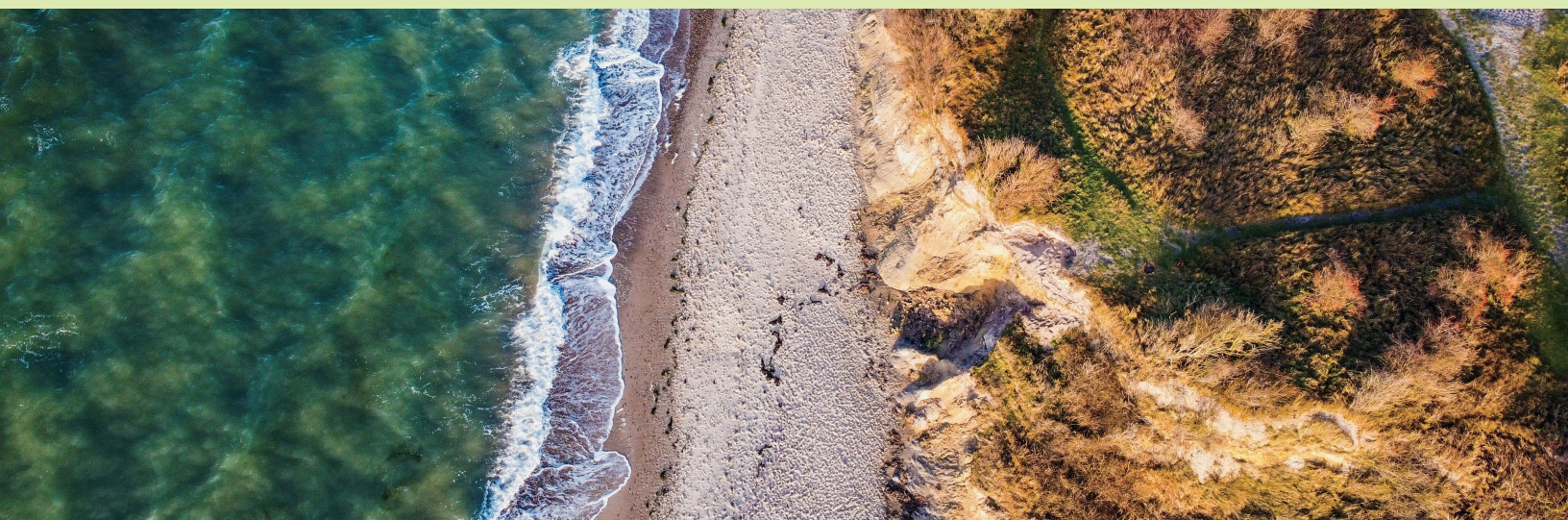
This policy brief introduces a values-based approach (VBA) to climate change adaptation—an approach that emphasizes alignment with what truly matters to people and communities. Adaptation efforts focused solely on economic and technical priorities often face resistance because they overlook social factors such as community values and lived experiences. A VBA offers a pathway to integrate community priorities, strengths, and needs alongside economic and technical considerations in decision-making.

Grounding solutions in community values fosters strategies that are not only effective in mitigating risks, but also meaningful and relevant to the communities most impacted. By prioritizing local perspectives and knowledge, this approach empowers communities to co-create equitable and widely supported adaptation solutions. The process outlined in this policy brief consists of six iterative steps, informed by both practitioner insights and academic literature.





Background



— BACKGROUND —

A values-based approach (VBA) extends beyond human communities to encompass more-than-human kin and the natural environment. Indigenous knowledge has long recognized the interdependence of human well-being and ecological health. Elevating this perspective, VBAs inform decision-making that prioritizes ecosystem sustainability as essential to long-term human well-being (Artelle et al., 2018; Wolf et al., 2013).

Moreover, a values-based approach uses asset-based framing, acknowledging and uplifting the strengths and skills communities have.

Traditional ‘rational’ decision-making, which evaluates risks, alternatives, and potential outcomes, has been praised for its structured approach. However, this approach often fails to account for the more social and emotional factors that shape real-world decision-making (Siders & Pierce, 2021). It assumes community goals remain constant and that new information alone can secure social acceptance—an assumption that oversimplifies the complexity of adaptation challenges (Siders & Pierce, 2021).

In this context, "community" includes both place-based (i.e., remote, urban, rural, and, natural) and identity-based (i.e., Indigenous, 2SLGBTQIA+, neurodivergent, and faith-based) groups.

