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Intra-community politics: winners and losers from the community-based adaptation projects in northern Ethiopia

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Abstract Over the last decade, Community-Based Adaptation (CBA) has emerged as a prominent approach for integrating climate adaptation into local development initiatives. However, current CBA practices still oversimplify 'community' as a unified entity with a single voice, overlooking internal diversities, inequalities, and conflicts. Using a case study of the UNDP-GEF Small Grants Programme (SGP) in northern Ethiopia, this paper critically examines how entrenched socio-political structures and power relations shape the implementation and outcomes of area closure activities. The findings demonstrate that, although these interventions aim to produce equitable benefits, they frequently reinforce existing hierarchies by favouring elite interests and marginalising vulnerable groups, notably young adults and women. Women's participation in decision-making processes, though modestly increasing, remains non-threatening to dominant male actors, while young adults face exclusion driven by concerns over land redistribution. Such dynamics underscore how customary laws and elite strategies perpetuate exclusion, rendering marginalized groups 'invisible' to external observers. In response, this study argues for a power-conscious and context-sensitive analytical framework to evaluate CBA interventions, emphasising the need to address structural inequalities within communities in order to achieve genuinely equitable and sustainable adaptation outcomes.

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Introduction

Climate change significantly influences smallholder agriculture by altering temperature and rainfall patterns throughout critical phases, including planting, growing, and harvesting (Harvey et al., 2018). This effect is particularly pronounced in Ethiopia, a country notably susceptible to climate change-induced declines in agricultural productivity and food security (Belay et al., 2022). Ethiopia's smallholders are uniquely vulnerable (Alemayehu and Bewket, 2017). Historical records underscore this vulnerability, throughout the twentieth century, recurrent extreme droughts claimed hundreds of thousands of lives and disrupted the livelihoods of tens of millions (Ayugi et al., 2022).

Smallholder agriculture significantly contributes to the country's economy, emphasising the importance of understanding how these farmers respond to climate change (Alemayehu and Bewket, 2017). The forecasts by General Circulation Models (GCMs) predict a notable increase in both the magnitude and frequency of drought in Ethiopia for the near and mid-future periods of all tested scenarios (Wubneh et al., 2023). This growing concern underlines the critical need to focus on improving adaptation strategies and resilience-building among smallholder farmers in the face of escalating climate challenges.

Smallholder farmers in northern Ethiopia face significant vulnerability and poverty at both household and village levels, conditions exacerbated by land fragmentation, degradation, and chronic population growth (Cholo et al., 2019). These challenges are intensified by a warming climate marked by water stress, droughts, and unpredictable rainfall patterns (Eakin et al., 2014; Ewalo and Vedeld, 2023). Although factors including elevation, agro-ecological conditions, population density, and land access shape varying degrees of vulnerability, a shared reliance on rain-fed agricultural strategies remains a common denominator (Gebremedhin et al., 2023). Recent droughts underscore the urgency of implementing adaptive measures to mitigate the impacts of climate change, thereby highlighting the complex interplay between environmental conditions and socio-economic factors that shape community resilience (Sinore and Wang, 2024).

Community-based adaptation (CBA) to climate change, a concept that has seen growing popularity in Ethiopia over the last decade, emphasizes locally led initiatives and participatory approaches for integrating adaptation strategies into local development efforts (Chung, 2023). This approach underscores the importance of participatory decision-making, putting it at the core of adaptation efforts (Ensor et al., 2018). CBA is designed to leverage communities' priorities and capacities, focusing on existing adaptation measures that draw upon local knowledge and understanding of complex socio-

ecological systems (Ayers and Dodman, 2010). It highlights the need for local development processes that prioritize participatory governance (Dodman and Mitlin, 2011; Forsyth, 2013; Reid, 2016).

