

Resilience Praxis as a Function of Coloniality: Rethinking Modernity, Resistance, and Participation in Adaptation Governance

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Abstract: As the world continues to grapple with severe climate change impacts over the past decade, states and international organisations are committing to ambitious policies/projects to build “resilience” while scaling up development efforts. At a critical juncture where questions of political power and knowledge production become salient, this paper examines why certain well-intentioned resilience interventions fail and (re)produce unintended consequences. Drawing from ethnography in Bongo in the Upper East Region of Northern Ghana, I argue that despite neoliberal framings of “bottom-up” participation, resilience praxis appropriates neo-colonial subjectivities and power inequivalence that engender counter-modernist spaces for onto-epistemic struggles, community resistance, and development failure. Beyond including farmers in decision-making in a tokenistic manner, I call for decolonial consciousness to critique historicities of power and recognise non-modern ideologies: as an alternative ontology to deconstruct coloniality in critical adaptation governance. I conclude that resilience praxis must move beyond tokenistic participation and embrace a plurality/pluriversality of worlds to co-produce contextually grounded and “just” climate solutions in the Anthropocene.

Resumen: A medida que el mundo enfrenta los impactos severos del cambio climático en la última década, Estados y organizaciones internacionales impulsan políticas y proyectos ambiciosos para lograr construir “resiliencia” y ampliar el desarrollo. En un momento donde el poder político y la producción de conocimiento son cruciales, este artículo analiza por qué ciertas intervenciones de resiliencia bien intencionadas fracasan y (re)producen consecuencias no deseadas. Basándome en un trabajo etnográfico en Bongo, en el Alto Este de Ghana, sostengo que, a pesar de los marcos neoliberales de participación “de abajo hacia arriba”, la praxis de la resiliencia apropia subjetividades neocoloniales y desigualdades de poder que generan espacios contramodernos para luchas onto-epistémicas, resistencia comunitaria y fracaso del desarrollo. Más allá de incluir simbólicamente a agricultores en decisiones, abogo por una conciencia decolonial que cuestione las historicidades del poder y reconozca ideologías no modernas como ontologías alternativas para deconstruir la colonialidad en la gobernanza de la adaptación. Concluyo que la resiliencia debe ir más allá de la participación simbólica para adoptar una pluriversidad de mundos para co-producir soluciones climáticas justas en el Antropoceno.

Keywords: resilience, modernity, (de)coloniality, resistance, participation, Northern Ghana

Introduction—Resilience and Its Limits

Over the past two decades, resilience has become central to political discourse and policy-making frameworks. In fact, it has been argued that resilience is the “guiding principle” of policy governance and “one of the key political categories of our time” (Chandler 2014b:1). The concept, which is now a policy buzzword, has been widely adopted in the scope of climate change adaptation (Mikulewicz 2024), disaster management (Grove 2014a), conflict prevention and humanitarianism (Scott-Smith 2018), urban studies (Grove et al. 2020), and in sustainable development (Park 2023). Despite its complexities, this article frames resilience in critical adaptation governance as a risk-management tool to “anticipate, avoid, plan for, cope with, recover from and adapt to (climate-related) shock and stresses” (Bahadur et al. 2015:11). The core assumption of resilience is that we live in a world of complexity and “unknowns” reflected in crises and anthropogenic events which affect all humans. Despite this, resilience is a modern construction that requires interventions that “maintain and enable our existing modes of being” in the age of the Anthropocene (Chandler 2019:305).

While resilience thinking has functioned to integrate and develop interventions to address climate crises and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Park 2023), it has been rigorously critiqued for entailing “biopolitical effects” with definite systems of knowledge and power (Foucault 1972) which govern liberal societies through insecurity (see Chandler 2014b; Grove 2014a, 2014b; Joseph 2013). Critical scholars argue that resilience praxis has a depoliticising effect on neoliberal adaptation and development praxis (Mikulewicz 2019; Wakefield 2020). Resilience is imbued with power (visible; hidden; invisible) that shapes how vulnerability is understood and acted upon (Eriksen et al. 2021; Garcia et al. 2022); reproducing subjects, epistemic struggles, and environmental injustice (Amponsah 2025; Garcia et al. 2022; Nightingale 2017). It is argued that the new age of resilience is marked by articulations of legitimisation, (neo)colonisation, and an extension of neoliberal logic of adaptation and subjectivities (Chandler and Reid 2016; Wakefield 2020). Accordingly, resilience is deliberated as a “neoliberal governmentality”: a modernist category of self-governance which shifts the role of the state from managing complex and perpetual risks to vulnerable communities (Duffield 2011; Joseph 2013; Scott-Smith 2018). In the words of Neocleous (2013:4), “the state now assumes that one of its key tasks is to imagine the worst-case scenario, the coming catastrophe, the crisis-to-come, the looming attack, the emergency that could happen, might happen and probably will happen, all in order to be better prepared”. For Foucauldian scholars, resilience reinforces rather than challenges neoliberal efforts to reconstruct productive, enterprising subjects capable of managing their own conduct in the face of uncertainty and complex risks in a radically dangerous world (Evans and Reid 2013; Grove 2014a; Reid 2012; Walker and Cooper 2011). Drawing from Foucault’s theories of power and discourse, Charles Amo-Agyemang (2021a:699), for instance, argues that contemporary resilience discourses and policy in Africa have become a technology for neoliberal governance that is “constructed and constitutive of the processes geared towards disciplining” Indigenous populations to self-govern in a manner that is congruent with the ethos of the state and Western

neoliberal institutions. Resilience thinking in Africa, he ultimately argues, “is a dangerous concept that must be resisted by questioning its ‘truth’, power and subjectivity” (Amo-Agyemang 2021a:700). While discourses framing resilience within neoliberalism are well established in critical scholarship, this paper offers an “anti-colonial” critique of resilience and development praxis through the interrelated prisms of power, knowledge, and subjectivity. In so doing, it foregrounds a distinctive conceptualisation of resilience governance as intrinsically embedded within “neo-colonial” rationalities of adaptation governance.

While resilience interventions continue to receive massive investments, critical scholarship points to the complex and often categorising nature of the processes, which obstruct the success of adaptation planning (Eriksen et al. 2021; Mikulewicz 2021, 2024; Nightingale et al. 2020). In this context, this article is less concerned with the impacts of resilience interventions on populations—particularly, the neoliberal philosophical implications on the human subject (resilience effects). Instead, it is about systemic procedures that shape resilience projects in vulnerable communities (resilience processes). The article contributes to radical/critical scholarship on resilience policy and praxis by drawing on ethnographic insights from Bongo in the Upper East Region of Northern Ghana, where donor-driven resilience initiatives situate adaptation planning as central to post-colonial development aid. Northern Ghana is the most climate-vulnerable and poorest region in the country (Antwi-Agyei et al. 2018). According to the Ghana Statistical Service (2020), 80% of the people in Northern Ghana are experiencing multidimensional poverty, and most engage in small-scale agriculture and/or animal rearing. The agricultural sector is largely rain-fed and subsistence-based, with major crops including millet (early and late), sorghum, maize, rice, groundnut, yam, and upland rice (Antwi-Agyei et al. 2018). The expansion of agriculture has positive implications for food security and poverty eradication. However, climate change threatens the growth of agriculture which necessitates resilience thinking.

Drawing from decolonial frameworks, I approach resilience-building processes as a deeply political paradigm entrenched in issues of coloniality, power, and subjectivity. This relates to who has the knowledge to construct climate adaptation solutions and on what basis. While “resilience praxis”¹ has been crucial, its design and implementation are situated on expert knowledge, focusing “almost exclusively on Eurocentric canonised modes of knowledge production” (Amo-Agyemang 2021b:6). This neglects contextual knowledge, leading to maladaptation and resistance (Mikulewicz 2024; Mills-Novoa and Mikulewicz 2025; Schipper 2020). In recent years, however, resilience appears to be shifting toward a “bottom-up” participatory paradigm, where experts now involve communities in decision-making spaces. This novel “bottom-up” methodology for (re)capacitating humans and integrating development aid capable of designing culturally relevant policies contrasts failed “top-down” development planning of the past (Scott 1998; also see Chandler 2022; Keelan and Browne 2020). However, these participatory approaches often remain embedded within old technocratic epistemological hierarchies, where local voices are included only when they align with pre-existing development logics, thereby reproducing rather than dismantling the coloniality of knowledge. In essence, conceptualising climate change and

adaptation governance as a techno-managerial issue limits meaningful—as opposed to tokenistic—participation in policy and project design to experts, privileging those with technical knowledge and capacities grounded in Western science while also marginalising alternative perspectives (Mason and Rigg 2019; Mikulewicz 2024). This article therefore aims to problematise the implications of the dominant modernist, (neo)colonial, and hegemonic approaches for building resilience in adaptive governance. It employs the Frafra people in Bongo as a paradigmatic case to explore the politics of climate change policy discourses. While Bongo has been a focal point for climate resilience projects/policies, this study especially examines the Increased Resilience to Climate Change in Northern Ghana (IRCCNG) project by the UNDP and Government of Ghana (2016–2022). This project is selected primarily for its (i) *raison d'être* of reproducing resilient communities, and (ii) design and execution process which leans towards a hegemonic *modus operandi*. The project characterises how resilience planning in Ghana is a material and discursive enterprise situated on the lived struggles of epistemic “truth”. Thus, I aim to analyse the project through the lens of peasant farmers, elucidating grim issues of suppression, power, and knowledge production coupled with political and systemic (institutional) rationalities that (re)shape resilience plans in vulnerable communities. To what extent does resilience praxis reflect hubristic imaginaries of coloniality and modernity? How do local beneficiary farmers respond to this? How can inclusion/participation reproduce neo-colonial subjectivities in resilience-building discourses?

