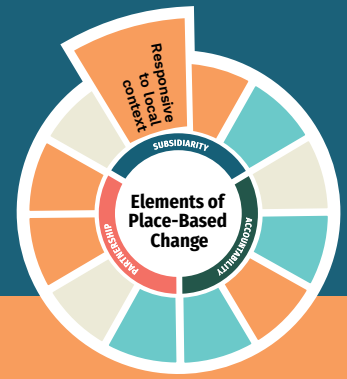


**Subsidiarity:** Decisions should be made at the most local level possible – where people have the greatest knowledge of context and the strongest stake in the outcomes. In place-based work, this means shifting authority closer to community – giving local leaders, organisations and residents the power to shape the services and systems that affect them.



## 1.2 Responsive to local context

**Initiatives are shaped by the specific histories, cultures and needs of the community, not by a one-size-fits-all model.**

### What is being responsive to local context in place-based change?

In place-based work, being responsive to local context is a practice, or a way of working, that seeks to understand and work with the unique histories, cultures, relationships and systems of each community. It involves listening deeply before acting; adjusting plans as understanding grows; using local knowledge to inform decisions; and embedding feedback loops that keep work relevant and connected. It's a commitment to shaping practice so that what happens in the locality genuinely fits the place itself.

Being responsive to local context is a core purpose of place-based change. This way of working requires all stakeholders, especially those from outside the community, to start by listening and learning from local voices. Taking time to understand how individuals experience their community is critical – this includes identifying which relationships and institutions hold influence, as well as

recognising how trust is established and maintained.

Being responsive to local context also demands an honest acknowledgement of the difficult histories that many communities have endured. These histories may include social exclusion, systemic failures, discrimination, colonisation, or many unsuccessful initiatives and interventions. Such experiences significantly influence how community members will interact with services and systems, affecting their willingness to trust, participate, and maintain hope for the future.

Recognising that historically negative experiences can make collaboration slower and more fragile, working responsively in place involves rebuilding trust through consistent presence, transparency, and being willing to listen and repair relationships before expecting change.

Taking the time to genuinely engage with community through activities such as community conversations, co-design workshops and local mapping can help uncover the formal and informal systems that

shape daily life and guide where to start, what pace to move at and who to involve.

Understanding local context through genuine engagement enables services and agencies to work with community to design and adapt approaches that match community needs, priorities and expectations, rather than applying standard program models.

For services and agencies to be genuinely responsive to local context requires flexibility – in funding, timeframes and accountability arrangements – to allow for adaptation and practice to evolve as understanding deepens.

### Why being responsive to local context is important in place-based change

One of the key features of place-based work is being responsive to local context. When actions and decisions are grounded in the everyday realities and histories of a community, they become more relevant and have more legitimacy. Understanding how people experience the place in



which they live enables partners to design responses that align with local priorities instead of external mandates. This alignment not only improves impact but also increases uptake by the local community, ensures resources are used efficiently, and directs efforts to where it matters most.

When decisions, practices and activities are linked to context, collaboration becomes easier and more meaningful. Shared understanding of local circumstances helps different external stakeholders understand how their work connects, identify

opportunities to coordinate resources, and co-create solutions that no single organisation could achieve alone. Relationships strengthen as partners move from working in parallel to working in concert, guided by a shared vision and purpose that reflects community priorities.

Being responsive to local context also creates the conditions for ongoing learning and adaptation. Regularly testing whether services and programs are fit for purpose invites reflection and continuous improvement. Partners can adjust activities and plans together

as needs, relationships and opportunities evolve, ensuring that progress is sustained rather than short-lived.

Most importantly, being responsive to local context builds credibility, buy-in and ownership. When communities see their histories, values and aspirations reflected in the work, trust grows and participation deepens. Context responsiveness transforms place-based work from a collection of programs into a living system – one that adapts, learns and endures because it is built from the place itself.

## Key takeaways

- **Start with community voice and context**

Take time to listen deeply and understand the histories, relationships and systems shaping local life before acting. Adapt programs and delivery models to fit local rhythms and priorities rather than external timelines.

- **Build respectful, long-term partnerships**

Prioritise relationships over transactions by investing in trust and shared purpose between community, government and service partners. Ensure the collaboration is relational and grounded in dialogue, transparency and mutual benefit.

- **Share decision-making**

Establish joint leadership structures – such as community councils, partnership boards or cross-sector tables – where governments, funders, services and communities have equal authority.

- **Invest in enabling infrastructure**

Fund coordinating structures and roles that support the collaboration. Ensure communities have the resources, tools and staff to lead and maintain momentum beyond short project cycles.

- **Embed continuous learning and adaptation**

Treat learning as an ongoing process. Use developmental or improvement-focused evaluation methods, create regular reflection spaces, and celebrate progress and learning along the way.

- **Align funding and policy with community-led practice**

Provide flexible, multi-year funding that supports collaboration, participation and experimentation. Encourage governments and funders to coordinate investments, share risk, and legitimise community knowledge, lived experience and cultural authority as core evidence for decision-making.