The Small Grants Programme (SGP) represents a prominent example of CBA practice in Ethiopia (SGP, 2024a). Established in 1992, the SGP is funded by the Global Environmental Facility (GEF) and is operated by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). It has been instrumental in supporting community-led initiatives to address environmental issues across the globe. By providing financial (up to USD 50,000) and technical support directly to local communities, the SGP has facilitated projects in over 136 countries, benefiting more than 27,000 communities worldwide (SGP, 2024b). First established in 2006, the SGP has implemented 269 projects in Ethiopia, with grants totalling over 7 million USD (SGP, 2023). With project periods extending up to two years, the SGP aims to empower communities, enabling them to combat environmental challenges effectively and sustainably. The programme promotes that local ownership of development projects is crucial for enhancing adaptive capacity to climate change (SGP, 2024a).

The effectiveness of CBA projects is intricately linked to the conceptualisation, construction, and practical understanding of 'communities' involved (McNamara and Buggy, 2017; Singh et al., 2021). In Ethiopia, the government has set a unilateral administrative definition of a community as a *kebele*, the smallest administrative unit with an average population of 4000 to 6000 (Chung, 2023). It is commonly equated to a village by international development practitioners, and this definition is also applied to the SGP projects. Each *kebele* features complex governance structures where formal and informal actors and institutions are closely intertwined, a reality that underscores the multifaceted nature of community governance (Vaughan and Tronvoll, 2003). This governance framework illustrates the deeply rooted social and political structures within a *kebele*, highlighting the challenges and complexities intrinsic to implementing CBA projects within such a pre-defined community context.

Inherently, the implementation of CBA reveals that power relations within communities are often asymmetrical, with decision-making processes frequently dominated by patriarchal leaders and elders in Ethiopia (Chung, 2023). This reality necessitates a critical examination of the multifaceted power dynamics that shape CBA projects. While this study prioritizes examining local socio-political dynamics, it is important to acknowledge that these dynamics are not entirely isolated from the broader national and international contexts in which CBA initiatives unfold. National policies and the strategic priorities of organisations like the UNDP and GEF, which support the SGP, can indirectly shape local practices,

interests, and opportunities. These higher-level influences may interact with or reinforce existing hierarchies at the community level.

Within these multilayered contexts, varied outcomes from CBA interventions underscore the complexity of community-led adaptation measures (Planel and Bridonneau, 2015). Understanding and addressing local power relations is therefore vital to ensuring that CBA projects are genuinely participatory and reflect the needs and aspirations of all community members. This paper critically examines these power relations as they manifest within the SGP project in northern Ethiopia, contributing to broader discussions in community development. While CBA is often idealized as a 'magic bullet' that leverages community capacities (Huq et al., 2017), this assumption oversimplifies the inherently contested processes of community governance. Communities are not static, homogeneous entities but rather products of ongoing negotiation among actors and institutions embedded in diverse customs, histories, environmental conditions, and scales of influence (Chung, 2017).

As a result, the implementation of CBA often becomes an arena where rights and resources are contested in complex socio-ecological systems (Yates, 2014). Power dynamics operate and manifest at multiple scales, from intimate domestic negotiations to interactions with neighbouring communities and, to some extent, are informed by broader national and international frameworks. CBA can thus function either as a vehicle for meaningful social reform or as an instrument that inadvertently sustains entrenched hierarchies and inequalities (Dodman et al., 2010).

Against this backdrop, the central argument of this study is that CBA projects, including area closure activities, can reinforce, rather than dismantle, entrenched socio-political inequalities, allowing dominant groups to strategically shape outcomes and marginalize vulnerable populations, particularly women and young adults. Accordingly, this research asks: How do entrenched power dynamics and socio-political structures shape the implementation and outcomes of CBA projects, especially in the context of area closures in northern Ethiopia? By illuminating the subtleties of community-level power relations while acknowledging that these are not wholly disconnected from national and international influences, this analysis aims to advance more nuanced, context-sensitive approaches to CBA, ultimately promoting adaptation strategies that are more equitable and socially just.

Research methodology

Field research was conducted as part of my doctoral study in 2014 and a follow-up study in 2018 in the East Gojjam zone of the Amhara region in Ethiopia. For ethical reasons, specific details about the village location,

referred to here as a *kebele*, are withheld. The University College London (UCL) Research Ethics Committee granted ethical approval for this research (Reference number: 4996/001), ensuring adherence to prescribed ethical guidelines.

