



INFORMATION BRIEF

Beyond Gender-Sensitive Adaptation: Meso-Level Organizations as Catalysts for Transformative Climate Change Adaptation

This brief summarizes the results of a qualitative analysis in four sub-Saharan African countries namely, Malawi, Ghana, Kenya and South Africa. While gender disparities in climate change adaptation (CCA) are a continental challenge, socio-political, economic and institutional dynamics influencing adaptation outcomes differ significantly across countries.

Specifically, we examine the role of **meso-level organizations (MLOs)**, the intermediaries between grassroots communities, state actors and global donors in fostering transformative adaptation through gender equity.

By unpacking the perspectives, capacities and strategies of these organizations, this brief highlights the barriers and opportunities for going beyond gender-sensitive adaptation to foster transformative change. These include reconciling changes in local norms with sponsor requirements, ensuring gender-work is inclusive, and finding space for innovation to address gender barriers to CCA, while also enabling women's empowerment. Understanding these context-specific challenges and opportunities is essential to addressing the root causes of gender inequity in adaptation.

KEY TERMS

Climate Change Adaptation (CCA): Actions that help individuals, communities, and systems prepare for and adjust to the impacts of climate change, such as drought, erratic rainfall, and crop failure.

Meso-Level Organizations (MLOs): Complex heterogeneous organizations involved in the implementation of planned CCA investments, in forms of programs, and projects.

Gender-Sensitive: Approaches that recognize and respond to gender differences and inequalities without necessarily challenging existing gender norms or power structures. Often focuses on accommodating gender concerns rather than transforming them.

Transformative Adaptation: Adaptation that seeks to address the root causes of vulnerability by shifting underlying systems, structures, and power relations—especially those tied to social inequalities such as gender. It moves beyond incremental adjustments to promote systemic, equitable change.

Too often, **gender disparities in CCA initiatives are reduced to a box-ticking exercise**, implemented to meet funding and policy compliance requirements rather than to address systemic inequalities in a meaningful way. As a result, adaptation interventions often fail to dismantle the structural determinants of gendered vulnerabilities.

– FAO, 2023



Key insights



MLOs as equity navigators across scales

MLOs act as critical intermediaries that bridge grassroots realities and donor expectations. By doing so, they navigate the tensions between cultural norms and compliance mechanisms, often translating equity goals into locally meaningful and politically feasible strategies.



Grounding gender-sensitive adaptation in lived realities

MLOs hold nuanced understandings of how gender shapes vulnerability. Their deep community engagement allows them to identify practical entry points, like financial access, mobile alerts, or climate-smart practices, for addressing structural gender disparities.



From access to influence: Pushing beyond participation

While many MLOs promote women's inclusion, a subset explicitly target recognition and procedural equity, for example, by engaging traditional leaders to secure women's land rights or facilitating women's leadership in decision-making forums.



Scaling deep: Reshaping gender norms from within

As intermediaries, MLOs “scale deep” by creating the space and time for shifting entrenched gender norms. Through trust-based engagement and culturally sensitive programming, they foster changes in attitudes, roles, and relationships within communities.



Scaling up: Influencing policy and adaptation programming

MLOs also “scale up” by working individually and collectively to shape adaptation programs and policies. Their advocacy and coalition-building efforts help institutionalize gender equity in national strategies and donor agendas.



MLO networks as amplifiers of change

MLOs form part of dynamic networks that fill institutional gaps, share tools for gender equity, and mentor newer or less resourced organizations, multiplying impact and fostering a whole-of-society approach.



Navigating the limits of compliance

While donor compliance mechanisms on gender are important, they often become the endpoint rather than a catalyst for deeper change. MLOs recognize that achieving gender equity in adaptation requires going beyond checklists, embedding equity principles in the substance of program design and delivery.



Uneven capacities, rising ambitions

Organizational capacity varies widely. While some MLOs integrate gender via baseline assessments and gender-disaggregated indicators, others lack frameworks or data, highlighting a need for peer learning and targeted support.

Background and context

Climate change disproportionately affects marginalized communities across the African continent, with sub-Saharan Africa facing more frequent and intense climate shocks than many other regions. These shocks include droughts, floods and erratic rainfall patterns that disrupt agricultural productivity, food security and livelihoods, placing immense strain on small-scale farmers and rural economies (Trisos et al., 2022).