Overlooking community values poses a risk of marginalizing the communities they aim to support. For example, while Canada’s National Adaptation Strategy (NAS) increased Indigenous representation within working groups, Indigenous communities still struggle with unequal decision-making power, perpetuating systemic oppressions like colonialism (Wale, 2023; Latulippe, 2019; Malin & Ryder, 2018). Effective climate adaptation requires decision-making processes grounded in a range of values, as priorities vary across time, locations, and diverse groups (Seekamp et al., 2020; Adger, 2013).

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Values-Based Approach

— VALUES-BASED APPROACH —

3.1 Foundations for a Values-Based Approach (VBA)



A Values-Based Approach (VBA) to climate adaptation offers a pathway that centers the values and strengths of those who the adaptation solution aims to support. Recognizing that values influence how people perceive risks, prioritize actions, and make decisions (Reid et al., 2014), adopting a VBA fosters greater social acceptance, transparency, and inclusivity of adaptation solutions (Seekamp et al., 2020; Lawrence et al., 2018).

Values generally fall into two categories:

Tangible values



Easy to quantify and measure (i.e. economic priorities, critical infrastructure, food security, disaster resilience, salmon, cedar)

Intangible values



Tend to emerge from lived-experiences and are more complex to measure (i.e. physical and mental well-being, social connectedness, cultural and spiritual practices, environmental knowledge)

It is also important to recognize that overlapping and interconnecting values span both tangible and intangible groups. For example, food security is often considered a tangible value, yet access to culturally significant food sources ties into intangible values like cultural traditions. Moving forward, the term “values” aims to capture this complexity, recognizing the dynamic interplay between tangible and intangible values within communities. This also illustrates the breadth of values that individuals and communities hold and where folks may differ in values and priorities.

3.2 Advancing a Values-based Approach (VBA)



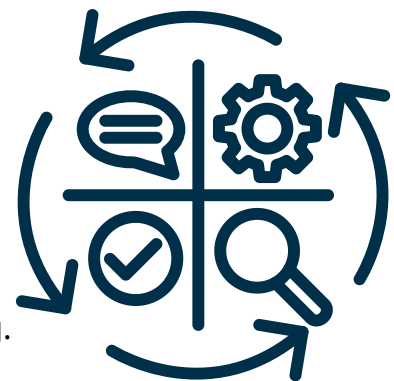
Embedding values into adaptation processes involves turning priorities, local strengths, and shared principles into actionable steps that guide each phase of an adaptation cycle (i.e., decision-making, planning, implementation, and monitoring and evaluating). This requires respectful relationships and building trust with those most impacted. While trust and relationship-building takes time, the long-term benefits of collaboration and partnership are significant.

Through meaningful partnerships with Indigenous and local communities, governments can empower equitable adaptation pathways that reflect diverse perspectives and foster long-term resilience.

While there are various examples on how to integrate values into climate adaptation processes in the literature, we draw on Reid et al. (2014)'s four-phase methodology and the adaptation process articulated within Canada's National Adaptation Strategy, to illustrate a values-focused decision-making approach. The overlapping of both processes articulates entry points on where values can be considered within an already accepted decision-making model.

Engaging with Indigenous and equity-denied communities requires centering their voices, lived experiences, and perspectives in the adaptation process ([Bill C-29, 2024](#); [DRIPA, 2019](#); [TRC Calls to Action 2015](#); [UNDRIP, 2007](#)). Each Indigenous community has distinct strengths, challenges, and experiences, necessitating tailored approaches for engagement and solution development. The framework outlined below prioritizes inclusivity, mutual respect, and the recognition of diverse lived experiences.

Adaptation is an iterative process, not a linear one. Steps may need to be revisited multiple times before progressing or returning to later stages, particularly when embedding values. This flexibility allows for continuous learning, reflection, and refinement, ensuring that adaptation efforts remain responsive to evolving community needs and environmental conditions. The proposed VBA process is structured to reinforce values at every stage, embedding them into decision-making and long-term resilience planning. By doing so, the process remains dynamic, adaptive, and aligned with the lived realities of the communities it serves.