The study utilized a qualitative methodology, including a literature review, analysis of project documents, eight months of participant observation, seven focus group discussions, and 73 semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted with smallholder farmers, government officials, and SGP management personnel, comprising 49 men and 24 women aged 18 to 55 years.

These participants were selected irrespective of ethnicity, religion, income, education level, or other social backgrounds, in order to maintain an ethically neutral stance and to prevent the research from inadvertently reproducing existing power imbalances. Given Ethiopia's diverse social fabric, where differences in religion, ethnicity, and socio-economic status can significantly shape local hierarchies and influence community dynamics, it was crucial to ensure that no group's perspective was privileged or excluded from the outset. This approach sought to reflect the range of experiences within the community as accurately as possible, thus aligning with the study's focus on examining power relations without bias. Recruitment was first facilitated through local institutions and by strolling around the village and expanded using a snowball sampling technique. Interviews were conducted in Amharic, Ethiopia's official language. Due to my partial fluency, I introduced the interview introduction and purpose myself and relied on research interpreters for the subsequent discussions.

My positionality as a researcher—shaped by my cultural background, socio-economic status, race, gender, and age—inevitably influenced this study. Entering the field as an outsider, a researcher from the Global North, and a non-native Amharic speaker created asymmetrical power relations. Initially, participants viewed me as the first foreigner to visit their village since the Second World War, which both heightened my visibility and affected what and how they shared. Over time, however, my outsider status encouraged openness; many participants came to see me as someone to whom they could 'get matters off their chest,' including those related to local power hierarchies and gender inequalities.

To mitigate potential imbalances, I engaged in reflexive practice, acknowledging how my presence might privilege certain voices over others. I made a concerted effort to ensure the perspectives of women and young adults were heard, both in my interactions and in the analysis that followed. By remaining transparent about my research aims, receptive to participants' perspectives, and attentive to structural inequalities, I worked to produce findings that honestly reflect the complexities of local power dynamics.

After completing the field research, I developed an initial coding frame informed by both the theoretical perspectives guiding this study and the themes that emerged during data collection. This initial coding frame was used to systematically code all transcripts, after which I created a database in NVivo qualitative data analysis software. Throughout the process, I iteratively refined the coding frame, integrating newly identified categories and relationships as they surfaced during coding and analysis. This iterative approach ensured that the coding frame remained flexible and responsive to the data, ultimately capturing the complexity of local power dynamics and community adaptation strategies more accurately.

Research findings

This study aims to analyse the dynamics through which local actors and institutions leverage various social and administrative assets within established socio-ecological systems to compete for access to rights and resource. This competition is underscored by the exertion of power, transforming social and administrative assets into dominance within local decision-making processes. In *kebeles*, smallholder farmers garnered considerable political power through their involvement in CBA projects, reflecting how community structures are deeply integrated into the project implementation framework. Participation in CBA projects emerges from a complex interplay of political conflict, economic diversity, and culturally defined social orders. The influence wielded in CBA projects stems not merely from an imposition of power but from actors' direct and indirect experiences and engagement with the social, economic, ecological, and political landscapes of their communities.

The first part of this section investigates the internal social and administrative assets of the studied *kebele*, examining factors such as position, education, wealth, age, and gender. Building on this foundation, the latter half analyses local power dynamics, focusing on how political practices marginalize specific groups, including women and young adults, by sidelining their voices. By doing so, the study sheds light on how the dominant groups within the *kebele* have maintained their supremacy, exploring key questions about who is involved in CBA decision-making processes and who remain 'invisible' to external observers.

Internal differentiation within the kebele The Ethiopian peasantry operates within a sophisticated framework of local customary laws shaping public behaviour and defining individuals' social status. CBA endeavours to empower local communities by fostering active participation in its decision-making processes. Despite prevalent beliefs in the aid sector that equitable access and fair distribution mechanisms ensure universal benefit (Cleaver,

2009), each member aspirations are deeply embedded in community norms, ethos, and structure in practice.