To answer these questions, I structure the article as follows. The next section presents the theoretical framework grounded in theories of (de)coloniality and community resistance, situating the paper squarely within critical scholarship on adaptation and token developmentalism in human geography and international development. In the following sections, I present the research context and methodological approach to data collection and analysis. I then examine the IRCCNG project, its objectives, design, and implementation processes, particularly the dam rehabilitation component. This takes a nuanced approach to resilience praxis, interrogating issues of modernity, coloniality, unequal knowledge production and power asymmetries, and resistance in the (re)building of dams. Finally, I argue for the decolonisation of resilience praxis, advocating for the need to think beyond inclusion and critically question prevalent issues of coloniality that token participation reproduces.

Decolonising Resilience: Coloniality, Critique, and Resistance in Adaptation Planning

In international development, resilience praxis provides a pragmatic, forward-looking framework to (re)capacitate humans to “bounce back”, “bounce forward”, and understand human–environment relationships (Chandler 2021b; Tozzi 2021; Wakefield 2020). However, the concept is criticised as reinforcing a “functionalist vision of the world as an interconnected whole, unable to engage with the multiplicity of people’s practices navigating change” (Tozzi 2021:1083). Thus, reconceptualising resilience theory and processes as “an object of inquiry,

rather than a self-evident entity” (Tozzi 2021:1084) offers a unique framework to re-politicise the concept, embracing a plurality of people, community, and places (Tozzi 2021). While a universal frame affords a practical approach to addressing climate change, reducing resilience to a technical apparatus obscures the diverse and context-specific ways resilience is enacted in practice (Mikulewicz 2024; Tozzi 2021; Walsh-Dilley 2016). In *Anthropocene Back Loop*, Stephanie Wakefield (2020) contends that resilience governance has shifted political discourses from preventing crises to managing and adapting to them often through technical and depoliticised processes, using “back loop” to signify a phase of instability and reconfiguration—one that is instrumentalised to reinforce predominant power structures rather than challenge them. Framing climate change as a scientific problem and depicting humanity as universally affected—often via the totalising and reductionist concept of the Anthropocene (Malm 2016)—forecloses the prospects of true political contestations (Mikulewicz 2024:2229). This discourse situates climate change solutionism within the logic of capitalist modernity and neoliberal coloniality, maintaining that the same capitalist systems that created the climate crisis possess the requisite qualities to address it. Such post-colonial conceptualisations of the Anthropocene often neglect political concerns with the history of the climate crisis, positioning technological innovations and experts as the “solution” (Chandler 2021b; Malm 2016; Mason and Rigg 2019). As Horton (2017:59) aptly postulates, “the post-2000s rhetoric of the Anthropocene regularly glosses the concerns of the environmental [in]justice with an assumption of human-wide culpability of climate change”. In essence, such contemporary discourse ignores the agency of communities targeted by interventions to understand and contribute to solutions, reproducing identities as “vulnerable” and marginalised (Chandler and Reid 2016; Mills-Novoa and Mikulewicz 2025). Following Rancière’s post-democratic paradox, Mikulewicz (2024) suggests that this occurs even as alternative non-modern worlds are acknowledged and included in decision-making—albeit in a tokenistic manner. This has enthused complex responses, scepticism, mistrust, and resistance.

Although substantial scholarship exists on the dominance and nature of adaptation and resilience initiatives, fewer studies have examined why and how these efforts are being resisted and to what end (Mills-Novoa and Mikulewicz 2025). Critical scholars have discussed how adaptation and development practices are resisted across the world. This includes a recent study of how Ponta Baleia, a remote rural community in Sao Tome and Principe, refused to participate in a planned adaptation project by the UNDP and the state (Mikulewicz 2024), agrarian communities’ struggles to resist, leverage, and rework resilience adaptation projects via the micro-politics of Foucauldian governmentality and “counter-conducts” in Ecuador (Mills-Novoa et al. 2023), farmers’ resistance to climate-smart agriculture and agricultural services in Indonesia (Ariefiansyah and Webber 2022), local communities’ refusal to move to higher lands as part of government-led adaptation planning in Fiji (Farbotko and McMichael 2019), local community resistance to ecosystem-based adaptation projects in Sri Lanka (Woroniecki 2019), and community resistance to agricultural modernisation and intensification technologies by farmers in Northern Ghana (Vercillo and

Hird-Younger 2019). Following the multiplicity of resistance literature that traverses issues such as class struggle, social movements, and everyday acts of resistance (Scott 1985), I examine how small-scale farmers in Bongo resist subjugation and empower themselves in resilience initiatives. While donor-funded resilience interventions reinforce structures of power that shape agricultural practices in the Global South, farmers actively negotiate, subvert, adapt to, and modify how they are—and want to be—governed (Amponsah 2025; Mills-Novoa et al. 2023). Therefore, rather than seeing power and resistance as opposing forces, I pay close attention to their dynamic interplay (Foucault 1977; Mills-Novoa and Mikulewicz 2025), highlighting how resilience praxis interacts, constrains, and creates opportunities for community agency. I argue that resilience praxis has become a crucial site where issues of modernity, neo-colonialism, power and knowledge are formed and contested. Critical literature contests adaptation and resilience building as an approach to expanding colonial power structures within development aid and policy practice (Amo-Agyemang 2021b; Amponsah 2024a, 2024b; Chandler 2024; Garcia et al. 2022; Paprocki 2021). Coloniality is seen as the “darker side of Western modernity” (Mignolo 2011:1) and the “myth of modernity” (Escobar 2007:184) that needs to be unveiled, critiqued, and eradicated because it exists as an “embedded logic that enforces control, domination, and exploitation disguised in the language of salvation, progress, modernisation, and being good for everyone” (see Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2019:11). Coloniality contains tenets of neo-colonialism, which suggests that gaining independence from a colonial government did not entirely dismantle the colonial rulership (Nkrumah 1965). Consequently, while colonialism as a historical orchestration ended in the early-to-mid 20th century, coloniality or neo-colonialism, as a tool to dominate and exploit, persists via the “continuities of colonial mentalities, psychologies and worldviews” into the post-colonial world (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013:8) where coloniality shapes the present vis-à-vis modernity and development (Mamdani 1996; Mbembe 2001; Mignolo 2011).

In climate financing for resilience and adaptation, these neo-colonial subjugations emanate from the over-reliance on the West for aid, which are often loans with conditionalities that plunge poor and developing countries further into debt crisis and processes of de-development (see Arko 2024; Navarro 2022; Zylinski 2024). Moreover, governmental institutions in developing countries are deeply influenced by colonial legacies, leading to Southern experts and elites perpetuating neo-colonial values in development practices (Munro and Rahman 2024). In this context, and as we shall see in the analysis below, though most of my expert participants are Ghanaians, they often sustain and entrench colonial exploitative and modernist values to the detriment of local and Indigenous communities. As such, a decolonial approach to climate governance becomes crucial to questioning both Western and non-Western subjectivities embedded in critical resilience processes. Decoloniality interrogates the world from the views of colonised people, re-constructing the unequal knowledge-making and power relations that characterise the neo-colonial present (Mbembe 2001; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2019). Recently, calls to decolonise resilience have gained traction in critical adaptation scholarship (Amo-Agyemang 2021b;

Amponsah 2024a, 2024b, 2025; Amponsah and Amo-Agyemang forthcoming; Biswas 2021; Chandler 2021a, 2024; Glynn and Cupples 2024; Santiago-Vera et al. 2021). These works argue for ways to re-problematise and unsettle dominant resilience praxis that creates new forms of colonialism, neoliberal governance, and technocratic solutions—shifting responsibility onto local communities while obscuring historicities of dispossession and marginalisation (Amponsah and Amo-Agyemang forthcoming). This article situates itself in this discourse, arguing for Indigenous recognition and epistemic plurality, stressing that transformative resilience praxis starts from pluriversal ontological standpoints, producing different solutions depending on the milieu in which it is being developed.

In this article, I caution against reducing the relationships between “local” (Indigenous) and “expert” (scientific) knowledge to a rigid binary. In practice, however, these knowledge systems are not oppositional but exist on a continuum, where traditional and scientific knowledge interact, shaping project implementation in diverse—and often complex—ways. Therefore, I advocate for a radical re-conceptualisation of resilience beyond “technical fixes”, considering the co-production of political economies, cultures, differences, and relations, unveiling the possibilities for epistemic pluralism to open-up new imaginations and “just” solutions. Following Nightingale et al. (2020), I refer to “just” climate solutions as pluralistic/pluriversal approaches that address environmental and social injustices while fostering interventions that challenge power relations and neo-colonial subjectivities. In this context, I call for decolonial consciousness that prioritises multiple ontologies and epistemologies over the present dominance of modernist paradigms in adaptive governance.

Local Context: The Frafra People in the Bongo District

This research is grounded on the small-scale Frafra farmers in the Bongo district of Upper East Northern Ghana. Located within the Northern Savanna agroecological zone, Bongo, the district capital, has a population of 116,431, with 55,094 males and 61,337 females (Ghana Statistical Service 2024). The Frafra people are primarily situated in the Bongo District and rely on subsistence farming. Ranking as the most vulnerable district in the Savanna agroecological zones of Ghana based on rainfall and crop yield (production) data (Aniah et al. 2019), Bongo is highly susceptible to the impacts of climate change. Moreover, its rocky landscape, which covers about 40% of the surface area, hinders agriculture activities (Aniah et al. 2019; Sow et al. 2014). The district has experienced erratic climatic changes and variations like droughts, irregular rainfall patterns, floods, and increased heat waves (Antwi-Agyei 2012). Hence, Bongo has become the target area for many resilience initiatives (see Table 1).

While the IRCCNG project (2016–2022) was implemented across ten districts in four regions in Northern Ghana, this study focuses on the implementation process in the Bongo district, using the Frafra small-scale farmers as a case study. The Frafra people are regarded as one of the minority ethnic groups in Ghana, comprising approximately 2% of Ghana’s population (Ghana Statistical Service 2024). The Frafras share many traits with the peasant communities discussed by Eric

Table 1: List of some resilience projects in Bongo

Project Name	Donors/Implementing Organisation(s)	Project Description
Resiliency in Northern Ghana (RING) Project (2014–2018)	USAID	Focused on improving nutrition and livelihoods for vulnerable households through women’s economic empowerment and agriculture-led interventions.
Resilient and Sustainable Livelihoods Transformation (RESULT) Project (2012–2018)	Canadian Feed the Children (CFTC)	Aimed at enhancing food security and resilience for poor male and female smallholder farmers and their households in northern Ghana.
West African Food Systems Resilience Project (FSRP) (2022–2028)	World Bank	Supports climate adaptation in agriculture to increase preparedness against food insecurity and improve the resilience of food systems.
Increased Resilience to Climate Change in Northern Ghana (IRCCNG) Project (2016–2022)	UNDP and Ministry of Environment, Science, Technology and Innovation (MESTI)	Enhanced resilience and adaptive capacity of rural livelihoods to climate impacts and risks on water resources in four northern regions of Ghana.
Northern Ghana Climate Resilience Program (NGCRP) (2018–ongoing)	Green Growth Africa	To promote Climate Smart Agriculture to help farmers adapt to the impacts of climate change by implementing practices that are more resilient and sustainable.
Ghana Transforming Household Resilience in Vulnerable Environments (THRIVE) (2023–ongoing)	World Vision Ghana	Builds community resilience and sustainable livelihoods through its innovative solutions to transform the lives of vulnerable households by empowering families and communities, ultimately improving the well-being of children.

Wolf (1966) and James Scott (1976). Their livelihood choices, shaped by mutual support and social cooperation, prioritise food self-sufficiency rather than wealth accumulation. Scott’s (1976) “subsistence security” as a driver of peasant moral economy and resistance highlights their struggles for justice and participation. Despite growing levels of vulnerability in Bongo (Aniah et al. 2019), the Frafra people continue to navigate ecological uncertainties by utilising *on-farm* adaptive strategies such as mixed cropping, crop rotation, changing planting date, ploughing, using drought-tolerant crops, stone bonding, and *off-farm* strategies like livelihood diversification and temporary out-migration (Sow et al. 2014; Tambo 2016). Their ontologies, stories, knowledge, and agential practices interpret them as people who by their stories of environmental conservations, do not

want to be considered as peripheral and weak but as agents who contribute to solutions to climate change (Amo-Agyemang 2021b; Aniah et al. 2019). The lived struggles and resistance of the Frafra people in Bongo are particularly enlightening heuristics through which I contest not only neo-colonial legacies underpinning modern discourse of resilience submerged in Eurocentrism, but also the normative arguments of these thoughts and practices.

Methods

This article is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in (Northern) Ghana between July 2022 and October 2024 in Bongo and Accra. The first trip was for my MPhil thesis, which lasted from July to September 2022. The second field trip was from March to October 2024 as part of my PhD research. During both periods, I attempted to understand the realities and complexities of climate change and adaptation in Bongo, the political economy of dams, climate resilience policy planning, and how resilience projects are implemented “on the ground”. Moreover, between November 2024 and January 2025, I conducted remote interviews via Zoom, along with follow-up discussions, from Oxford, United Kingdom.

Overall, this article draws from a set of 106 semi-structured interviews (71 men and 35 women) and five focus group discussions with 85 farmers (30 male and 55 female), where I relied on ethnographic principles: that is, a methodology categorised by “concerns with the meaning of actions and events to the people we seek to understand” (Spradley 1979:5). The first part of the interviews in Bongo included 46 farmers (21 males and 25 females), eight traditional authorities and leaders (6 males and 2 females), 19 local government and practitioners (17 males and 2 females), and 5 key informants (all males). Since I do not speak nor understand the local Frafra dialects, I relied on my research assistant for participants who could not speak English or *Twi*.² This ensured terms such as “resilience” and “adaptation” were expressed in meaningful Frafra languages, given its relational, temporal, and structural dynamics (Tozzi 2021). These interviews were directly translated in real-time into English and were transcribed manually by me for key themes. The second set was with state officials and practitioners, including two experts and consultants at the Ministry of Environment, Science, Technology and Innovation (MESTI), four at the Environmental Protection Authority (EPA), five at the Ministry of Food and Agriculture (MoFA), two engineers and one contractor from the Ghana Irrigation Development Authority (GIDA), two technocrats at the National Development Planning Commission (NDPC), one climate change specialist at the Ministry of Finance (MoF), two at the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development, and two politicians—a former Member of Parliament and Minister of Environment and head of the MESTI as well as a District Chief Executive (DCE). The interviews also included two experts and consultants at the World Bank, two at the UNDP, one from the Adaptation Fund Board, and two academics and research consultants. Interview questions sought to understand why experts implement resilience projects in Bongo and Northern Ghana broadly, who the key stakeholders of resilience planning are, and whether or not

farmers are involved in policy processes. Moreover, to guarantee the validity and credibility of research data, I employed (i) triangulation, (ii) field visits, (iii) participant observations, (iv) follow-up interactions, and (v) engagement with research participants over a prolonged period.

This study was approved by the University of Oxford's Central University Research Ethics Committee. As Indigenous and local communities have been subjected to extractive, non-consensual research in the past (see Latulippe and Klenk 2020), I took issues of humanity, ethics, and consent seriously. During my fieldwork, all participants gave consent to participate verbally or by signing a consent form after I had explained the research aims. I was aware of the power dynamics that emanated from my social position as a doctoral researcher from Southern Ghana during my interactions with Frafra farmers. These dynamics were shaped by broader colonial and post-colonial relationships between the North and the South, influencing both the research process and my interactions with participants. Rather than assuming a neutral ethnographer role, I reflected on how my positionality shaped data collection, interpretation, and the frame of the thesis. To navigate these complexities, I remained reflexive and was attentive to farmers' voices and lived experiences, ensuring that their perspectives informed the research instead of being subsumed in dominant resilience discourses. Crucially, I sought to co-construct knowledge with participants, fostering a dialogue that disrupted hierarchical researcher–subject relations and utilising ways to decolonise resilience methodologies.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. First, all efforts to gain access and interview the contractor who rehabilitated the dam in Bongo failed during fieldwork. I therefore relied on interviews with engineers, consultants, technical experts, and local farmers to ensure triangulation. Second, the case study made it impossible to compare with other beneficiary communities. Finally, while efforts to “decolonise resilience” require not only critiquing modernity but also re-learning the contextual knowledge that has been marginalised and subjugated by the unfolding of Western modernity (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2019), I do not offer empirical insights on the local knowledge and adaptive strategies of Frafras in this paper. However, identifying (neo)colonial manifestations in policy practice is a crucial starting point to decolonise the discourse on resilience.

Rationalising “Resilience” in Social Life: On the IRCCNG Adaptation Fund Project

The rise of resilience amidst radical climate complexity in Northern Ghana relates to the advocacy of responsabilisation, self-organisation, and adaptation, particularly in conditions where individuals or communities are deemed “at-risk” and susceptible to crises. However, decisions about resilience investments and initiatives are never only (a)political—as they extend into and govern social life. Driven by the necessity to address climate change to ameliorate the challenges of agriculture and enhance rural socioeconomic livelihoods, the Government of Ghana (GoG), through the MESTI and EPA in early 2010, conceived the idea to develop

a proposal for the Adaptation Fund (AF), established under the Kyoto Protocol of the UNFCCC. In 2010, the UNDP joined the team as the Multilateral Implementing Entity (MIE). In July, August, and September 2011, the MESTI and EPA, the Water Resource Commission (WRC), and the World Food Programme were consulted to design a proposal submitted to the AF in 2012 and approved in 2015 (see Table 2). The project utilised a total budget of \$9,447,188 (UNDP 2023) and includes three components and outcomes (see Table 3). Although experts from state and international agencies conceptualised and developed the initial proposal, local communities were later consulted to assist in selecting target districts and execution structures. However, despite the involvement of community representatives, final decisions were made by experts and engineers based on technical standards, limiting inclusivity, meaningful participation, and local agency.

