



INSIGHT BRIEF

Bridging the Gap: The Critical Role of Meso-Level Organizations in Climate Change Adaptation

Insights from 70 Organizations across Ghana, Kenya, Malawi and South Africa

Summary

Climate change adaptation (CCA) in agriculture is often examined through either a micro (farm-level) or macro (policy/donor) lens, leaving the essential role of meso-level organizations (MLOs) underexplored. This insight brief draws on empirical data from Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, and South Africa to highlight the often invisible yet critical roles played by MLOs. These organizations serve as intermediaries, connecting small-scale

producers (SSPs) with broader policy, finance, and resource landscapes. The findings indicate that MLOs exhibit diverse capacities, functions, and geographies, forming complex networks essential to adaptation efforts. Yet they remain vulnerable to funding shifts and institutional fragmentation, underlining the urgent need for more targeted support and recognition.

STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS:



Invest in MLO capacity to ensure they can continue delivering adaptation at scale.

This includes core funding, institutional development, and leadership support.



Promote better integration of MLOs into national planning processes and **donor strategies** to ensure alignment with on-the-ground realities.



Support coordination platforms and peer learning, which can reduce duplication and strengthen MLO networks.



Encourage cross-sector partnerships, including private sector and research institutions, to enhance innovation and long-term sustainability.



Monitor and adapt funding modalities, recognising that short-term or project-based approaches may undermine organisational stability and long-term impact.

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.

Small-Scale Producers (SSPs): Farmers or producers with limited land, resources, and market access, often operating in vulnerable rural settings.

Climate Information Services (CIS): Timely and relevant climate-related data, such as seasonal forecasts or early warnings, used to support decision-making by communities and institutions.

KEY RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- Who are the MLOs engaged in CCA for SSPs?
- What institutional settings shape their work?
- What roles, functions, and capacities do they see as critical to their impact?

Why MLOs matter for climate change adaption

Across sub-Saharan Africa, communities are already navigating the consequences of climate change such as erratic rainfall, increasing droughts, and declining agricultural yields. In this context, meso-level organizations, which include NGOs, local government bodies, farmer associations and private enterprises, play an important role in facilitating adaptation as they are uniquely positioned to shape the flow of knowledge, resources, and accountability. Operating in the “middle space”, they translate strategies into local action, ensuring interventions are grounded in community realities.

As global attention shifts toward equitable and efficient adaptation, MLOs are central to addressing social dimensions like gender and youth inclusion. They navigate local norms, enhance participation, and help translate equity goals into practice. They also play a critical role in climate information services (CIS), ensuring SSPs have access to relevant, timely data that informs adaptive decision-making. This brief draws from a study that set out to better understand the organizations working with communities vulnerable to climate change. Building on recent reviews of adaptation actors and earlier work on organisational dynamics, it offers an updated empirical picture of MLOs across four African countries.

The findings are based on interviews with 70 MLOs in Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, and South Africa. They are presented in four sections:

- ✓ **organisational profiles**
- ✓ **adaptation mandates**
- ✓ **institutional contexts**
- ✓ **key functions and capacities.**



WHAT CONSTITUTES A MESO-LEVEL ORGANIZATION?*



Local non-profit organization/ community-based organization

A local organization established for non-profit purposes



Government agency

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



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.)



Private enterprise

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



International non-profit organization

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



Parastatal/state-owned enterprise

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



University/research organization

University or research organization



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)

* MLOs are differentiated from macro- and micro-level entities in climate adaptation in that they are intermediaries: they are not funding the adaptation investment, nor are they the targeted beneficiary. Rather, they are involved in the implementation of the planned adaptation activities.

Key findings

1 MLO PROFILES AND REACH

- MLOs vary in size, are well-established, and geographically active, with many having expanded into CCA from other sectors.
- Kenyan MLOs are generally larger than those in Malawi or Ghana.
- The majority have over 15 years of experience and many operate across multiple regions, including other African countries and beyond.
- Local nonprofits and community-based organizations (CBOs) are the most common types, followed by international NGOs, government agencies, and private actors.

2 INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT AND FUNDING SOURCES

- MLO funding structures significantly influence their priorities and flexibility; 42% rely on a single funding source, while 58% draw from multiple sources.
- Bilateral (58%) and multilateral (55%) donors are the most common funders, with 39% of MLOs reporting USAID support.
- Country-level funding patterns vary: Ghana and Kenya rely more on international NGOs, Malawi on multilateral and bilateral sources, and South Africa primarily on bilateral partners.
- Beyond funding, many MLOs actively engage stakeholders to influence the systems they work within, linking local action to national agendas.

3 FUNCTIONS

- MLOs primarily act as trainers/educators (88%), advocates (57%), knowledge interpreters (52%), and conveners (49%), with training often covering gender and climate information.
- Technical functions are less common: only 10% engage in technology development, 7% in savings and loan schemes, and 3% in risk insurance, despite their relevance for CCA.

4 CCA COMMITMENT AND ACTIVITIES

- As CCA funding has expanded many MLOs have adapted their missions and portfolios to align with this priority.
- About 59% of MLOs view CCA as a key focus, with 50% also prioritizing agricultural development. Other thematic priorities include environment and conservation, gender equity, disaster risk management, ICT, youth empowerment, and entrepreneurship.
- Most MLOs work across multiple domains, reflecting the integrated nature of adaptation and the potential for cross-sector learning.
- Reported CCA activities are diverse, ranging from awareness and education (30%) and policy advocacy (25%) to climate smart agriculture (22%), agroecology (14%), and climate information services (14%).
- These figures highlight the diversity of MLO approaches to CCA in both mission and practice.

To assess how central CCA is to an MLO's mission, we used a four-level measure:

Limited, moderate, strong, and core



Findings show that only

10% had a **limited** CCA mission

While

26%

had **moderate** focus



The majority reported either **strong** (39%) or **core** (25%) commitment

Organizations in **Kenya and South Africa** were more likely to view **CCA as a core mission** than those in Ghana or Malawi.

Key insights

1 Strategic but under-recognised: MLOs operate across multiple geographical areas and contexts. Drawing on experience from other development sectors they create the potential for cross-learning and building understanding of CCA issues. Despite their adaptability, they remain overlooked in national adaptation policies and funding priorities.

2 Multi-mandate missions: Most MLOs work across multiple themes, reflecting the complex nature of resilience. This breadth enables innovation, helps leverage co-benefits and aligns with systems-based adaptation but it can present coordination challenges and dilute the focus on climate.

3 Knowledge brokers: MLOs play a vital role in education and awareness raising, connecting scientific knowledge with local realities and supporting communities in accessing climate information, adopting climate-smart practices, and navigating uncertainty.

4 Institutional fragility: Many MLOs are financially vulnerable, with smaller ones relying on narrow donor bases, risking long-term capacity and sustainability.

5 Untapped private sector potential: There are few private sector MLOs in the sample, pointing to a need for more targeted engagement.

REFLECTIONS

Looking ahead, MLOs' ability to deliver effective CCA will depend on their internal capacity and the strength of supporting institutional systems. While some may scale back or close due to funding challenges, the current landscape also presents an opportunity for donors to strengthen domestic CCA ecosystems by investing in the autonomy and resilience of national and local actors. This study underscores the importance of leveraging MLOs' existing capacities and local networks to develop more context-driven, inclusive CCA initiatives for vulnerable populations, particularly SSPs.

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



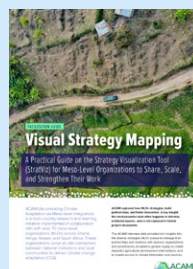
MLO Landscape Across Four Countries



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:

