Strengthening Accountability in Climate Adaptation Projects: Perspectives from Rural Farming Communities

DANLEY COLECRAFT AIDOO, NANA KOBEA BONSO, ISAAC ALVIN AMOAH

Research Background

Climate adaptation projects increasingly depend on community participation to sustain outcomes. Accountability is often framed as a pathway to empowerment, transparency, and ownership. However, accountability also structures behaviour, expectations, and authority within project settings (Eriksen et al., 2021).

In many rural contexts, accountability is experienced less through formal reporting systems and more through everyday social relations, communication practices, and local norms. Understanding these dynamics is critical for ensuring that adaptation interventions are not only technically effective but also socially just.

This study examines accountability as a lived process within rural farming communities participating in climate adaptation projects.

Research Motivation

While adaptation projects promote participation, farmers often remain excluded from key decisions concerning resources, priorities, and project design. Understanding how accountability operates in practice is therefore essential for ensuring that adaptation interventions are not only effective, but also socially just and responsive to community realities.

This study responds to the need for closer examination of how accountability, transparency, and participation interact in rural climate adaptation contexts.

Research Focus

The study asks:
- How do farmers experience accountability in adaptation projects?
- How do peer knowledge sharing and transparency shape accountability practices?
- What limits exist for upward and downward accountability?
- How do these dynamics influence farmer agency and participation?

Study Context and Methods

The research was conducted in rural farming communities in Northern Ghana where climate adaptation projects had been implemented.

Design:
Qualitative case study approach.

Data Collection:
Focus Group Discussions with farmer groups
Key Informant Interviews with extension officers and project actors

Sampling:
Purposive and stratified to reflect gender, farm size, and adaptation practices.

Analysis:
Thematic analysis combining deductive and inductive coding, with attention to horizontal, upward, and downward accountability.

Theoretical Framework

The study draws on **Social Capital Theory** (Putnam & Gross, 2002; Woolcock & Narayan, 2006), which emphasises the role of:
- ❖ Trust
- ❖ Shared norms
- ❖ Social networks
- ❖ Reciprocal obligations

While social capital is often associated with empowerment and cooperation, this study examines how these same social ties can also reinforce compliance with externally defined project priorities.

This approach aligns with recent critiques that participation and social cohesion do not automatically translate into influence over institutional decisions (Forsyth, 2023; Fisher et al., 2024).

Key Findings

Horizontal Accountability as the Dominant Form

Farmers described accountability primarily through peer relations. Monitoring occurred through:
- ❖ Farm visits
- ❖ Verbal corrections
- ❖ Group discussions
- ❖ Informal sanctions

Peer knowledge sharing strengthened cooperation and mutual responsibility. However, it also reinforced conformity to project expectations.

> "We visit each other's farms and know who is doing the right thing."

Horizontal accountability was trusted because it was visible, familiar, and grounded in social relationships.

Transparency as Selective

Transparency was strongest in relation to technical advice, especially when communicated in local languages. Farmers valued this openness.

However, information on funding, resources, and institutional decisions was largely absent and commonly accepted as beyond farmers' authority.

> "Issues about funding are not for our level."

This reflects what Gupta et al. (2021) describe as transparency that supports disclosure without enabling influence.

Mediated Communication and Limited Upward Voice

Farmers communicated concerns mainly through facilitators and extension agents. This mediation shaped how messages were transmitted and interpreted.

As a result, participation did not consistently translate into influence over project decisions.

> "We tell the facilitator, and he sends it to the project officers."

This limited the extent to which farmers could directly question or negotiate project decisions (Eriksen et al., 2021).

Responsibility without Authority

Farmers were responsible for sustaining project practices and enforcing group discipline yet remained excluded from shaping priorities. Accountability was experienced locally, while authority remained institutional.

Interpretation

Accountability strengthened cooperation, discipline, and participation. At the same time, it limited the space for negotiation, contestation, and influence.

Responsibility circulated within communities. Authority remained external.

Accountability therefore functioned both as a source of agency and as a mechanism of governance.

Implications for Adaptation Practice

To strengthen meaningful accountability:
- ❖ Responsibility should be matched with decision-making influence.
- ❖ Feedback channels should allow direct dialogue, not only mediation.
- ❖ Transparency should include governance and resource information.
- ❖ Participation should allow negotiation, not only compliance.

Contribution to WASH and Climate Governance

The study:
- ❖ Highlights accountability as a socially embedded process.
- ❖ Demonstrates the central role of horizontal accountability.
- ❖ Reveals the limits of transparency and mediated communication.
- ❖ Provides grounded insight into power relations in adaptation projects.
- ❖ It contributes to debates on participation, governance, and climate justice in rural contexts.

It supports calls to rethink participation as a political, not only technical, process (Eriksen et al., 2021; Fisher et al., 2024).

Conclusion

Accountability in climate adaptation is not only about reporting and monitoring. It is about how responsibility, authority, and voice are distributed. Understanding these dynamics is essential for building adaptation projects that are not only resilient, but also equitable.

Acknowledgements

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