The IRCCNG project was an agricultural development aimed at building on key measures and interventions from various vulnerability and adaptation interventions to support Sustainable Development Goal 13 (Climate Action) while also delivering co-benefits for other relevant SDGs and the National Climate Change Adaptation Strategy (NCCAS). Throughout its execution, the project was recognised as the UNDP’s largest project (Romero and Acquah 2021; UNDP 2023). The project operated within a multi-scalar governance structure and stakeholders at state institutions, international organisations, and local institutions. Figure 1 displays a graph of a network of actors and their relationships. The nodes represent different institutions/groups, while the edges (connections) indicate collaborations, oversight, or influence. The colour coding distinguishes different categories of actors (e.g. government agencies, NGOs, donors, and local communities). The MESTI and UNDP, through its Project Management Unit (PMU) or Secretariat, led the coordination, while the EPA, alongside the MoFA and other technical agencies such as the GIDA and the WRC, provided key technical support. Based on a review of academic vulnerability assessments on droughts and flood records from United Nations University (produced in 2010; unpublished), ten districts were selected (MESTI and UNDP 2012), including Bongo, which was then the most vulnerable district in Ghana³ (Antwi-Agyei 2012). The project aimed to integrate

Table 2: IRCCNG project summary

UNDP approval date	AF approval	Start date	Mid-term review	Original project completion	Actual project completion including no-cost extension
June 2010	March 2015	April 2016	October 2018	April 2020	31 December 2022

No. of community beneficiaries				
No. of project districts	No. of communities	No. of dams rehabilitated	Estimated direct beneficiaries	Estimated total direct and indirect beneficiaries
10	50	15	14,137	93,909

Table 3: IRCCNG project objective, components and outcomes

Project Objective	
Enhanced resilience and adaptive capacity of rural livelihoods to climate impacts and risks on water resources in four northern regions of Ghana (Northern, Upper East, Upper West, and Savannah)	
Component 1	Water Resource Management and Planning Under Climate Change
Outcome 1	Improved basin level management and planning of water resources taking into account climate change impacts on surface and groundwater sources
Component 2	Community-Level Implementation of Climate Resilient Water Resource Management Activities
Outcome 2	Climate resilient management of water resources by at least 30 communities in Northern Ghana
Component 3	Diversification of Livelihoods of Rural Communities Under Climate Change
Outcome 3	Enhanced diversification of livelihoods of 50 communities in Northern Ghana

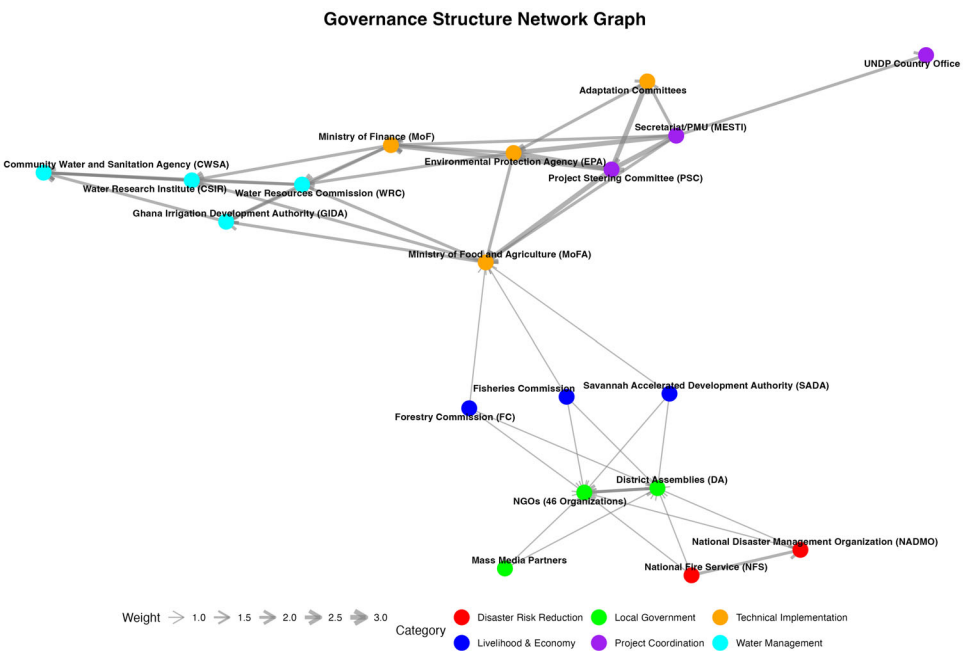


Figure 1: Actors and networks of the Increased Resilience to Climate Change in Northern Ghana (IRCCNG) project governance (source: author’s construct based on the Project Terminal Evaluation by Romero and Acquah [2021])

adaptation by developing climate-resilient water supply systems and irrigation facilities to support dry-season gardening, promoting climate-smart farming at the community levels. This was achieved through providing a climate-resilient water supply by (i) rehabilitating and improving the storage capacity of existing dams, and (ii) constructing dugouts. These were to monitor flooding as flood plains are drained and the water is harvested into the dams and dugouts,

expanding water capture, harvesting, and storage for small-scale irrigation systems (Romero and Acquah 2021).

The focus on water scarcity was justified by the fact that, according to the UNDP, about 50% of the people in the north lack safe drinking water and mostly rely on unhealthy surface water sources as their main drinking water and food (Tefaye et al. 2019). This is partly because, unlike the south, which experiences two rainfall seasons, the north experiences only one, with climate change exacerbating the effects (MESTI and UNDP 2012). Approximately 90% of the rains in the north fall between June and September, making it the only period for soil moisture surplus suitable for agricultural food production (ibid.). Aside from these months, it becomes extremely challenging for farmers to engage in rain-fed cropping due to the lack of irrigation facilities. An environmental planning expert at the UNDP shared a popular discourse:

Water scarcity poses a major challenge to agricultural production in Northern Ghana that renders farmers and families vulnerable to climate change. Apart from getting insufficient water for drinking and crop production, their livestock must also travel long distances to get water, and the lack thereof leads to the depopulation of their livestock, which serves as a source of income and a livelihood asset needed for them to adapt. Water scarcity affects the annual amount of food produced in the region.⁴

The MESTI and UNDP (2012) reported that 59% of Ghana's food-insecure population, representing 453,000 people, live in the north. While this is mainly attributed to agricultural, social, and economic factors, a climate and natural resource management expert at the Ministry of Food and Agriculture reiterated how climate change poses a threat to food security and water availability: "The changes have led to drought, where people struggle over suitable lands for crops. The issue of water is so striking that people sometimes need to travel miles to obtain access to water for their households and farmlands."⁵ For policymakers, this phenomenon exacerbates their exposure to climatic changes and fuels their "low adaptive capacity" and victimhood⁶ statuses. This discourse was further echoed by a senior official at the EPA and a key consultant for the IRCCNG project. In our conversation, he reiterated that "victims" cannot save themselves without external support:

Typically, people need to be supported because some of them struggle to address the different implications of climate change on national development activities. It is like the blind trying to guide another person—it cannot work. In such cases, adequate external support is required ... They may have local knowledge, such as predicting changes in the weather, but this alone cannot solve climate problems. Local understanding of climate change and variability alone is simply not enough.⁷

The praxis of supporting vulnerable farmers and community was captured by a UNDP official: "Owing to their vulnerability and low adaptive capacities, it is difficult for them to bounce back without any additional support."⁸ For him: "the effectiveness of their adaptation strategies depends on whether they receive additional assistance. Without external support, they cannot be resilient."⁹ Such discourses evoke a new kind of politics highlighting the need for resilience praxis to

enhance livelihoods, rationalised by the need to secure social life, address poverty, and ensure food security.

However, the project’s design and implementation processes sparked polarised opinions with divergent views and ideological contestations. On the one hand, policymakers emphasised a community-led project driven by the need to address climate change from the perspectives of the local farmers themselves (see Figure 2). On the other hand, discourses and realities of bottom-up inclusion and community-driven participation in beneficiary communities were still fraught with visible disparities, dissatisfaction, and resistance. Peasant farmers felt the project’s decision-making process, structures of inclusion, and mode of execution recycled the old frames of reference. As the next section shows, farmers are sceptical about the opacity of consultation, arguing that the intervention was designed and facilitated by a group of “experts” and power holders, and they were only presented with the “project plan” when the stakeholder consultation meeting was held.¹⁰

While the IRCCNG project was well intentioned and expertly planned, the analysis reveals that it failed, in certain aspects, to engender equitable and “just” solution. It is tempting to read this as a critique of power and technical knowledge in the milieu of resilience and adaptive governance. Instead, by foregrounding the distinct ways small-scale farmers conceive of, resist, and negotiate complex