This discussion highlights the determinants of influence and attention in *kebele*-level meetings. *Kebele* Representative #1 asserts that 'when people have opinions, the platform is open, and they raise questions. In the *kebele* meeting, around 200 people come, and some 20 people may speak and then a vote will be made', and this observation was echoed by many interviewees who acknowledged that both women and men hold the right to attend meetings and speak out. Village Elder #1 also states, 'Though people differ in communication skills, all have an equal right to speak'. Yet, whether any given speaker's voice truly resonates with the audience is another matter. Enhanced rights and open platforms do not necessarily translate into being heard: *Kebele* Leader #1 comments, 'Open-minded people speak openly and equally. However, people who are mentally sick and have negative motives do not get attention'. Observing multiple *kebele* and sub-*kebele* meetings revealed that the degree of attention a speaker commands often depends on socio-political status, education level, wealth, age, and gender, with their relative importance varying according to the audience's composition.

Firstly, local government officials, notably one or two development agents appointed in each *kebele*, wield considerable administrative power, ensuring government allegiance over community demands (Pausewang, 2002). These officials, often more credentialed than *kebele* chairpersons, are continuously transferred between different *kebeles* every three to five years, maintaining the state's influence over village affairs and reinforcing hierarchical obedience of citizen. Male Village Farmer #1's reflection encapsulates this: '*kebele* officers are wary of higher government authorities and fail to communicate true local conditions with them, leaving us intimidated and questioning the utility of numerous *kebele* meetings'.

Secondly, social and religious roles at the *kebele* level significantly influence leadership dynamics. This phenomenon is evidenced by over 30 percent of interviewees identifying their *kebele* by the current chairperson's name as Former *Kebele* Leader #1 explains, 'People think the leader of *kebele* is the *kebele* itself'. Leadership positions across various sub-*kebele* institutions not only command public respect but also embed individuals within a web of political and patriarchal influence.

Nepotism further complicates intra-*kebele* dynamics, creating networks of power that both unite and divide the *kebele*, marginalising less connected, both geographically and socially, or less privileged groups. Women's League Leader #1 introduces her family as, 'My first son is a teacher at school, the second son is a local leader, and my husband is a leader of *kebele* militias'. *Kebele* Treasurer #1 also says, 'The *kebele* officer is a daughter of my cousin

and we often discuss matters here [his house]. I also go to the *kebele* office frequently'. This trend divides the *kebele* into multi-networked communities which support and oppose each other according to circumstances. Meanwhile, it often further isolates the already marginalized groups. When asked 'Do you have any position in your *kebele*?' Young Male Village Farmer #1 answers, 'Of course not, we are young, and we do not have much land, and I am not close to any of those people'. Familial ties to leadership roles are common, with individuals frequently holding or being closely related to those in power, thereby influencing *kebele* discussions and decisions.

Militia and political party members play pivotal roles in *kebele*-level meetings, with their influence contingent on education and official endorsement. Militia members, in particular, are regarded as village protectors, their authority bolstered by formal training and governmental sanctioning. *Kebele* Militia #1 explains, 'We are supposed to safeguard the village... More opportunities are given to militias if we are educated'. Here 'more opportunities' means leadership positions in the village. Political party members also exert considerable influence over decision-making processes, often determining the acceptance of local development proposals in *kebele* meetings, as observed during the fieldwork.

Religious leaders, representing Orthodox Christianity in northern Ethiopia, delineate acceptable social behaviours and restrict certain groups, such as women, to specific roles. *Kebele* Militia #1 comments, 'The religious leaders are the platform themselves and are given a place around the table in the meetings. They are also involved in arbitration'. Their authority extends into *kebele* decision-making, where they often act as arbitrators, ensuring adherence to religious norms and influencing communal discourse (Vaughan and Tronvoll, 2003). According to *Kebele* Leader #2, 'The militia men and religious leaders speak more than others, but they only speak when they are asked to do so... But the political cadres [the political party members] always speak more'.

