



Climate & Development
Knowledge Network

INSIDE STORY

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Key messages

- Traditional songs composed by women and broadcast on community radio built a platform trusted by participants and the wider community.
- When women's voices gain legitimacy in public spaces, their influence over household and community decisions grows.
- Publicly disseminated climate-themed songs can complement technical adaptation efforts by strengthening dialogue between men, women and local leaders, and supporting marginalised groups' inclusion in climate governance.
- Partnerships between community groups, radio stations and local authorities can amplify local climate knowledge and strengthen community resilience.
- Co-creation processes that integrate local and scientific knowledge help ensure climate messages are accurate, culturally resonant and community-owned.

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Singing as climate action: Amplifying women's voices in Ghana's Upper West Region

"The rains no longer come when our fathers expected them. We must watch the sky and plant with wisdom."

These words, sung by women farmers in Ghana's Upper West Region, capture a growing reality across many rural communities – climate change is experienced long before it is formally named. It is witnessed in late rains that keep farmers waiting, in fields that must be replanted after false starts, and in quiet conversations under shea trees about which crops might survive the season.

In the Pavuu, Yikpee and Biekyielu communities of the Lawra and Nandom districts, livelihoods depend heavily on rain-fed agriculture. Farmers rely on seasonal rainfall to grow crops such as maize, millet, sorghum and groundnuts. When rainfall becomes unpredictable, families must constantly adjust how and when they plant.

Women are central to navigating this uncertainty. They cultivate vegetable gardens, process shea nuts and other crops, manage household food supplies, care for small livestock, and take the lead on seed preservation and water management.

Through these daily responsibilities, women develop a close and detailed awareness of shifting rainfall patterns, soil conditions and crop performance. This awareness represents a vital and often overlooked source of actionable climate knowledge.

Although providing rich insight, women's local climate knowledge is rarely accounted for in formal climate discussions and is often treated as informal, remaining largely confined to households rather than informing community-level planning. Adaptation strategies developed without this knowledge are at risk of overlooking valuable tools to help communities respond to natural hazards.

Recognising this gap, a CDKN-supported initiative between 2023 and 2024 explored a simple but powerful question: What happens when women's localised climate knowledge is amplified through culturally familiar forms of communication? Working with women's groups in the districts of Lawra and Nandom, the initiative helped women turn what they already knew into songs and put those songs on the radio. The broadcasts have ended, but the practice they amplified has not.

Although these communities have always composed songs to make sense of the world, the initiative gave that tradition a wider audience and included information about climate change into the songs.

The co-creation process

The CDKN Ghana team set out to connect and integrate these women's voices into a broader conversation about climate change and the need for adaptation. Local facilitators, who were trusted by community members and familiar with local dynamics, brought several women's groups together across the two districts.

The process began with a participatory surfacing of lived experience. Women gathered in small groups to talk about what was happening to their land and their livelihoods: erratic rains, shifting planting windows, deteriorating soil quality, crop failures, all while facing the daily pressure of keeping their families fed. These conversations quickly revealed that the women's understanding of climate disruption was not only practical but also deeply cultural. Many women attributed erratic rains to spiritual causes, curses or ancestral displeasure. Instead of dismissing these existing explanations, facilitators and researchers introduced scientific perspectives alongside existing beliefs, enabling women to consider multiple ways of understanding climate change.

This approach recognised that while it is difficult to ask people to discard long-held beliefs, they are often open to considering multiple explanations¹. Working with openness to multiple ways of knowing became a cornerstone of the process.

What the songs say

From these conversations, songs began to take shape. Researchers helped connect women's observations with scientific understanding of climate patterns in the region, so that the songs would be both accurate and deeply rooted in their everyday realities, neither knowledge system was treated as superior. The goal was to bring these different ways of knowing together so that the songs were credible to outside audiences while remaining fully recognisable to the women who composed them. The compositions that emerged were not simply messages but expressions of lived experience. The songs did not frame climate change as a problem requiring outside expertise. They described shared experiences and invited communities to think together about how to respond;



Members of the women's community group in Lawra, Ghana.
Photo credit: CDKN

*"Let us prepare the soil well and plant different crops
So that when one fails, another will feed the household."*

The songs reflect local adaptation strategies for managing climate uncertainty. The women describe adjusting planting dates when rains arrive late, restoring soil fertility through composting and manure, and diversifying crops by combining staples such as millet or sorghum with legumes and vegetables. They also highlight the importance of maintaining small numbers of livestock and food gardens as buffers against poor harvests.