3.3 Proposed VBA Process

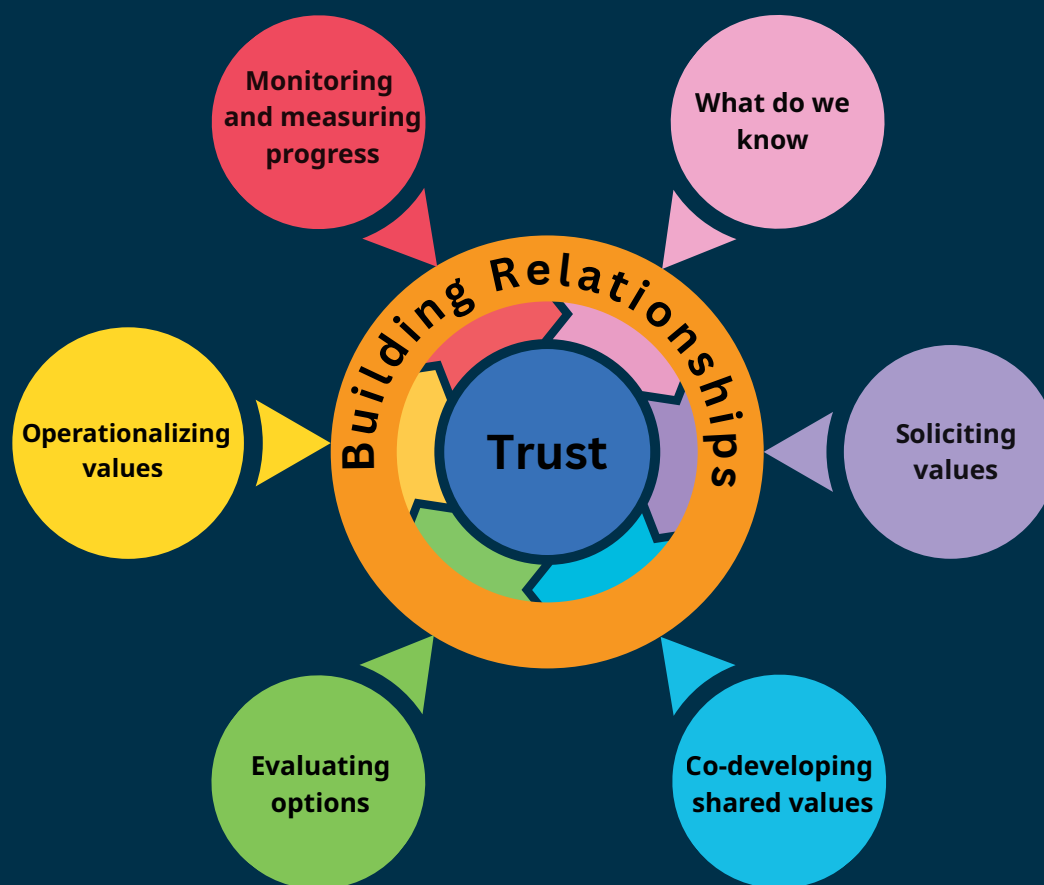


Figure 1: Visual representation of proposed values-based approach (VBA) to climate adaptation processes. Circular process that centers on trust, and revolves in iterative cycles.¹

3.3.1 Build relationships



Building trust is the foundation of effective flood adaptation efforts. Before engaging in plans or discussing values, it is essential to establish genuine connections with communities, especially those historically excluded from decision-making processes. Earning trust requires time and patience, but ensures flood adaptation solutions are equitable and effective.

¹ This proposed process builds on Reid et al. (2014)'s framework, which aligns with the existing decision-making structure in the Province of B.C. The framework is adapted based on the local knowledge and input of the Gitga'a't Nation, addressing the specific climate change impacts affecting the community's daily life. The nuances and context of Reid et al. (2014)'s framework are inseparable from the lived experiences of the Gitga'a't Nation. Therefore, only the process and methodological approach is applied here, to ensure the nuances and lived experiences remain grounded in local context.

Key principles:

- Listen first, avoiding pre-made solutions.
- Acknowledge community history, as past experiences shape present approaches to change.
- Recognize community expertise, emphasizing the skills and knowledge they bring.
- Recognize and respect the Title, Rights, and Treaty Rights Indigenous communities hold.
- Identify roles and responsibilities for all involved, attempting to dismantle colonial power relations and historical injustices.

3.3.2 Centering community and place-based knowledge



Local communities possess unique insights into flood risks and vulnerabilities, informed by generations of lived experience. Honoring and centering this knowledge enhances adaptation efforts.

Key principles:

- Recognize community strengths, knowledge, and capabilities when adapting to flood risks.
- Let communities lead in identifying flood-prone areas and historical flood patterns.
- Communicate risks, hazards, vulnerabilities and understand how flood risks will impact individuals, groups, communities, sectors, and organizations.
- Pursue multi-benefit solutions that address broader community needs alongside flood protection.
- Use creative engagement tools like storytelling or arts-based methods to gather flood-related insights.