Thirdly, wealth and education are pivotal in establishing social status and influence within decision-making processes, reflecting deeper cultural norms. Public appearance and behaviour often signal one's status, impacting their acceptance and confidence in communal spaces. *Kebele* Priest #1 points out, 'When your clothes are not similar... For instance, the rich dresses in clean clothes and the poor may not have soap to wash their clothes... Their acceptance will not be same, and the poor will be shy in public'. It highlights the disparities in public perception based on clothes hygiene, suggesting the rich articulate their views more freely due to societal expectations. Speech mannerisms further differentiate individuals, with educated members preferred for their coherent expressions and valued

insights, leading to a higher likelihood of their participation and acceptance in discussions.

This dynamic disadvantages the less wealthy and less educated, who may feel inhibited due to societal judgments and fears of political repercussions. As *Kebele* Militia #2 points out, 'Poor people have anxiety. But rich people fear nothing . . . The poor is afraid of politics and fear they will be imprisoned for unknown political reasons. The rich have skills and do not say things that could upset the political cadres'. *Kebele* Militia #2 elucidates the anxieties and social apprehensions that stifle the poor's voices, contrasting with the affluent's savvy in navigating political discussions without fear. Influence and voice within the community are thus not merely a matter of speaking up but are also intricately linked to one's ability to conform to, and manipulate, the social expectations and realities.

Fourthly, while there are indications of evolving gender roles in rural Ethiopia, the social oppression of women remains prevalent. Village Elder #2 acknowledges that, historically, women's participation in meetings was minimal, however, opportunities for women to voice their opinions have increased, although their contributions are less valued by the community. *Kebele* Representative #1 explains, 'Women come to the meetings by being forced [due to the requirements of the SGP] . . . Nowadays there are more chances for women to speak'. However, many women still simply attend meetings more as observers due to unfamiliarity with proceedings or societal expectations that deter active participation, as observed during my participation in the meetings. Male Village Farmer #2 comments, 'Women come to the meetings but do not speak. [Researcher: Why?] They have not got used to the meeting procedures and they come only to observe the situation'.

Education and marital status further influence women's engagement in public meetings, with societal norms and religious leadership imposing additional barriers to their active involvement. Despite formal allowances for participation, the actual practice reflects a culture of silence among women, exacerbated by the fear of judgment and the lack of experience in such settings. This oppression is in relation to other social circumstances of women such as education, perceived expertise or marital status. Female Village Farmer #1 explains, 'Women alone will never go to meetings. We usually go with our men [husbands or male family members]'. Female Village Farmer #2 elaborates,

> *'There is a chance for everyone to speak. Only being uneducated can prevent her from speaking . . . I do not speak. We, women, stay silent . . . They [men] give permission, but we do not participate because even if we speak, they do not accept us. When we make a mistake, everyone laughs . . . They will laugh at men too, but*

> *they are not shy . . . The leader [of a women's league] gave some comments in the meeting but even she becomes shy as she is illiterate'.*

Lastly, age is venerated, with elders playing crucial roles in arbitrating disputes and advising the community leaders, yet their representation is not fully inclusive. Elders, particularly those with prior leadership experience, are revered and involved in decision-making. This respect does not extend to all, notably uneducated individuals and women, who are often sidelined in community dynamics. This underscores a complex interplay of social hierarchies, where gender and age significantly affect participation and influence within the community.

In addition to these criteria, there is a widely accepted opinion that decision-making processes in northern Ethiopia are not about discussing issues but a process of convincing people about decisions made at higher levels of governance. Male Village Farmer #3's account illustrates this frustration, noting that decisions under *kebele* control are, in reality, pre-determined by government officials, rendering *kebele* meetings merely procedural. This sentiment is echoed in observations that leadership often prioritizes its agenda over community input, fostering a stiff, rather than collaborative, atmosphere.

Enforcement of these top-down decisions sometimes leads to social exclusion of dissenters, indicating a coercive mechanism to ensure compliance within the community. Educational efforts by religious leaders aim to frame these decisions as beneficial in the long term, suggesting a didactic approach to consensus.