Women, who constitute a significant portion of the agricultural labor force, are particularly vulnerable to climate change due to deeply entrenched gender disparities in resource access, decision-making and economic opportunities (Bryan et al., 2024).

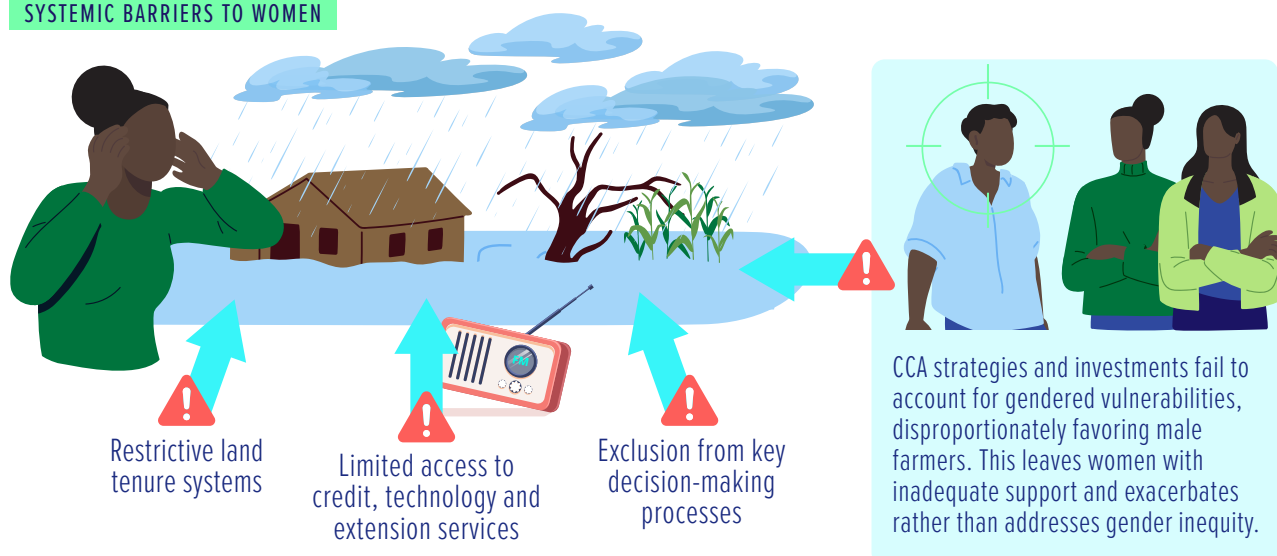
Despite their central role in food production and natural resource management (Bryan et al. 2024), **women in many African societies continue to face systemic barriers that limit their ability to adapt effectively to climate change** (see figure below). Awareness of and participation in climate-smart agriculture is gendered, and access to agricultural financing for women is still challenging. These issues exacerbate existing social and economic disparities, making it even harder for women to build resilience against climate change.

GENDER-SENSITIVE CCA

In recent years, gender-sensitive CCA has gained increased attention in policy, particularly within frameworks such as the Africa Union's Climate Change and Resilient Development Strategy and Action Plan (2022-2032) and various national adaptation plans. Additionally, major international climate finance mechanisms, including the Adaptation Fund, Green Climate Fund (GCF), and Global Environment Facility (GEF), have prioritized gender integration in their funding criteria and programmatic approaches. However, **despite these commitments, significant implementation gaps persist, and many CCA programs fail to fully integrate gender considerations in a transformative manner** (Resurrección et al., 2019).

Transformative adaptation outcomes require investments that **confront and rectify underlying inequities**. Without such shifts, CCA strategies risks reinforcing pre-existing disparities, undermining their effectiveness and making it difficult to scale up inclusive and equitable CCA efforts.

SYSTEMIC BARRIERS TO WOMEN



COUNTRY SPECIFIC CONTEXTS:

Gender and climate adaptation in Malawi, Ghana, Kenya and South Africa**GHANA****Customary land tenure and women's economic integration in value chains**

Ghana's agricultural sector is shaped by customary land tenure systems, which govern approximately 80% of land ownership and limit women's control over agricultural resources. While women play a significant role in post-harvest processing and trading, their participation in land ownership and decision-making is constrained by patriarchal inheritance traditions. These limitations prevent women from accessing formal agricultural finance and investment opportunities, further exacerbating gender-based productivity gaps. Despite the introduction of gender sensitive policies, women remain underrepresented in leadership roles within climate governance structures.