3.3.3 Uncovering values



Flood impacts vary across cultures and communities, shaped by differing values and connections to land and water. Understanding this perspective is critical for inclusive flood adaptation solutions. The process for uncovering values should reflect the diversity of the communities affected by flooding.

Key principles:

- Be mindful of whose values are being centred and prioritized.
- Create safe spaces for all partners to express perspectives.
- Set clear guidelines ensuring all voices are respected.
- Understand relationships with flood-prone land and waters within project areas.

3.3.4 Co-develop shared values



This step focuses on identifying shared values or fostering mutual respect and understanding among differing or conflicting values. Flood adaptation solutions are strengthened when diverse perspectives are acknowledged and incorporated, rather than requiring full agreement. The aim is to create a foundation that reflects the priorities and lived experiences of all involved while ensuring inclusive and practical outcomes.



Key principles:

- Let communities decide whether consensus or diversity is preferred.
- Reflect on whose values are being centred and prioritized.
- Define shared values to guide flood adaptation solutions.
- Encourage mutual learning from different worldviews.
- Remain flexible about what shared values mean for each project.



3.3.5 Evaluating adaptation options

Flood adaptation solutions are more effective when they align with community values, increasing the likelihood of social acceptance and long-term success. This step assesses potential options based on shared priorities, ensuring that selected solutions are both technically sound and socially supported.

Key principles:

- Prioritize multi-benefit options that meet various community needs while addressing flood risks.
- What options are capturing both tangible and intangible dimensions of climate impacts.
- Engage all partners when selecting flood adaptation solutions based on shared values.
- Clarify decision-making power in selecting solutions.
- Explore innovative decision-making approaches.
- Focus on resilience and adaptive capacity to flooding.

3.3.6 Integrate values into implementation



Implementing VBA solutions requires addressing barriers such as limited resources, varying risk perceptions, and political inertia. Aligning solutions with community priorities fosters political commitment and buy-in while ensuring that adaptation efforts remain grounded in local needs. Trust, shared ownership, and value alignment are essential to bridging the gap between planning and action, making implementation more effective and meaningful.

Key principles:

- Include all partners in implementation discussions.
- Ensure ongoing collaboration and adaptability to emerging flood risks.
- Anticipate and address barriers such as funding, awareness, and political will.
- Adopt creative tools to sustain momentum.

3.3.7 Monitoring and measuring progress



Implementation is an iterative process that requires consistent monitoring, learning, and adaptation. When the monitoring and evaluation metrics center community values, it ensures solutions reflect what truly matters to those affected, making them both effective and widely supported. The monitoring, learning, and adaptation step requires continuous reflection, creativity, and a sustained commitment to community needs.

Key principles:

- Move beyond traditional metrics, embracing innovative approaches.
- Develop flexible systems for monitoring and evaluating flood adaptation progress.
- Adapt based on feedback, ensuring solutions remain relevant to flood resilience.
- Explore constructed or alternative indicators to assess impact and progress of adaptation.



Resources & Case Studies

— RESOURCES & CASE STUDIES —

4.1 Resources and tools for reference



- Who is the solution for?
- Adopting an Indigenous lens to climate adaptation work
- Guidebook on inclusive municipal adaptation planning
- Equitable climate adaptation considerations for local governments

4.2 Case studies of VBA in practice



PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND

Novaczek et al., (2011). Social and Cultural Values Mapping as a Decision-Support Tool for Climate Change Adaptation. November.

FRASER RIVER

First Nations Fisheries Legacy Fund & the Centre for Indigenous Fisheries. (2024). Biocultural Indicator Manual. A Guide for the Development & Implementation of Biocultural Indicator Frameworks.

SWINOMISH TRIBAL COMMUNITY

Donatuto, J., Campbell, L., & Trousdale, W. (2020). The “value” of values-driven data in identifying Indigenous health and climate change priorities. *Climatic Change*, 158(2), 161–180.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10584-019-02596-2>

CITY OF VANCOUVER

City of Vancouver. (2021). Values-based Planning Primer. February.

GITGA'AT NATION

Reid et al., (2014). Indigenous Climate Change Adaptation Planning Using a Values-Focused Approach: A Case Study with the Gitga'at Nation. *Journal of Ethnobiology*, 34(3), 401–424.

CITY OF SURREY

City of Surrey. (2016). CFAS Stakeholder Engagement Framework. Internal Document

REGIONAL DISTRICT OF CENTRAL KOOTENAY

Whittaker et al., (2018). Building Relationships And Cultivating Social Licence: A Guide For Small Tenure Holders In BC. BCCFA.