In essence, Ethiopian peasant life is governed by a complex interplay of norms, rules, and socio-political structures that privilege the perspectives and interests of the elite. This study highlights the nuanced web of relationships and power dynamics that characterize community interactions, eschewing a simplistic, quantitative analysis of power for a more relational examination of community dynamics within socio-ecological systems. The following section will explore how these dynamics work in the context of area closure activities, a pivotal aspect of SGP projects in Ethiopia.

Dominance of the elite in power dynamics Power dynamics play a crucial role in shaping CBA projects, characterized by diverse agency involvement and varying participation levels of individuals, often leading to politicisation within communities. CBA's intent to integrate indigenous norms and address local issues necessitates understanding and challenging existing power structures that may marginalize certain groups (Ensor and Berger, 2009; Dodman and Mitlin, 2011; Chung, 2023).

CBA seeks to ensure equitable benefits through open dialogue and debate, with outcomes hinging on the interplay between actors, institutions,

and the politics pervading community life. These interactions shape the framework for CBA governance, emphasising the importance of recognising dominant narratives and the potential for established groups to control participatory spaces, often to the detriment of marginalized voices.

This analysis recognizes the complex socio-political landscape of communities, emphasising the power dynamics within the *kebele*. It specifically explores the practice of area closure in community forests, a crucial but contentious component of CBA efforts in northern Ethiopia. Typically situated in mountainous watershed areas, these community forests are communally owned and managed. They serve primarily as resources for landless individuals who use them to graze livestock and for women who collect firewood.

At the same time, deforestation poses a critical environmental challenge in the Ethiopian highlands, primarily driven by local efforts to increase pastureland and farmland due to declining agricultural yields and shrinking arable land per capita Wassie, 2020. 'Area closure,' a key component of the SGP, aims to mitigate this by restricting access to certain lands to prevent soil erosion and promote natural regeneration. In northern Ethiopia, this initiative has led to the closure of significant portions of community forests, including the studied *kebele*.

Initially, the implementation of area closure sparked disputes within the *kebele*, with concerns over forest access and land use. Nonetheless, the *kebele* leaders reported a shift in perspective, attributing this change to the visible environmental improvements brought about by the area closure activities. *Kebele* Priest #1 describes, 'When we initiated the activity, some members stood against our idea by saying that we are going to sell our land. When the *kebele* saw the tangible changes, they accepted the idea of area closure'. *Kebele* Secretary #1 also comments,

> *'Initially there was such disagreement. But they are now convinced and support the area closure . . . We had discussions about area closure with the kebele and then we identified the available land for area closure, and we closed the land. [Researcher: What if people around the land refuse area closure?] We have to convince them. Even at the beginning of the project some people came up with axes and threatened to cut us into pieces and so we ran away. But today they appreciate the area closure'.*

Both recounted overcoming initial resistance through community discussions, highlighting the process of convincing local people of the area closure's merits.

There was also pressure from external actors such as the SGP national coordinator. As discussed in Introduction, the power dynamics shaping community decisions are not confined to the local level but stretch across multiple scales, underscoring the interplay between local, national, and

international influences on the ground. *Kebele* Secretary #1 points out, 'The SGP officer suggested area closure activities as well as some new seeds which I knew could not be adapted to our environment, but it was included in our activities . . . I could not voice my opinion'. *Kebele* Leader #2 also explains, 'They brought us an improved ploughing tool which was not suitable to our land. But many other suggestions benefitted us. Our activities were heavily based on their advice . . . They are more educated than us. It is good to follow them'. This illustrates how the community's adaptive actions are shaped not only by internal hierarchies, but also by the pressures and expectations of more distant authorities, reflecting the multi-scalar nature of CBA efforts.

A critical issue arose around the decision-making process for area closures as the process was mainly carried out by the *kebele* leaders in collaboration with government officers and bypassed broader community consultation. Despite the limited number of people participated in the process, the initiative proceeded with the backing of key *kebele* elders. This exclusionary approach led to grievances among young adults, who felt side-lined from decision-making processes and uninformed about the closures. Dissatisfaction grew as some young farmers felt penalized for raising concerns afterwards, highlighting a tension between leadership directives and community consensus.