KENYA**Progressive climate policies, market access and gender gaps in climate finance**

Kenya has one of the most progressive climate governance frameworks in East Africa, with the Climate Change Act (2016) and the National Climate Change Action Plan (2018-2022) embedding gender considerations into national adaptation planning. The Kenya Climate Smart Agriculture Strategy (2017-2026) further promotes women's participation in climate-smart agriculture. Despite these legal advancements, implementation gaps persist, especially at county and local levels. Women's participation in climate finance, agricultural extension services, and disaster risk management remains low, with only 20% of adaptation funding under the National Climate Change Fund reaching female-headed households, highlighting structural barriers to resource distribution. Additionally, labor burdens and limited market access constrain women's adoption of climate-smart agricultural practices.

MALAWI**Gender, land tenure and climate vulnerability in an agrarian economy**

Malawi's dependence on rain-fed agriculture makes it particularly vulnerable to climate shocks such as prolonged droughts, floods and erratic rainfall patterns. Furthermore, women make up a large proportion of the agricultural workforce and yet own less than 20% of agricultural land, largely due to patrilineal inheritance systems. In matrilineal communities, women have nominal land rights but lack decision-making power over land use, limiting their ability to invest in long term CCA. Access to climate finance and extension services remains a critical barrier, with limited access to formal credit restricting their ability to adopt climate-smart technologies. Although Malawi's National Adaptation Plan recognizes gender disparities, implementation remains weak at the meso-level, where local organizations often lack the financial and technical capacity to integrate gender equity in CCA strategies effectively.

SOUTH AFRICA**Dual climate risks and gender disparities in climate finance**

As Africa's most industrialized economy, South Africa faces dual climate challenges thus balancing rural agricultural adaptation with urban climate resilience efforts. In rural areas, women experience limited access to climate resilient technologies, agricultural extension services and adaptation financing. One major barrier to gender equitable adaptation in South Africa is the unequal allocation of climate finance, with women-headed households receiving significantly less adaptation funding compared to male headed households. While the National Adaptation Strategy (2017) and the Gender Policy Framework acknowledges these gaps, enforcement remains inconsistent across provincial adaptation programs.



The role of meso-level organizations in promoting gender equity in CCA

Gender equity is increasingly recognized as a key feature of CCA efforts, but achieving it requires time, sustained engagement, and context-sensitive approaches. Gender equity in CCA includes improving access to adaptation resources and benefits (distributional equity), ensuring meaningful participation in decision-making across scales (procedural equity), and recognizing the differentiated experiences, needs, and rights of women and marginalized groups (recognitional equity) (Leach et al., 2018).

While the diversity of actors involved in adaptation is beginning to be documented (Petzold et al., 2023), there is still limited understanding of how MLOs engage with these equity dimensions in practice. Broader engagement with equity provides a foundation for more transformative adaptation. As organizations on the frontlines of planned adaptation investments, MLOs have the potential to bridge the gap between top-down policies and grassroots realities (Rasmussen et al., 2019). By exploring how MLOs perceive gender equity challenges in CCA – and the strategies they employ to address them – this study highlights their critical, yet often overlooked, role in fostering more inclusive and transformative adaptation outcomes.

WHAT CONSTITUTES A MESO-LEVEL ORGANIZATION?

We mobilize the term “meso-level organization” (MLO) to capture the set of complex heterogeneous organizations involved in the implementation of planned CCA investments, in forms of programs, and projects.



Local non-profit/community-based organization

A local organization established for non-profit purposes



International non-profit organization

Non-profit organization/non-government organization, which operates across various countries. This also includes philanthropic organizations and/or foundations



Bilateral organization

A government or non-profit organization that supports or cooperates directly with a single partner country to address specific issues or advance mutual interests (e.g. GIZ, etc.)