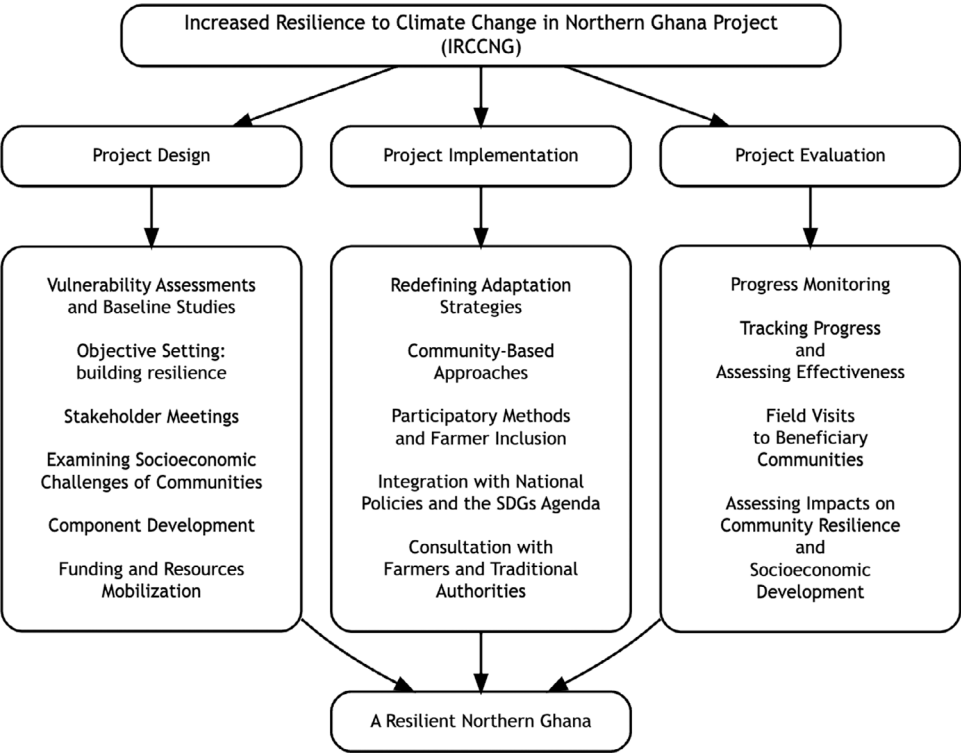


Figure 2: The Increased Resilience to Climate Change in Northern Ghana (IRCCNG) project framework (source: author’s construct based on field notes and interviews)

resilience structures, I elucidate how farmers are intricately interlaced in such systems—but often in positions and places of little influence, voice, knowledge, respect, and power.

A Hegemonic Planning Mentality? The Politics of Dams and the IRCCNG Project

In this section, I critically examine the dam rehabilitation component of the IRCCNG project in Bongo, exploring its role in rural development planning. I show how the (re)construction of dams in the district and Northern Ghana broadly has been integral to Ghana's rural development since the post-colonial era, shaping local agricultural and water management systems. However, to fully grasp the significance of dam construction and rehabilitation in the present context, it is necessary to situate these efforts within the historical trajectory of Ghana's agricultural landscape. Therefore, the following analysis emphasises how certain development interventions of the past continue to inform contemporary resilience and adaptation projects and their effects on local communities.

The History of the Present: From State-Led Development to Neoliberal Governance

Ghana's agricultural policy regime has deep colonial roots, which reshape the present. Historically, colonial policies focused on producing cash crops such as coffee, cocoa, and rubber—mostly for exports to Britain (Seini 2002). This led to massive infrastructural development in the south, where the moist semideciduous vegetation provided ideal conditions for cocoa and coffee cultivation (see Nyantakyi-Frimpong and Bezner Kerr 2017; Plange 1979). The north was historically sidelined in agriculture and development policies, and very little colonial revenue was allocated to the region, explaining why it has remained—and continues to be—poor and underdeveloped (Al-hassan 2013). Aside from its unfavourable climatic and geographic conditions to support the production of cash crops suitable for exports, the Northern Territories were only brought under colonial rule in 1902, although the British established the Gold Coast Colony in 1874 (Nyantakyi-Frimpong and Bezner Kerr 2017). At the time, the north only served as a labour hub for agriculture in the south (ibid.).

In 1949, with the establishment of the Agricultural Development Corporation (ADC), the Northern Territories received their first agricultural policy investment, aimed at promoting inputs for food crops in the north and cash crops in the south (ibid.). This calls for initiatives such as irrigation plans, mechanisation, and intensification aimed at modernising farming, which was promoted post-independence. Between the 1950s and 1960s, large-scale dam infrastructure was prioritised under Ghana's first president, Kwame Nkrumah, as part of his socialist, state-driven development vision. This became essential to his modernisation agendas that promised industrialisation to reduce over-reliance on cocoa exports since the colonial era and promote self-sufficiency through state farms and corporations (see Miescher 2014). During this period, over 240 dams and dug-outs

were built, mostly in the north, to support rain-fed food production, domestic usage, livestock rearing, and to promote sustainable soil and water conservation (Acheampong et al. 2014). These projects were deemed politically and technically feasible due to the potential to provide a constant water supply, leveraging on large dams, like the Akosombo Dam, for hydropower (Biswas and Tortojada 2001). However, expectations were barely met decades after the implementation of large dams, basically due to “technical fixes”, the neglect of local farmers’ needs, poor state management, and challenges with operations, control, and maintenance (Acheampong et al. 2014; Biswas and Tortojada 2001).

From the 1970s to the early 2000s, dam (re)construction efforts stagnated due to shifts in economic policy, structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) and reduced public investment in state-led infrastructure projects (Vercillo and Hird-Younger 2019). Although irrigation systems like the Veia¹¹ and Tono Dams were designed to support dry-season small-scale farming in the north, they faced resistance for employing “top-down” engineering and technical approaches and contributed to the dispossession of farmers’ lands (Nyantakyi-Frimpong and Bezner Kerr 2017). The focus on state-driven dams and water management policies shifted towards decentralised approaches, which were associated with broader neoliberal market-driven reforms, creating a space for private, foreign, and non-state actors to assume responsibility for providing services for agriculture (Vercillo and Hird-Younger 2019). By the 2010s, concerns over climate change and resilience reinforced crucial interests in water infrastructure at the community level. The One Village One Dam (1V1D) policy initiative, launched by GoG in 2017, was introduced as part of Ghana’s broader agenda to enhance rural life via resilience and adaptation by providing year-round irrigation to farmers in Northern Ghana. The policy led to the construction of over 500 small dams across the north (Adams et al. 2024). However, the design and implementation of 1V1D has been critiqued for politicised “top-down” planning, poor water retention, and failures to meet local agrarian needs (Adams et al. 2024).

The Dam Controversy: Discourses, Knowledge(s), and Power

In March 2019, about three years after the launch of the IRCCNG project, the MESTI and UNDP commissioned the rehabilitation of ten dams and dugouts, with five extra dams added in 2020 as part of the project’s climate actions. Before the rehabilitation, the MESTI and UNDP partnered with 46 NGOs to support livelihood fish farming interventions as well as beekeeping livelihood schemes established in all 50 project communities for honey production, benefiting both women and men as direct beneficiaries (Romero and Acquah 2021). This included constructing boreholes and implementing dry-season gardening schemes, primarily for women, enabling them to engage in small-scale climate-smart farming of crops such as pepper, okra, and tomatoes during the dry season (ibid.). According to the UNDP (2019), dam rehabilitations would help address water scarcity by aiding communities to access water throughout the year, mainly in the dry seasons. Bongo was one of the districts in the north fortunate to have one of their old dams rehabilitated (see Figure 3). The rehabilitation occurred at a site in

Bongo-Dua, a small agrarian community in the Bongo district with about 8,000 smallholder farmers. The dam is located next to a farming site where about 1,500 peasant farmers work on a piece of land called the “Garden”.¹² The original dam was built in 1964 as part of state-driven infrastructural development to boost agriculture.¹³ About 70% of small-scale cultivators who work in the Garden in Bongo-Dua regularly are women.

Peasant farmers who are considered “project beneficiaries” believed that the dam’s reconstruction was a timely intervention. In a focus group discussion with them, farmers were appreciative of the initiative in that it would help tackle the challenge of drought in the dry seasons. For them, the dam and the new Garden are vital for their wellbeing, as it will enable women (mainly widows) to enhance their food production and their market activities.¹⁴ Despite this positive appraisal, they were also vocal about issues related to the dam’s renovation, expressing their lack of meaningful inclusion in the initial project design and construction, which resulted in noticeable technical errors. A 54-year-old male farmer and leader of the Water Users Association (WUA)¹⁵ explicitly narrated the following story:

We were not consulted during the formulation stage. They only came here after they had their plans, and everything was sorted from Accra. I remember when they came, they only wanted to search for an old dam to rehabilitate ... A few weeks after, they came to hand over the site to the contractor to begin construction work. However, during construction, we noticed some errors regarding the positioning of the canals



Figure 3: The rehabilitated dam in Bongo-Dua, Bongo (source: image captured by the author during fieldwork in Bongo)

and the dam's depth, width, and height of the spillway. We expressed concerns about it and suggested ways the dam should be constructed to serve our communal needs based on our knowledge and experience gathered while working in farmlands for a long time; however, the contractor refused to listen to us.¹⁶

A female farmer also opened up about their concerns: "There was a slight hill, and we suggested that the contractor should clear it by removing the gravel so the land can be deep to hold sufficient water. However, he told us that it was not included in the plan, so he could not do it."¹⁷ I was often told that although experts consulted communities (see Figure 2), they only did so after agreements and critical components of the project were already developed. Farmers invited to the consultation meetings who were leaders of WUA, a representative from the local authority, the agricultural extension agent of Bongo-Dua, and some cultivators in the garden (part of them were women) claimed they were only presented with a plan and had little to no voice during the meeting. Another male farmer¹⁸ expressed how his voice was ignored when he offered a modification in the plan about the canals:

Because of the sloppy nature of the land, I suggested that the contractor should raise the canal to the highest level in the field to allow water to flow under adequate pressure to all corners of the farm. But he refused and said he was the one who had the expertise and knowledge to build the dam.