Women, and particularly younger women, are also disproportionately affected by area closures since they needed to travel further distances to collect firewood—another task complicated by the scarcity of resources. However, unmarried young women often find themselves excluded from meetings, as women's participation often occurs alongside male family members, limiting the opportunities for younger, single women to voice their concerns. Young Female Village Farmer #1 reflects, 'The [community] forest is important as we learnt this at school . . . but we need to go further to collect firewood nowadays. I hate to go far away for firewood. It is hard and scary'.

The participation in the CBA activities predominantly comprised older, economically secure, and educated males with social influence, who are minimally affected by the closures due to owning private lands for livestock grazing. This demographic benefits from the closures, supported by government and external funding, emphasising environmental rehabilitation while side-lining younger generations perceived as competitors for resources. Meanwhile, criticism arose within the *kebele* against young adults opposing the closures, accused of prioritising personal over national and environmental interests. This contention highlights a division within the community, with some leaders attributing opposition to a lack of understanding and a tendency towards negative perspectives on community initiatives.

However, a hidden motive underlies these accusations. Senior members have raised concerns about potential government-led land redistribution, particularly for landless young adults. *Kebele* Secretary #1 mentions that a consensus on enclosing the area was partially driven by fears of losing the community forests to young adults, among the senior members. Young Male Village Farmer #2 points out, 'The *kebele* and elders promised to give us the community forest six years ago and they abandoned their words and closed the land'. There is a shared belief among the dominant group that enclosing the forest is a better idea than giving it to the young adults. Young Male Village Farmer #3 shares his struggle,

> *'I am terribly affected, now I buy grass for my cows . . . I understand the land must be protected and trees should grow . . . But there is a shortage of land because land was allocated in the previous years, and the youth has no access to land. We expect the government to allocate those unoccupied lands to the youth'.*

This dynamics reflect the chronic tension between environmental conservation discourse and the equitable distribution of resources within the Ethiopian farming community.

As a result, efforts to align young adults with environmental conservation through area closures encountered mixed reactions. Former *Kebele* Leader #1 and Village Elder #1 advocated for the benefits of the projects for land protection, urging a focus on livestock quality over quantity. Some elders offered practical solutions, such as providing alternative grazing lands and hiring young adults as guards for the closed areas, emphasising the potential benefits like beekeeping and grass sales. Yet, many young adults, feeling economically side-lined and lacking access to land, continue to resist the SGP activities. The chronic land shortage and the perceived need for land redistribution over rehabilitation among young adults fuel this discontent.

In contrast, women's involvement in decision-making processes within CBA projects has seen notable growth, driven by local government initiatives and cultural shifts towards gender equality. Female Village Farmer #3 highlights the cultural transformation post-project, 'Gender equality is being promoted now after the project came . . . The culture of washing the legs of husband has been abandoned . . . Nowadays during the weekend we can even go to the meetings with them'.

However, while women's attendance has improved, active participation remains limited. Women still speak less than men during meetings. Women's League Leader #1 explains, 'We women participate in the meeting, but we do not raise issues, and we do not ask questions most of the time . . . But we are learning and teaching each other'. *Kebele* Representative #1 observed an increase in women speaking up, attributing this change to the SGP project's influence, yet acknowledging the persistence of public speaking anxiety

among women. Furthermore, the demographic composition of women in meetings tends to skew older due to traditional family responsibilities and the logistical challenges of leaving livestock unattended.

Single women, particularly widows and divorcees, report feeling even more marginalized in these forums, linking their silence to societal stigma and lack of education, which exacerbates their marginalisation. This pattern reflects a gradual, yet incomplete shift towards gender inclusivity in community meetings, with enduring barriers to equal participation for women, especially those single or less educated.