University/research organization

University or research organization



Government agency

Specifies government departments, including local and regional government agencies involved in adaptation implementation activities



Parastatal/state-owned enterprise

An entity or organization which is (partially/completely) owned by a country's government and often has some political power



Private enterprise

An entity, such as a (social) enterprise, which seeks to generate profit



International multilateral organization

International organization formed by three or more parties for the purposes of common interest (e.g. United Nations Development Program, World Bank, African Development Bank)

National and international climate governance structures



channel critical insights from grassroots experience

MESO-LEVEL ORGANIZATIONS



facilitate access to resources and knowledge

Community-level implementation



address the localized needs of rural women in CCA efforts

MLOs have the potential to:

- ✓ **facilitate equitable access** to climate finance, training and agricultural inputs
- ✓ **promote inclusive governance structures**, by helping to ensure that women's voices are represented in local CCA planning
- ✓ **pilot context-specific adaptation strategies**, such as community-based water management initiatives, and equitable access to climate information services
- ✓ **create the conditions in which complex conversations** about gender norms can occur
- ✓ **identify and address barriers** to women's entrepreneurship and leadership

Methods for assessing gender equity in MLO actions

To examine how gender equity in CCA is addressed in sub-Saharan Africa, this study employed the **trivalent equity framework** (see figure below).

While climate adaptation investments have expanded across the region, many initiatives continue to reinforce existing gender inequalities by failing to ensure meaningful participation of women in

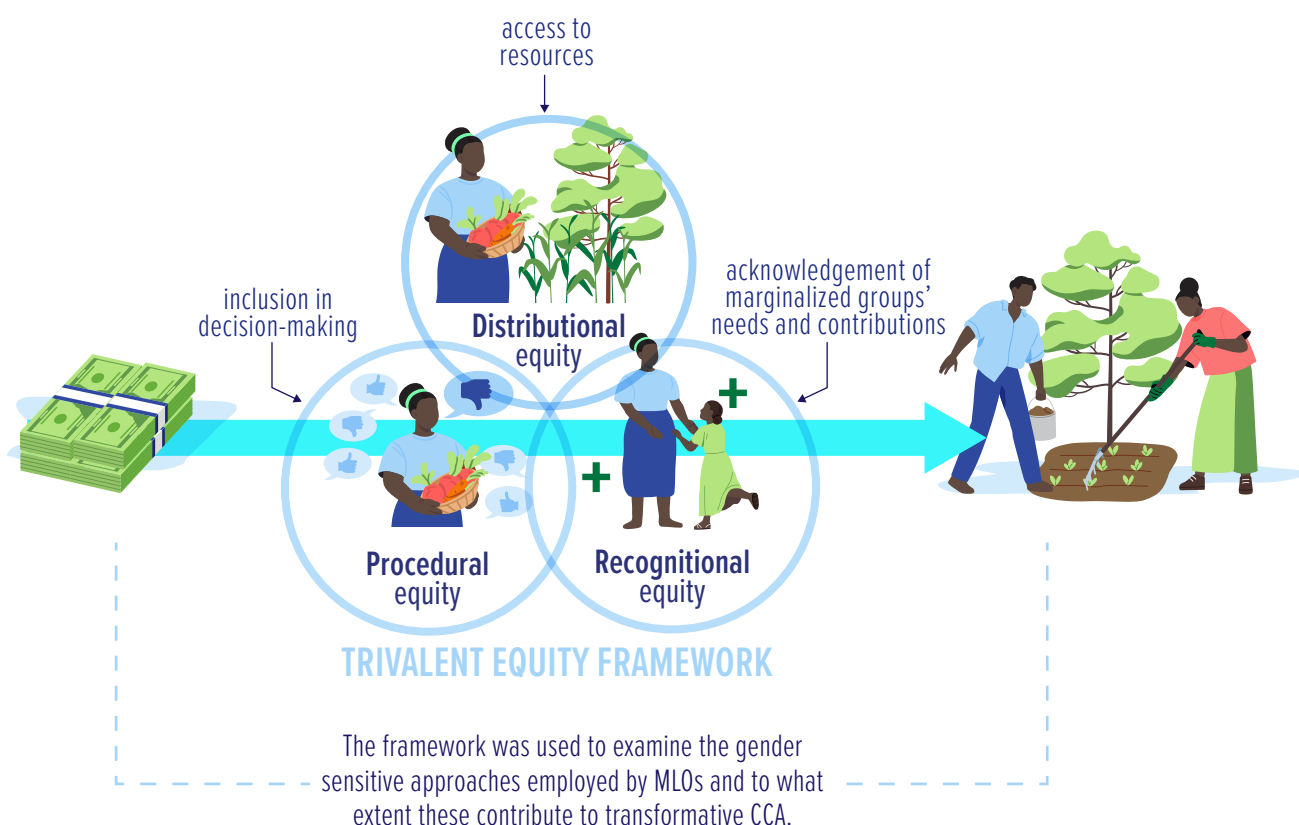
decision-making, equitable access to climate finance and recognition of the diverse socio-economic and cultural factors that shape their adaptive capacities.