One of the expert consultants at the MESTI told me that though they engaged the communities, delays in getting funding released affected the budget significantly which limited the levels of the consultation process and the scale of community inclusion. While the IRCCNG project proposal was submitted to the AF in mid-2012, it was only approved in 2015, after three years. In his words: "Depreciation and inflation wiped away over 30% of the cost. For example, we were supposed to build 50 dams, and due to the depreciation, we had to reduce to 15."¹⁹ He explained that the challenge forced them to reduce the beneficiaries, noting that they had to "prioritise and reprioritise the communities".²⁰ Experts indicated that financial inflation hindered the ability to carry out thorough and inclusive consultations, leading to a reduction in outreach activities and limiting opportunities for authentic community engagement. This raises a critical question: if financial constraints had not been a factor, would the participatory process have been more inclusive, "just", and meaningful? While it is difficult to draw definitive conclusions, it is plausible to suggest that given the current climate financing limits, the process had to be adapted in ways that, while functional, did not allow for the level of inclusion initially envisioned. For instance, the engineer who was a member of the Project Steering Committee (PSC) (see Figure 1) shifted the blame to the AF, highlighting how the systemic and institutional delays as well as the complexities in the funding application processes transformed a well-intentioned intervention aimed at building capacities into a "technical apparatus" that ultimately limited meaningful community participation and the project's overall development:

We did some rankings to identify the site because of budget constraints. Then, we did a topographic study for all the dams in the districts, as we had the data; then, we did the design to get the requirements ... Based on that, we removed the most expensive ones. Indeed, it was purely technical because of the funding.²¹

He further noted that while experts acknowledge meaningful community participation as a crucial step for project success, the overall process lacked transparency, reflecting the concerns of farmers:

Normally, if there is adequate funding, community entry is the first thing we do. We enter the community through the palace, meet the people, let our intentions known, and then they give us people we can work with in terms of survey and labour. They help us put up pillars and make key demarcations. After the design is done, we also do what we call “Validation”—where we go back to show them the design and ask if they have any issues ... Then we finalise and go back again. These are all budgetary requirements, which wasn’t enough for us to accommodate all these stages. It was also because there were significant delays and issues with the funds. So, I agree with the community if they say they weren’t consulted much.²²

The engineer later admitted that the project was not successful in some communities, attributing this to his dissatisfaction with some contractors, emphasising “poor workmanship” and their “failure to engage with community members”.²³ Despite tenets of inclusion and the so-called “bottom-up” neoliberal approaches, it became clear that the project still falls into the same traps of “top-down” hegemonic planning and adaptation governance (see Eriksen et al. 2021; Mikulewicz 2024; Mills-Novoa et al. 2023; Schipper 2020). This produced confrontation and localised struggles between experts who exercise power and farmers subjected to that power (Foucault 1982). Indeed, Bongo women played a role in the struggles: proposing alternative ways to extend the spillway, challenging dominant practices, and asserting their agency (Amponsah 2025). While most farmers in the Garden are women, they were also critical regarding the technicality of the rehabilitation process in terms of depth, width, and the closure of an old working canal by the constructor. Women were vocal about their own acts of subversion; as a 60-year-old woman farmer provocatively narrated:

During construction, the contractor repeatedly ignored our voices, and our ideas were not tolerated. Whenever we complained, he would quiz us, “What do you think know? What have you studied to tell me all of these things? I am the one who has studied eight years of engineering.” ... He constantly reminded us that he was using books and completely disregarded our knowledge. He ended up constructing a dam with several challenges that were not suitable for us, so we had to “resist” it.²⁴

Resilience as a Form of Coloniality: Post-Colonial Discourses on Community Resistance

The politics of climate resilience policy praxis in Ghana is regulated by (a)political and modernist processes which continue to ascribe the skills of resilience and adaptive governance to engineers, scientists, contractors, and agriculture

planners. This emphasis sidelines the lived political and social realities—thereby producing resistance. Oftentimes, decolonial thinkers frame this marginalisation as a form of epistemological erasure and Indigenous struggles. However, my argument is that the shift to conceptualising coloniality as practically problematic at the reductionist levels of epistemic dichotomy and cultures can be problematic (Chandler 2024). Decoloniality, put bluntly, is reduced to colonial logics and ways of knowing (ibid.; Mendoza 2020). By extending this narrow paradigm, I critically deconstruct the multi-layered structures in which modernist framings of resilience praxis both impose and provoke peasant resistance, subverting local ecologies (coloniality of being); and relegating complex multi-layered systems to the corridors of modernist subjectivities and epistemic violence (coloniality of knowledge). Post-colonial realities of resilience and adaptation governance are, thus, inextricably related to subjects of modernity and forms of asymmetrical power relations in the fields of implementation (coloniality of power), where resistance challenges these dynamics.

Resistance, for Scott (1985), is the “weapon of the weak” epitomised in the ordinary actions and (in)direct practices of the oppressed. Rather than merely see “resistance as organisation”, Scott shows less visible everyday acts of peasant resistance typified by boycotts, “dissimulation, desertion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, [and] sabotage” (1985:xvi). Just like Scott, Vercillo and Hird-Younger (2019) underscore that resistance in Northern Ghana illustrates subtle, mundane, and quotidian actions that are barely organised. In Bongo, it became clear that farmers’ resistance to the dam rehabilitation was not merely subtle or less visible but overt, more organised, and subversive. Through resistance, I argue, farmers struggle to improve their well-being, pushing the boundaries of all possible alternatives, subverting unjust practices in their ontologies of being. Resistance to the irrigation facility began out of the visible technical errors that constituted unintended structural challenges. The main canal was positioned in the middle of the old and new gardens, making it impossible for water to flow to the new farmland situated above it under gravity. Pipes, which were broken during my fieldwork, were laid out to transport water, but inadequate pressure from the pumping machine made this impossible. Practically, only one-third of the farms could benefit from the facility, which farmers found extremely biased, disturbing, and inequitable. A consultant, technical expert, and one of the project supervisors at the state’s MESTI conceded to the key technical error: “What caused the issue of unequal distribution of water was that when the engineer and contractor constructed the laterals, they made a mistake at a junction which led to the disproportionate distribution of water to the garden.”²⁵ An expert at the UNDP also confirmed the controversy and resistance between the contractor and the Bongo community. However, his response to community recognition valorised modernity in practice, placing significant worth on the validity, reification, and legitimacy of science and technology (Wakefield 2020). He recounted:

Before the dam was rehabilitated, a consultation was conducted with community members and the focal person of the area. Indeed, it was led by competent state

ministries, such as the GIDA and MESTI, who developed the specifications. There were instances where the technical understanding and opinions of the dam and how people thought of it varied. However, we mainly checked for “technical feasibility”. It may be “politically feasible” to listen to the people who want the dam constructed in their way, but you have to scrutinise it scientifically, so it does not break.²⁶

These responses represented a correlation between science and *the local*, arguing that while farmers’ voices could be adapted politically, they sit outside the realm of what is deemed technical²⁷; hence, not acceptable. Such comments are constructive and constitutive of modernist forms of *coloniality of knowledge*, relating to critical epistemological issues and the politics of knowledge production—implying pressing questions like “who generates which knowledge and for what purpose?” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2019:216). Insights from the interviews reveal how these expert power holders identified a type of knowledge that was valuable, introduced it, and utilised it. These struggles elucidate how modernity in the context of resilience policy characterises a prevalent epistemological canonisation that universalises the “truth regime” by elevating itself as sole and objective truth (Amo-Agyemang 2021a, 2021b; Foucault 1982). Consequently, the project failed in its quest to serve the communal good, all while reproducing forms of recognition, procedural, and distributive injustices and inequalities (Amponsah 2025). To build a dam that would benefit few and marginalise the knowledge, wisdom, and voices of many, an elderly farmer asked: “Is it worth it at all?” He reflected:

Boycott was the only solution we could resort to because the dam was incomplete and poorly constructed and not everyone could benefit from it. I had to write a letter to the District Chief Executive, the agricultural office, and the MESTI but we did not hear any word from them. We followed up to the offices and we were told that the engineer would come but we waited for months until he finally came back to insert a pipeline [which was broken during fieldwork] to boost water flow.²⁸