RURAL AND REMOTE BC COMMUNITIES

Enlivened Values and Embodied Vision framework by Charlene Sanjenko (see Appendix B)

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Conclusion

— CONCLUSION —

5.1 Benefits and Importance



A VBA approach fosters trust, inclusivity, and collaboration, ensuring adaptation measures are socially accepted and culturally appropriate. By aligning values within adaptation processes, it addresses the interconnectedness of climate impacts on people and ecosystems, creating regenerative and long-term solutions. This approach highlights the importance of social acceptance and the role of values in determining what adaptation measures are considered acceptable or desirable. It also reveals the underlying motivations, strengths, and concerns that influence people's willingness to support or resist certain interventions, guiding more context-sensitive and culturally responsive adaptation efforts.

5.2 Challenges



Communities often hold diverse values, making it challenging to balance differing perspectives. Practitioners such as consultants, facilitators, and decision-makers, must approach local values with cultural sensitivity to avoid misunderstandings that could undermine trust and collaboration.

Since values are dynamic, a VBA requires ongoing engagement and updates to remain effective, which demands investments of time, funding, and resources.

Tensions may arise between community-specific values and Western science adaptation goals and strategies that have been traditionally adopted by government and political actors. One manner to navigate such tensions is by facilitating discussions in a manner that respects all entities' knowledge, skills, and priorities. Moreover, translating complex local values into rigid policy frameworks or international agreements adds another layer of complexity.

5.3 Conclusion



Climate change adaptation strategies often face resistance when they fail to align with the values, priorities, and lived experiences of the communities they aim to serve. A Values-Based Approach (VBA) to climate adaptation offers a pathway to embed values into the decision-making process. This approach prioritizes inclusivity, mutual respect, and collaboration, ensuring adaptation measures are relevant, equitable, and sustainable. Overall, a VBA highlights the importance of empowering community values, skills, and needs, when advancing long-term resilience. Adopting this approach is not just about responding to change and navigating different priorities; it is about implementing place-based, socially accepted, and effective adaptation solutions that resonate with communities and empower local strengths and knowledge.

5.3.1 Sample reflection questions to help guide this process

Embedding community values in adaptation planning requires ongoing reflection, careful navigation of differing perspectives, and a commitment to inclusivity. These reflection questions help centre the priorities of the communities adaptation efforts aim to serve while balancing cultural sensitivity, strategic alignment, and long-term engagement. They provide a framework for critically assessing how values are identified, communicated, and upheld throughout the adaptation process. By using these questions to guide decision-making, practitioners can begin fostering trust, responsiveness, and accountability, ultimately strengthening adaptation efforts that are socially meaningful, equitable, and effective.

Understanding community values

1. What core values do you have that fundamentally inform and influence your decision-making process?
2. What values do you hold that will shape how you understand and interpret community values?
3. What values do you use when working with communities?
4. What are the key values held by the communities we serve, and how do we identify them effectively?
5. How can we engage diverse community members, especially underrepresented groups, to ensure their values are included in the adaptation process?

Cultural sensitivity and inclusivity

1. Are we approaching community engagement with sufficient cultural awareness and sensitivity to avoid reinforcing inequities?
2. How can we ensure that our processes honor Indigenous knowledge systems and respect traditional values?

Adaptability and ongoing engagement

1. How do we ensure our strategies remain flexible and responsive to the evolving values of the community?
2. What mechanisms can we put in place for continuous community feedback and involvement in decision-making?

Holding accountability

1. How do current practices and decisions actively reflect and uphold the values of the communities they impact?
2. What mechanisms are in place to ensure community voices are genuinely integrated into decision-making processes?
3. What steps are taken to ensure ongoing, transparent communication with communities about decisions that affect them?

Managing tensions

1. What steps can we take to mediate conflicts when community values conflict with adaptation goals, policy priorities, or within the community?
2. How do we balance conflicting values within a community while maintaining fairness and inclusivity?
3. What conflict-resolution strategies can you incorporate to navigate conflicting values between you and the communities and/or partners you are working with?

Measuring success

1. What indicators can be used to assess whether our adaptation strategies reflect and uphold community values?
2. How do we define success?
3. What alternative indicators or tools can demonstrate success in ways that challenge Western definitions of success and align with Indigenous worldviews and other ways of knowing?
4. How can we document and share lessons learned to improve VBA implementation in future projects?

Appendices

Appendix A: *Bibliography*

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Appendix B: Values framework

Values framework used to support co-development of solutions for place-based climate resilience by Charlene Sanjenko, reGen Impact Media.

Created for the *Serving Rural & Remote Communities: Co-developing Place-Based Climate Resilient Solutions* Project.