The framework unpacked **how MLOs facilitate gender equity in CCA, exploring their strategies to enhance procedural, distributional and recognitional equity across Malawi, Ghana, Kenya and South Africa**, as discussed under “Key findings”.

To understand how MLOs engage with gender equity in CCA, the study examined three interrelated areas:

- 1 MLO's understanding of gendered vulnerability and equity principles,
- 2 MLO's capacities to plan, resource, and implement gender-responsive actions, and
- 3 MLO's strategies for addressing procedural, distributional, and recognitional equity in practice.

This framing enabled us to assess through interviews and focus groups with organizational representatives how MLOs conceptualized gender equity and translated those concepts into action. The team conducted 70 in-depth interviews and reviewed organizational materials across Malawi, Ghana, Kenya, and South Africa. Thematic coding (using MAXQDA) helped identify patterns in how MLOs navigate contextual constraints, donor requirements, and local norms to foster more inclusive adaptation outcomes.



Key findings

1 MLO's PERSPECTIVE ON GENDER AND CCA

Interviews with MLOs revealed **varying levels of awareness regarding gender equity in CCA**. Many linked women's climate vulnerability to systemic economic disadvantages — particularly women's disproportionate poverty levels, labor burdens, and restricted access to financial and material resources.

"... we see gender and inequalities more broadly as one of the key drivers of poverty or that keep people in poverty and barriers to getting out of poverty. So really looking at whether a gender transformative piece would actually remove some of those barriers and create a household that was more cooperative and decision making."

Some MLOs identified economic hardship as further constraining women's adaptive capacities by exacerbating domestic violence and intra-household conflicts.

"We are looking into the factors that contribute to conflict within the homes or domestic violence, for example, lack of food and lack of money."

These perspectives underscore the need to go beyond gender-sensitive CCA to frame climate solutions as part of broader empowerment strategies addressing structural inequalities and sociocultural norms.

2 RECOGNITIONAL EQUITY

Many MLOs reported that **adaptation programs often fail to consider gendered labor divisions and the sociocultural constraints** limiting women's participation in adaptation projects. **MLOs also recognized the risk of backlash when promoting women's participation in traditionally male-dominated adaptation activities.**

To mitigate this, some MLOs adopted culturally sensitive engagement strategies, such as working with "male champions," engaging whole households, and incorporating traditional leaders into program design. These approaches helped ensure that gender equity in CCA was perceived as beneficial to entire communities rather than exclusionary to men.

Strategies used by some MLOs to address sociocultural norms that define gender roles included:



Tailored project activities to women's time, labor demands, needs, and interests, such as by promoting climate-smart agricultural interventions that reduce women's labor burdens.



Ensured alignment with women's primary household responsibilities, such as through nutrition and clean energy programs.



Addressed gender norms directly as part of project activities such as by appointing "male champions."



Engaged "whole society" to create an enabling environment for CCA, such as by engaging whole households and incorporating traditional leaders into program design.

"One of the things we can all agree on is that whenever we are talking about issues of climate change, the people who suffer most are the women."

— KENYAN RESPONDENT

"Navigating a society and culture with significant gender imbalances is a challenge we often overlook. In our proposals, we don't explicitly mention working in highly patriarchal environments due to restrictions."

"Adaptation programs usually don't align with social development programs, which is where these issues fundamentally belong."

"When we insist that we need women to be entrepreneurs, does it change the household dynamics? Those are things we honestly need to get a grip on..."

3 DISTRIBUTIONAL EQUITY

A key focus of MLOs was ensuring **equitable access to CCA resources**, with many utilizing participation quotas that require a minimum percentage of female beneficiaries as a metric for gender inclusivity. One South African MLO noted, **“it was just like gender wasn’t built-in in any other ways... it kind of felt in most instances that it was a numbers game”**. While this facilitated access to financial and material resources, MLOs expressed frustration over the superficiality of such approaches, arguing that they often failed to address deeper structural barriers.