In an interview with the Agricultural Extension Officer of Bongo-Dua,²⁹ he described how farmers deliberately refused to engage in the commission, which was initially discussed on their WhatsApp platform without the presence of policy-makers. This strategic non-participation, he further noted, served as a means of mobilising community action against experts and practitioners in pursuit of their own interests. Consequently, their primary focus shifted towards “disengaging” and “excluding themselves” from the commissioning ceremony despite the presence of key representatives from the government and UNDP.³⁰ I uncovered that farmers had abandoned the newly built Garden intended for dry-season farming because water could not flow through the land. In this context, it laid as a complete waste of donor resources incited by farmers’ desire to stick with their old garden. After the dam failed to provide adequate water for the majority of farmers relying on the Garden, it was further revealed that its structural design prevented it from retaining sufficient water. In response, the Frafras took matters into their own hands by contributing resources to raise the spillway. As Ford et al. (2020) argue, farmers’ resistance to modern interventions strengthens their agency and responsibility to take action towards their interests and welfare—therefore showcasing a genuine “counter-systemic” resilience (Walker and

Cooper 2011:157) and self-reliance in the face of environment injustice characterising adaptation governance. A woman who is one of the leaders of the WUA and has been working in the Garden for four decades recounted how this unfolded:

After all forms of negotiations had failed, we decided to ignore the government and UNDP and extend the spillway. We held a meeting and decided to contribute money to raise it ourselves. This was a very smooth and transparent process, and all of us collaboratively contributed what they had for us to raise it. In the event of heavy rains, that part of the dam can hold water which can serve us for a long time.³¹

In this context, local resistance not only addressed their immediate needs but reinforced communal bonds and shared values to suppress subjugation via grassroots action (Mikulewicz 2024). Farmers' resistance embodied how social exclusion in agriculture policy reflects the post-colonial landscape of Ghana, reflected in decades of technification, failed agricultural interventions, and stagnant development. Post-colonial discourses of Frafra farmers' resistance to agriculture projects suggest a period of dissonance between imaginary visions of what interventions ought to be and the forms of power relationships that arbitrate what they are in the field. Contemporary chronicles of power asymmetries in resilience policy praxes, I argue, owe their roots to the imperial age of colonialism. As Vercillo and Hird-Younger (2019:771) assert, "power imbalances and their impact on farmers' behaviours need to also be understood concerning issues of temporality and historicity". Frafra farmers trace power imbalances within resilience and agrarian discourses to the colonial periods,³² which shifted the governing fabric of agricultural policies in Ghana. An elderly Frafra woman, for instance, explained how historical agriculture development in Bongo had sidelined farmers, making reference to the Veia Dam, which dispossessed many farmers without proper state compensation.³³ I, therefore, situate grassroots resistance not in a vacuum but as deeply rooted in historical analytics of colonialism and the two decades of resilience praxis in the agriculture sector. Power asymmetries and historical subjectivities are in keeping with contemporary relations deeply rooted in discourses of *coloniality of power* entrenched in power inequalities since their histories are situated on racialised hierarchies of hegemonic Eurocentric/Western power systems (Mbembe 2001; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2019). The technical approach of resilience establishes a milieu for policymakers to exercise power vis-à-vis the subjugation of local ontologies and alternative governance structures and power. This reproduces modern subjectivities since power works as a way of subjugating Frafra epistemologies and ontologies—and subjecting them to calculated interventionism (Foucault 1982; Grove 2014b).

This leads to the third aspect of these political subjectifications: the *coloniality of being*. This is about the creation of Western hegemony and questions of human ontology (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2019). It is also about problematising extant ontological ideologies of modernity, of a "One-World" World, of objective positivist laws and principles, linear causality, and systems' unchanging features situated within a void of time and space. In the context of the IRCCNG project, experts assumed "one-size-fits-all" solutions without questioning difference, context, and relations (Chandler 2021a). This dominant Eurocentric paradigm, Law (2015:134) argues,

is: “catastrophic in North–South encounters. They reduce difference. They evacuate reality from non-dominant realms ... They insist, in the end, that there is a universe and that we are all inside it, one way or another”. By doing so, the world is seen as a status quo or a given, casting a critical eye on Indigenous Frafra’s ontologies while elevating technical, Western knowledge. As Chandler (2024:2) rightly asserts, the coloniality of being is crucial to international governmental imaginaries based on the premise that “policy lessons can be learned and generalised across time and space”. This logic forecloses the possibility of ontological multiplicity, erasing other ways of knowing, being, and relating to the environment. Considering these critical issues undermines the legitimacy of experts and external aid, which is often situated on rectification, reduction, and abstraction. Coloniality of being within resilience interventionism is a problematic ground for development in Bongo and the Global South broadly.

The deification of science and expert knowledge and the devaluation of local knowledge and ontologies facilitated the reconstruction of a dam which failed in its quest to serve its intended beneficiaries. However, resilience praxis works by emphasising how “project failure” is not mainly a “failure of policy”, but a learning prospect concerning the processes of adverse externalities, where policy and project failures enable humans to learn and control shocks of these emergent processes (Chandler 2014a). This is justified by the experts at the UNDP and MESTI who explicitly reiterated statements like “you know we cannot please everyone”, “we did our best”, “insufficient financing constrained us”, and that “every policy or project has its own challenges—but it is a step in the right direction”. In this sense, the IRCCNG project is construed not as intrinsically negative but as the inability to reflexively learn from shocks, adapt, and control the resistance that emerged “when institutional decision-making processes create[d] barriers to effective learning” and local adaptation (Chandler 2014a:57). Further, not only did efforts by experts to build resilience fail and reproduce injustices, but so too did their attempts to modernise, subjugate, and regulate life more broadly.

Thinking Beyond “Inclusion”: Decolonising Subjectivities in Participatory Spaces

As (neo)colonial and modernist historicities of climate change solutionism coupled with decades of top-down development planning have not positively impacted farmer livelihoods and ecologies, there is a need for radical re-conceptualisations of existing approaches to resilience policy as part of a critical decolonial turn. This calls for resilience planning and hegemonic discourses on power to be refined to recognise and legitimise farmers’ epistemologies. In arguing for climate justice in the Global South, most scholars and experts advocate for local inclusion as a preferred approach to address inequalities. As Chandler (2021b) points out, alternative contemporary discourses of resilience in the Anthropocene suggest that a novel, more “pragmatic” approach to development and human security is necessary since the complexity of present problems challenges traditional “top-down” or linear solutions of state-oriented security. Such discourses emphasise that “external actors cannot always provide solutions from the outside, as if they had

all the answers and policy solutions came in ‘one-size-fits-all’ packages” (Chandler 2021b:174). Since solutions to problems are contextually grounded, a more “bottom-up” approach to resilience-building that enhances and scales up endogenous, locally driven forms of participation and decision-making is crucial. Despite this appeal, Milgroom and Claeys (2025) argue that induced participatory spaces subject locals to epistemic violence while entrenching authoritative practices. In *Participation is Not the Answer*, they highlight how Mozambican government agents, in resettlement negotiations in the Limpopo National Park, disabled displaced people’s voices in inclusive spaces by, “*delegitimizing* local people’s ways of being and knowing, *delimiting* what could be negotiated, *coercing* people into providing consent and finally *disengaging* from participatory policy” (Milgroom and Claeys 2025:94). In *Neoliberal Indigenous Policy*, Elizabeth Strakosch (2015) deemphasises popular claims that liberalism implies decolonisation, stressing, contrarily, that “*including* Indigenous peoples as full liberal citizens entrenches rather than dismantles existing settler institutions and authority” (Strakosch 2015:23). Moreover, in most cases where local people are *included* in planning and institutional structures, they are seen as a “minority interest” with little power and influence to deconstruct those structures (Amponsah 2024a, 2025; Murphy 2000).

During fieldwork, experts and project planners claimed to have involved local farmers and communities in the IRCCNG project’s design and implementation. This was captured by an expert at the MESTI who constantly emphasised that the community workshops in Tamale and beneficiary communities, as well as the inclusion of about 49 NGOs in the implementation, truly reflect how planning and execution were grounded in local imaginaries and systems—where local communities were regarded as some of the most relevant actors in the process.³⁴ Top-down planning and state-oriented planning, experts suggest, are now rejected in favour of “participatory” solutions involving comprehensive consultation and community-level planning. The idea is not to replicate the failures of large-scale dam construction plans of the 1960s and 1970s, like the Veia Dam in the Bongo District. However, in Bongo, I was often told stories of community marginalisation in participatory spaces, uncovering wider power imbalances and epistemic struggles within participatory spaces. Crucially, some argued that consulting communities as part of a “bottom-up” ideological canon only operates to satisfy donor requirements, as the Adaptation Fund requires applicants to consult beneficiaries in order to qualify for funding in the first instance. As the project expert of MESTI highlighted, “we did comprehensive stakeholder engagement with people as without it the project will not be approved and requisite funds shall not be released”.³⁵ Despite being included in resilience policy spaces, epistemic violence manifested by the “othering” processes that depicted Frafra farmers in Bongo as uneducated and passive with low adaptive capacities, and where experts treated farmers as if they knew better. It became apparent that contextual voices were neglected in inclusion spaces because they did not align with technical standards and with experts’ standards of “development”. Thus, I argue that participation must not be seen as the desired end for “just” climate solutions, but as a means through which experts legitimise and regulate subjects towards their own interests.