Notably, the increase in women's participation in meetings, attributed to men's endorsement, do not challenge the existing authority. Women perceive speaking rights as granted by men, yet cultural norms and self-censorship limit their public expression. While women utilize informal channels like women's leagues to voice concerns, their impact on decision-making is contingent on aligning with male values, illustrating the conditional nature of their participation. This dynamic underscores the need for deeper cultural shifts to achieve genuine gender equity in community governance.

Power dynamics in the studied *kebele* reflect broader societal inequalities, with CBA's goal of fostering equal community benefits challenged by existing socio-economic hierarchies maintained by the local elite groups. The isolation of young adults, exacerbated by area closure, contrasts with the modest gains in women's meeting participation. This dynamic underscores a tacit approval from dominant male members, who view women's involvement as non-threatening, while continuing to sideline young adults over land redistribution concerns. Ultimately, the dominant group's power is reinforced through strategic engagement with CBA initiatives and environmental rehabilitation efforts, highlighting the nuanced interplay of power, gender, and social inclusion in community decision-making processes.

However, this power dynamics were not reported in the SGP's monitoring and evaluation report. This was mainly because, while the *kebele* leader touts the project's role in mitigating climate change impacts and revitalising indigenous vegetation, many young adults who experienced the detriment of livelihoods subsequently left the village, heading to cities. Young adults' persistent socio-economic challenges and dissatisfaction with the project's outcomes remained 'invisible' to external observers. This oversight highlights a significant gap in the project's evaluation process, where the voices of marginalized groups are often overlooked.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper critically examines the complex interplay of power, socio-political structures, and adaptive strategies within a CBA project in northern

Ethiopia. Grounded in the central argument that CBA interventions can reinforce, rather than dismantle, entrenched socio-political inequalities, it highlights how dominant groups strategically shape outcomes, marginalising vulnerable populations, notably women and young adults. In doing so, the study addresses the key research question: How do entrenched power dynamics and socio-political structures shape the implementation and outcomes of CBA projects?

By first exploring the internal social dimensions of the studied *kebele*—considering factors such as position, education, wealth, age, and gender—the analysis moves beyond a simplistic, quantitative lens to reveal the nuanced relational dynamics that define Ethiopian peasant life. These relationships are governed by norms and hierarchies that privilege elite interests, ultimately influencing who participates, who speaks, and whose voice is acknowledged within community decision-making processes. The subsequent examination of area closure activities, intended to restore degraded landscapes and enhance climate resilience, further illustrates that these broader patterns of inequality are not wholly disconnected from national and international influences, as policies and external funding priorities may reinforce existing hierarchies on the ground.

Power dynamics within the *kebele* reflect and reproduce wider societal inequalities. While women's meeting participation shows modest growth, tolerated by dominant male actors as non-threatening, young adults face persistent exclusion driven by concerns over land redistribution and access to resources. Their dissatisfaction, intensified by area closures that limit livelihood opportunities, frequently goes unnoticed. Such invisibility can be traced to the ways in which project funders and implementers measure success, with the SGP's monitoring and evaluation reports acknowledging environmental gains but overlooking the social costs borne by marginalized groups.

These findings underscore the need for a power-conscious, context-sensitive analytical framework that can capture the multi-scalar nature of adaptation efforts. Adaptation, as emerging scholarship attests, constitutes a form of labour often rendered invisible and undervalued (Johnson et al., 2023). When carried out under conditions marked by hierarchical norms and restricted access to rights and resources, this adaptation labour sustains inequities rather than fostering just transitions. Embracing inclusive governance mechanisms, establishing accountability measures, and incorporating youth and women's perspectives can transform adaptation labour into a force for redistribution and equity, rather than an engine of hidden exploitation that create winners and losers.

By integrating socio-political analysis into CBA planning, implementation, and evaluation, future adaptation strategies can move beyond nar-

row environmental indicators toward a more holistic understanding of resilience. Such approaches directly address the research question and support the study's central argument. They also align with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals—especially SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and SDG 13 (Climate Action)—underscoring that genuine resilience hinges on acknowledging and valuing the contributions of all community members. Ultimately, recognising and engaging with the full spectrum of voices and interests can lead to more equitable, inclusive, and sustainable outcomes in the face of climate change.

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