To create more substantive impacts, MLOs employed innovative strategies tailored to women’s adaptation needs.

These included:



Specialized training in climate-smart agriculture, agribusiness, and financial literacy. MLOs designed interventions to enhance women’s empowerment in production and value chain integration, as a means of supporting access to climate adaptation resources.



Access to climate information services (CIS). Recognizing the gendered barriers to technology, MLOs developed targeted strategies such as women-only radio listening groups, SMS-based advisories, and scheduled mobile phone alerts.



Land tenure security. Some MLOs actively engaged with traditional leaders to facilitate land access for women, ensuring they could adopt climate-smart agricultural practices without fear of displacement.

A Ghanaian organization described how they addressed the information access challenge by scheduling the timing of CIS delivery on cell phones, which were typically assets controlled by men or youth in the household: **“The men are able to leave the phone with the women, knowing the exact time when the calls will come... women started acquiring phones within the community owing to the importance of the messages.”**

4 PROCEDURAL EQUITY

MLOs emphasized that **transformative change requires meaningful involvement of women in decision-making structures**. In Ghana and Malawi, organizations invested in long-term leadership development, supporting

women’s cooperatives and farmers’ groups to engage in climate policy processes. Others built capacity among young women, providing mentorship and pathways for them to assume leadership roles in adaptation governance.

Several MLOs sought broader structural change by advocating for increased representation of women in local governance structures. **“We have to make that decision, and commit to invest a lot more in building the skills of these women-led organizations so that they equally become attractive, not just to us to partner with, but to other organizations moving forward.”**

The key strategies adopted by MLOs to increase women’s involvement in decision-making structures included:



Trained and incentivized women entrepreneurs through investment, engagement and mentorship and the creation of pathways toward leadership positions.



Advocated for women’s leadership in project design and implementation such as by ensuring their active involvement in project management committees and community resource allocation decisions.



Trained women for leadership in formal governance roles such as focal points for development efforts and built the capacity of women’s organizations to attract funding.

5 LEVERAGING NETWORKS FOR TRANSFORMATIVE CCA

Given internal capacity constraints, partnerships and collaborative networks have emerged as critical tools for MLOs to advance transformative adaptation. A subset of MLOs have adopted networked governance approaches, co-developing programs with government agencies, donors, and peer organizations. These alliances allow MLOs to pool expertise, share tools, and scale promising practices.

Even MLOs with limited internal capacity contribute meaningfully through these networks, demonstrating how collective strength often exceeds individual capacity. However, reliance on external partnerships and guidance presents risks – donor-driven gender frameworks sometimes impose rigid requirements that fail to reflect community realities. Ensuring a balance between donor expectations and locally contextualized approaches remains a challenge.

“Our **funding constraints limit our ability to fully address the complexities of gender inequality in our programs.** While we can acknowledge gender disparities in our proposals [to sponsors], there’s a limit to how deeply we can delve into these issues without exceeding our scope or resources.”



6 INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITIES AND CHALLENGES IN PROMOTING GENDER EQUITY IN CCA

MLOs demonstrated diverse institutional capacities in implementing gender equity in CCA. While some organizations had dedicated gender experts and formalized gender policies, others relied on external consultants or donor-driven mandates.

Out of 65 organizations who described their expertise in detail:



19 had an explicit mission focus on **gender equality**

22

reported having **in-house gender expertise**



17 had formal gender policies, but only **10** conducted **gender sensitivity training** for staff



12 reported **lacking gender expertise** entirely, while **4** relied exclusively on **external consultants**

These findings highlight a gap between policy commitments and implementation capacity. **While gender policies exist, they are often weakly enforced, with limited financial and human resource allocation.**

Many organizations remain dependent on donor priorities, which sometimes results in top-down gender mandates that may not align with local realities. Most organizations lack systematic gender data collection, impeding evidence-based decision-making.