Despite systems of decentralisation and participation, local farmers feel positioned outside the realms of power, lacking rights, agency, and acceptance in resilience and development praxis. In my interviews with policymakers, they emphasised a “community-driven” approach to describe an inclusive and participatory approach to resilience governance (see Figure 2). However, as Yang (2024) recently argued, the use of the term “community” has become popular in climate actions and resilience policy to the extent that it has evolved into a “point of orthodoxy” (Maskrey 2011:45)—as a reference of “moral licence” for policymakers and external donors to make projects appear as “participatory” and “locally empowering”. This is indeed captured by Titz et al. (2018:14) when they convincingly underscored that “community becomes ultimately problematic if imposed from outside on a group of people; it is meaningless at best and harmful at worst, as it disguises and neglects internal hierarchies, frictions and conflicts and is rather for the ‘outsiders’ convenience than serving the interests of the group members”. These standardised frameworks often sideline the “plural” and locally embedded ways of understanding, adapting, and engaging with their ecologies (Tozzi 2021). As de la Cadena (2015) rightly points out, such modern interventions often work within a singular “ontological register”, reducing the multiplicity of “earth beings” and world-making into a particular governable cosmos that is congruent with the logics of neoliberal rationality in target communities.

For Chandler (2021b), even the more radical alternative or “community-based” approaches to increase resilience that rely upon “interventions to enable so-called natural processes, either through an emphasis on local and traditional knowledge or through new monitoring technologies” constitute problems: “Firstly, the problem of unrecognised exploitation; and secondly, the problem of continuing to sacrifice others to maintain unsustainable Western modes of consumption and production” (Chandler 2021b:173). Communities are not homogeneous, and the epistemologies and cultures within them encompass diverse ways of life (and being), reflecting distinct identities and complexities inherent to particular (Indigenous) populations. Promoting resilience to such communities without analysing their richness of diversity engenders counterproductive consequences. In Bongo, the leaders of WUA, more specifically, revealed how experts assumed “one-size-fits-all” *modus operandi* without questioning “difference”, context, and relations in the Bongo district.³⁶ They criticised this practice, asserting that it homogenises cultures and goes against their natural ontologies and “ways of being”. Yet, while there have been critiques of participation in development policy (Cooke and Kothari 2001; Milgroom and Claeys 2025), it does not negate the fact Indigenous and local people must practically be equally included in resilience and adaptation governance for reasons of social justice and decolonisation. Here, decolonising power imbalances and subjectivities in participatory spaces is essential as, without it, resilience interventionism is likely to fail (Mason and Rigg 2019).

Reducing decolonisation to inclusion in resilience praxis risks essentialising and entrenching power imbalances within present articulations. Decolonising resilience offers a non-homogenising ground to reconceptualise and rethink neo-colonial subjectivities and power disparities in resilience projects (Amponsah 2024a). Decolonising resilience, or dismantling coloniality, for both colonised and coloniser, involves

overturning the dominant ways of seeing the world and nurturing resilience in plural ways that do not replicate colonial practices and principles. In this context, it is crucial to rethink Southern practices perpetuating neo-colonialism and to (re)learn, acquire, and transform knowledge to fit local contexts and conditions (Munro and Rahman 2024). Without this, I caution that resilience praxis risks becoming devices of neo-colonial hegemony and socio-political injustice, perpetuating the very vulnerabilities they seek to address. Decolonising resilience is about ascribing agency to the subaltern, the marginalised, and the colonised. It is about deconstructing neoliberal policies that subjugate farmers to Western projects regardless of whether they accept their cultures and way of “being”. It is about recognising alternative non-modern worlds and “new” modes of life.

Concluding Remarks

Drawing from critical theories of re-politicisation of development that eschew top-down technical approaches to resilience interventionism, this article has sought to provide critical perspectives on why certain well-meaning resilience projects fail and reproduce unintended consequences through the prism of the IRCCNG project in Bongo. The project offered pivotal perspectives into the tenets of political power and modernism, strengthened by how social exclusion and environmental injustice do not only operate from macro policy perceptions where the struggles and resistance of communities get suppressed. Rather than romanticising local knowledge, this article highlights how resilience policy and practice epitomise new forms of colonial subjectivities, emphasising the need to move beyond participation/inclusion and decolonise present and historical subjugation in resilience governance. The IRCCNG project deployed resilience as a way of (re)capacitating “vulnerable” farmers and rationalising the role of the state and development planners in social life. However, the analysis revealed that resilience policy governance is constructive and constitutive of asymmetric power relations and unequal knowledge production that regularly work to implicitly (sometimes explicitly) elevate the technical over the local (Eriksen et al. 2021; Mikulewicz 2024; Nightingale et al. 2020).

This discourse reflects how resilience and adaptation governance, while often well intentioned, paradoxically, obscures the long histories of colonial and epistemic violence and the asymmetrical power relations between the coloniser, experts, and African indigenous populations who are often beneficiaries of resilience programming. As Tanzanian professor Issa Shivji strongly postulates: “contemporary neoliberal discourse has one fundamental blind spot. It treats the present as if the present has had no history” (see Tamale 2020:3). The erasure of history in climate governance in the post-colonial era and the categorisation of the present and future as part of the contemporary resilience-building efforts could be reframed as onto-epistemic violence. Consequently, I posit that resilience governance within the natural milieu of the Frafras is a critical site for epistemic struggles, local resistance, and decolonial encounters emanating from the discourse on modernity embedded in contemporary structures of coloniality of power, knowledge—and being. Yet, while resilience policy governance is

increasingly being reframed as a “bottom-up” approach that actively engages beneficiary communities in participatory spaces, it is also the situation that power imbalances and epistemic struggles within these spaces often render endogenous, “community-driven” approaches largely performative: serving to tick a political checklist and fulfil donor requirements, rather than meaningfully empowering target communities and enabling voices (Milgroom and Claeys 2025). I argue that decolonising resilience towards “just” and pluriversal futures requires stepping out of the epistemic space of modernism and recognising the agency, cultural differences, ontologies, and power structures in beneficiary communities in resilience policy discourses. It also involves moving away from technocratic approaches to resilience to implementing development projects towards a decolonial consciousness that questions and disrupts modern visions and institutional ideologies.

In essence, since resilience praxis is presented as a preferred and fundamental “solution” to reducing farmer vulnerabilities and safeguarding the agricultural sector in Africa, then it is clear that critical thoughts and donor-funded interventions need to go beyond the hubristic imaginaries of modernism and coloniality, acknowledging and incorporating much more explicitly the dynamic role of local communities and agency in processes through which legitimate and pluralistic visions of resilience thinking are generated (Tozzi 2021). This decolonising approach would help prevent risks of maladaptation, unintended consequences, and community resistance; offering a locally adapted framework geared towards democratising knowledge production and power beyond the yoke of pervasive modernity and (neo)colonial subjectivities in critical adaptation governance.

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Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Endnotes

¹ In this article, I conceptualise resilience policies and projects in adaptation governance loosely under the term “resilience praxis”, highlighting the intersection of resilience theory and practice—where ideas are articulated, enacted, and reflected upon in real-world contexts. While resilience policies and projects are not synonymous, this framing allows me to use them interchangeably where necessary: policies provide the theoretical and institutional frame, while projects represent the tangible outcomes of interventions on the ground, shaped by donors, power dynamics, hegemony, and resistance.

² *Twi* is the native language of the Akan ethnic group in Southern Ghana, and the widely spoken local dialect in Ghana.

³ Interview with environment policy expert at UNDP, 6 September 2022.

⁴ Interview with senior climate and environment policy expert at UNDP, 6 September 2022.

⁵ Interview with official at MoFA, 30 August 2022.

⁶ I must clarify that the portrayal of farmers as victims with low adaptive capacities by experts and policymakers does not necessarily imply farmers’ inability to actively resist, challenge, and subvert the ways in which they are governed through modernist resilience solution. I have explored this extensively elsewhere (see Amponsah [2025](#)).

⁷ Interview with senior planning officer at EPA, 29 August 2022.

⁸ Interview with policy expert at UNDP, 6 September 2022.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Focus group discussions with Frafra farmers, 27 August 2022 and 13 May 2024.

¹¹ Construction of the Veia Dam in the Bongo district in the Upper East Region began in 1965 and completed in 1980.

¹² Field note, August 2022.

¹³ Interview with elderly farmer at Bongo-Dua.

¹⁴ Focus group discussion with Frafra farmers, 13 May 2024.

¹⁵ WUA is a local association for farmers who are “beneficiaries” of the rehabilitated dam in Bongo-Dua.

¹⁶ Focus group discussion with Frafra farmers, 27 August 2022.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Focus group discussion with Frafra farmers, 27 August 2022.

¹⁹ Interview with consultant and expert at MESTI, 21 January 2025.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Interview with engineer from the GIDA, 21 January 2025.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Focus group discussion with Frafra farmers, 27 August 2022.

²⁵ Interview with policy specialist at MESTI, 7 September 2022.

²⁶ Interview with UNDP climate change specialist, 6 September 2022.

²⁷ Interview with environment policy expert at UNDP, 6 September 2022.

²⁸ Interview with Frafra farmer at Bongo-Dua, 27 August 2022.

²⁹ Interview with Agricultural Extension Officer of Bongo-Dua at the Department of Agriculture in the Bongo District, 9 April 2024.

³⁰ Field notes, August 2022.

³¹ Interview with female executive of WUA, 27 August 2022.

³² Focus group discussion with Frafra farmers, 13 May 2024.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Interview with expert and consultant at MESTI, 21 January 2025.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Focus group discussion with Frafra farmers, 13 May 2024.

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