These messages were not strict technical instructions, instead the songs served as conversation starters, offering entry points for community members to share and refine practical responses to the challenges they were navigating together.

Taking women's voices to the airwaves

Once composed, the songs were performed at community gatherings in each district, then recorded and shared with local radio stations for broadcast.

In rural Ghana, community radio is one of the most accessible communication platforms which reaches households across villages. It often contributes to the basis of discussions among farmers, traders, and community leaders.

This made community radio the perfect platform to share the women's songs, which were broadcast on the airwaves alongside short discussions, where women explained the meaning of the lyrics and the climate challenges reflected in them. This allowed messages to reach wider audiences while highlighting and preserving their strong links to women's day-to-day experiences. Intentionally broadcasting the songs in their local languages also preserved the emotional nuances of the lyrics that would otherwise have been lost in translation. It also extended the reach of women's voices far beyond the small groups that originally composed the songs. However, timing broadcasts around women's domestic and farming responsibilities remained a challenge and required careful coordination to support their involvement.

Despite some of these hurdles, participation in radio broadcasts provided a valuable opportunity for recognition. For many of the women involved, hearing their own voices on the radio was transformative. The shift from community members with little influence over decision-making to recognised contributors to climate discourse was profound.

"Hearing my own voice on the radio was a faraway dream I never thought could come true. It made me believe in my own worth."

Song composer from Pavvuu community, Lawra district

The public recognition from the broadcast strengthened the perceived legitimacy of their voices, enabling many of the women to contribute more openly to discussions in both the household and community. Some also described the shift from being a silent observer to active participant, demonstrating their growing confidence and the increasing social acceptance. During interviews, many reported a greater involvement in household and community decisions, with their husbands and local leaders increasingly consulting them on farming, seed selection, and water management. These changes matter not only for inclusion, but for resilience. This is because when farming decisions draw on a wider range of observations and experiences, households are better able to respond to unpredictable rainfall and crop stress.

"Before, I listened. Now I also speak."

Member of singing group, from Biekyielu community, Nandom district

Much of this confidence grew from the co-creation process itself. In the group sessions women shared their own narratives and lived experience. The sessions also provided a space for peer learning as women exchanged knowledge about farming techniques, as well as social dynamics, strengthening their collective problem solving.



Woman farming in the Upper West region. Photo credit: CDKN

Shifts in social norms

In the Pavvuu and Yikpee communities of the Lawra district, traditional leaders attended performances and, in some instances, acknowledged the initiative publicly at community *durbars*, which are large formal events convened by chiefs that bring together community members to discuss issues, share information, and mark important events. As a result, shifts in attitudes were more noticeable. Public support from respected leaders reinforced women's participation in farming and climate discussions, signalling to other community members that their contributions were valued.



Women singing songs of resilience in Lawra community, Ghana.
Photo credit: CDKN



Women's community group discussions. Photo credit: CDKN



Madam Jenifer, singing with Anyee community group members in Lawra, Ghana. Photo credit: CDKN

However, the opposite was the case in Biekyielu, Nandom district, where cooperation from traditional leadership was limited due to tensions between the local facilitator and the chief. While this did not lead to any direct restriction of activities, it appeared to influence the degree of visible support and endorsement from traditional authority, which in turn affected the pace of implementation. In many rural communities in Ghana, even relatively informal activities such as group discussions are typically preceded by protocol engagement with chiefs and elders. This process is less about formal permission alone and more about signalling respect, legitimacy, and alignment with established leadership structures.

Where such alignment is less visible or inconsistently maintained, community participation can be more cautious, and mobilisation may take longer. In this case, activities were able to proceed, but with more gradual uptake and engagement. This highlights the importance of early and sustained engagement with traditional authorities, as well as the need to select facilitators who are perceived as socially neutral and able to maintain trust across different segments of the community.

The variation in cultural shifts across the communities reflects the gradual nature of social change, where norms evolve through repeated experiences that signal new possibilities². In this case, songs, radio broadcasts and community discussions consistently reinforced the value of women's experiences and knowledge. By working through established cultural systems rather than imposing external approaches, the initiative reduced the risk of backlash and gradually expanded the space for women's participation in community decision making.

The initiative also had an unexpected effect on younger women and girls. In communities such as Pavuu and Yikpee, younger community members were exposed to the songs and radio broadcasts and observed women speaking publicly about climate adaptation. This visibility expanded perceptions of leadership and participation among young women who had rarely seen female community members occupy such public roles. Local facilitators reported that younger women began asking how they could join future recordings or community discussions. This intergenerational engagement helps sustain change by having more role models and offering opportunities for intergenerational learning and knowledge exchange.

Lessons for practitioners

The experience from Ghana's Upper West Region demonstrates that gender-transformative communication is not only about inclusion. It is about how communities respond to climate risks by expanding whose knowledge shapes decisions, demonstrating that by diversifying the voices shaping climate risk management, communities can respond more effectively to changing weather patterns. This approach points to a set of lessons about what enabled progress, what made it difficult, and what others seeking to replicate this model should consider.

What enabled change



- **Familiar cultural forms.** Traditional songs gave women a socially accepted way to discuss climate challenges, allowing gender barriers to be explored through metaphor rather than confrontation. Radio broadcasts extended these messages into private spaces, encouraging reflection without directly challenging authority structures.



- **Co-creation and shared ownership.** Women shaped both the content and form of the songs through their own reflections. This sense of ownership strengthened confidence, encouraged peer learning and sustained engagement.



- **Integrated knowledge systems.** Connecting local and scientific knowledge produced messages that were accurate, contextually relevant and credible to both women and wider audiences.



- **Early engagement with traditional authorities.** Traditional figures hold significant social influence, and their endorsement shapes community-wide attitudes. Early, respectful engagement helped the initiative take root and be seen as legitimate.



- **Facilitators with broad community trust.** Facilitators who were perceived as impartial built credibility across all segments of the community, reaching women, youth and marginalised groups – not only traditional authorities.

What got in the way



- **Livelihood cycles and scheduling conflicts.** Agricultural seasons and domestic workloads limited when women could participate. Careful scheduling was essential to avoid conflicts with farming responsibilities and ensure radio broadcasts reached participants consistently.



- **Deep-rooted gender norms.** Resistance in some communities required working within cultural traditions rather than against them – using familiar formats and creating space for dialogue that gradually expanded women's roles in decision-making.



- **Local political dynamics.** Tensions between facilitators and traditional leaders, as seen in Biekyielu, can constrain implementation. Early relationship-building, clear communication on roles and selecting socially neutral facilitators are essential to managing this.



- **Sustaining momentum beyond the project.** Embedding practices within existing community structures and creating pathways for women into district-level adaptation planning would strengthen long-term impact.



Member of the Pavu women's group, shares her experience through radio interview. Photo credit: CDKN

Good practice pointers

- Institutionalise culturally embedded approaches as a core component of climate literacy and knowledge brokering strategies, not a supplementary awareness tool.
- Create formal pathways linking women communicators to district-level adaptation planning processes to sustain institutional influence.
- Formalise intergenerational learning. Youth engagement and role model visibility should be built into programme design to consolidate long-term norm change.
- Integrate norm change into monitoring frameworks, capturing inclusive participation in adaptation decision-making and women-informed changes in resource governance.

Looking ahead

Although the radio broadcasts have ended, what they set in motion has not. Women who participated in Pavuu, Yikpee and Biekyielu report sustained or growing confidence in community discussions. Sustaining this momentum depends on continued engagement from community facilitators, local radio stations and supportive leaders, and on integrating the approach into existing structures such as farmer groups, women's associations and local government planning processes.

In the Upper West Region of Ghana, women's participation in climate dialogue began with traditional songs. By shaping those songs themselves and sharing their experiences through a familiar cultural form, women were not simply participants in a project; they were contributors to the knowledge that informs how communities understand and respond to climate change. That contribution can be seen in women who now speak where before they listened, in husbands who now ask rather than decide alone, and in younger women watching and deciding that they too belong in those conversations.

Whether these changes endure will depend on how consistently women's voices remain part of the decisions that shape the land, the harvest and the future. What this initiative has shown, however, is that with an inclusive, locally rooted approach, that future is possible.



Women's community group singing songs about the realities of climate change. Photo credit: CDKN

Endnotes

1. Sim, J. and Waterfield, J. (2019) 'Focus group methodology: some ethical challenges', *Quality & Quantity*, 53(6), pp. 3003–3022.
2. Young, H.P. (2015) 'The evolution of social norms', *Annual Review of Economics*, 7(1), pp. 359–387.
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Climate and Development Knowledge Network (CDKN)

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