“For every project, it is mandatory to conduct a baseline assessment that clearly identifies gender differences and incorporates these insights into the project, regardless of whether the project’s primary objective directly involves gender issues. A major challenge, however, lies in gathering sufficient data for a comprehensive understanding of gender components, especially when it is not the focus of the project. During the project design and planning stages, we make it a point to engage in discussions about gender aspects, ensuring that we identify and address potential issues related to gender.”



Summary

1

CONTEXTUALIZING GENDER EQUITY IN CCA

- **Perceived gaps:** Many MLOs report disconnect between a perceived superficial “tick-box” exercise demanded from sponsors, and the need to address deeper structural and cultural barriers in the field.
- **Multidimensional nature:** MLOs are addressing gender as a complex intersection of agriculture, culture, economics and social practices, requiring context-sensitive and multi-dimensional strategies.

2

MLOs AS INSTRUMENTAL IN GENDER-FOCUSED LOCALLY-LED, TRANSFORMATIVE ADAPTATION

- **Position of influence:** Gender-focused MLOs are able to bridge local needs and realities with national and international sponsors’ goals and interests.
- **Equity work:** Many MLOs are playing a long game, building procedural equity (investing in local leadership capacity) and recognitional equity (changing norms and roles) towards transformative change.

- **Peer-to-peer collaboration:** Most MLOs recognize the importance of gender expertise. Where capacity is lacking, MLOs collaborate to share knowledge, build their capacities, and learn from each other.

3

CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS FACED BY MLOs

- **Donor misalignment:** Short-term, project-focused goals underfund the longer-term and deeper investments required for enhancing procedural and recognitional equity, both which are necessary for effective locally-led adaptation.
- **Specialization vs. partnerships:** Donors may require gender expertise beyond the staffing capacities of small MLOs, failing to recognize expertise sharing through partnerships.
- **Data needs:** Contextualization of gender in adaptation requires good data and metrics, which can be beyond the capacities of some organizations to collect and process.

4 INNOVATIVE APPROACHES TO TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE

- **Adaptive problem solving:** MLOs are engaging in adaptive, relational, and pragmatic strategies, creating the foundation for transformative change specific to diverse cultural contexts impacted by climate change.
- **Positioning power:** MLOs are recognizing that enabling women to hold decision-making positions locally creates the groundwork for influencing climate-sensitive agricultural development into the future.
- **Distributed models:** MLOs leverage their peer organizations through collaborative networks to share resources, responsibilities, and complementary expertise, enhancing capacities at a network-level.

5 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

- **Long-term investment:** Support MLOs with flexible, sustained funding rather than rigid output-focused metrics.

6 CONCLUSION: REFRAMING ADAPTATION THROUGH A GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE LENS

- MLOs are central to making equitable CCA a lived reality. Their adaptive, embedded practices offer blueprints for transformative change, especially when supported through appropriate policy and funding ecosystems.
- For donors and policymakers, enabling these organizations means recognizing the value of process over metrics, trust over control, and deep learning over quick wins.

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About ACAMI

The Accelerating Climate Adaptation via Meso-level Integration (ACAMI) project was a two-year collaborative initiative focused on enhancing the role of meso-level organizations—public, private, and non-profit entities that act as intermediaries between small-scale agricultural producers and broader policy and investment communities—in advancing effective climate change adaptation strategies across Africa. ACAMI identified leverage points and bottlenecks affecting the capacity of these organizations to facilitate equitable and effective adaptation for small-scale producers. By co-creating tools and metrics that capture the attributes and strategies of meso-level organizations, the project supports partnership opportunities and improves risk management and sustainable livelihoods under climate change. The project was conducted in four African countries: Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, and South Africa.

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For more detailed information, please contact the ACAMI project leads for access to academic publications and working papers.

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KNOWLEDGE SERIES



Framework for Conceptualizing MLO Dynamics



MLO Self Assessment Tool



Mapping MLO Attributes and Diversity



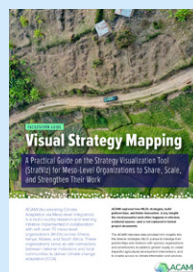
MLO Landscape Across Four Countries



MLO Innovations for Gender Equity



MLO Roles in Climate Information Services



A Practical Guide on Strategy Visualization Tool for MLOs to Share, Scale, and Strengthen Their Work



Guidance on Engaging with MLOs



What's your Strategy? Organizational Learning Game (Prototype)

Available here:

