



# How subjectivities and subject-making influence community participation in climate change adaptation: the case of Vietnam

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## Abstract

Critical scholars on power relations and climate change adaptation have highlighted the lack of community participation as a consequence of unbalanced power operations. Evidence about how unequal power relations and subject formation constrain public participation, however, is under-studied. In this paper, we utilised the intersection between community participation and the subjectivities lens to examine how a hierarchical political structure systematically operates to influence community engagement in adaptation and how and why local communities are included or excluded from adaptation as a result of subject-making, using Vietnam as a case study. Using 66 semi-structured interviews and ten focus group discussions involving policymakers, practitioners, local authorities, and communities, we examined how the key respondents stereotyped local roles and capacity in agricultural adaptation activities. Applying content analysis, we found that the general population in Vietnam is often framed as lacking knowledge and capacity to respond to climate impacts. Reflected through a traditional government-led model in two agricultural adaptation projects, the study showed that subtle but pervasive subjectivities and subject-making processes constrain community participation by affecting perceptions and, subsequently, actions of key stakeholders, undermining local roles and capacity in undertaking adaptation. These perpetuate the power imbalance between local communities and government entities. The findings contribute to the prevailing scholarship of climate change adaptation that, under an authoritarian regime, local capacity is undermined not only by powerholders but also by community members as they consent to government decisions.

**Keywords** Adaptation · Climate change · Community participation · Subjectivities · Power relations · Vietnam

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**Highlights** • The study provides insights into how subjectivities and subject-making constrain community participation under a centralised hierarchical political system.  
• Subtle but pervasive subjectivities and subject-making significantly influence perceptions and actions of key stakeholders that perpetuate the power imbalance.  
• Local capacity is undermined not only by powerholders but also by community members, particularly under an authoritarian regime.

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## 1 Introduction

Social exclusion inhibits marginalised populations from raising and integrating their voices into decision-making and taking actions to respond to climate change across scales and regions, as demonstrated by various researchers and practitioners (Amorim-Maia et al. 2022; Harris et al. 2018; Garcia et al. 2022). Scholarships on climate justice and vulnerability have highlighted a lack of participation, particularly of disadvantaged groups and individuals who are on the frontline of climate change impacts, leading to ineffective climate change adaptation and an exacerbation of existing vulnerabilities (Amorim-Maia et al. 2022; Bikuba and Kayunze 2019; Brink et al. 2023; Chowdhoree et al. 2020; Rossi et al. 2019; Strange et al. 2022). Scholars have identified multiple factors hindering community participation in the Global South, such as disparate perceptions and expectations on roles of stakeholders (Jeffers 2020; Paschen et al. 2021; Uittenbroek et al. 2019; Wolf et al. 2020) or the understanding and performance of agencies based on rules, regulations (Dang et al. 2019; Taylor and van Grieken 2015), time, and attention (Ha et al. 2015; Huntjens et al. 2014) which are needed to foster participation.

Different perceptions, roles, and performance of stakeholders indicate a subjective viewpoint that extensively influences whose knowledge counts and who is excluded (Eriksen et al. 2015; Manuel-Navarrete and Pelling 2015). This is demonstrated by systematic inequalities wherein powerholders dominate entire adaptation processes and sideline the roles and capacity of others, particularly disadvantaged groups (Dinnie et al. 2015; Garcia et al. 2020; Olsson et al. 2014). Such subjectivity is created by unequal socio-political structures and power relations and in turn omits the participation of marginalised groups. For instance, scholars described that climate change adaptation in Vietnam has encountered considerable barriers related to socio-political factors, economic and financial resources, human capacities, institutional arrangements, and even cultural aspects (Brown et al. 2018; Tran et al. 2019; Trinh et al. 2018; Vo et al. 2021). Such barriers have resulted from unequal power relations between state-level authorities, elites, and disadvantaged groups, where the authority to make decisions and to distribute resources does not belong to local communities (Garcia et al. 2022; Lindegaard 2018; Pham et al. 2017; Tran 2020). In interpreting this limitation, Huntjens et al. (2014) argued that power distance and hierarchical culture were critical factors influencing how people perceived risks and their abilities or positions to participate in response actions. In addition, top-down approaches limit opportunities for local communities to develop alternative options while following the decision-making hierarchy and depending on government support (Brink et al. 2023; Lindegaard 2020; Strange et al. 2022). Lindegaard further argues that the Vietnamese government uses climate policies to construct climate subjects through governing climate responses and reasserting its political authority. However, less is known about how climate subject-making and subjectivity, within the existing hierarchical power relations, influence community participation.

The concept of subjectivity has been used to describe how dominant groups label individuals and other groups based on social differences (Nightingale 2012), sometimes in an attempt to deter the general population from raising their voice and claiming authority or to make the populace governable (Eriksen et al. 2015; Nightingale and Ojha 2013; Tschakert et al. 2016). Subjectivities are driven by cultural codes and power structures which shape their social differences and sustain inequality based on gender, class, ethnicity, and other categories. Subject-making is a process of creating subjectivities and stereotyping individuals and their positions due to uneven and often exploitative power relations (Garcia et al. 2021; Nightingale and Ojha 2013). As such, subjectivities influence how a community

responds by either resisting or consenting to decisions on adaptation (Eriksen et al. 2015; Manuel-Navarrete and Pelling 2015; Mosberg and Eriksen 2015). It is, therefore, crucial to understand how and to what extent rural communities are excluded from decision-making by investigating how subjectivities and subject-making influence stakeholders' participation (e.g. Bertana 2020; Jeffers 2020; Millner et al. 2020; Uittenbroek et al. 2019).

Using the lens of subjectivities, this study aims to understand how power operations and subject-making processes promote or hinder community participation in climate change adaptation in Nam Dinh and Tra Vinh provinces, Vietnam. In particular, it seeks to investigate how local communities were framed in relation to others, which determined the extent to which local communities can participate in adaptation. To do so, we examined how subject-making processes, by influencing stakeholders' perceptions, have resulted in limited participation in adaptive actions. We began by discussing the current understanding of community participation in adaptation and its intersection with subject-making. The background of the case studies and data collection and analysis are then presented. The research results start with an examination of how the general population is positioned in adaptation strategies and plans. Then, we examined how different stakeholders perceive the roles of agrarian communities before investigating how relevant stakeholders stereotype farmers' adaptive capacity. We concluded by highlighting the participatory modes in two adaptation projects that revealed the influence of subject-making and power relations on community participation in adaptation practices.

## 2 Subject-making and community participation

Community participation is intended to involve the general population in decision-making processes, often with a focus on marginalised and vulnerable groups, to share their knowledge and to learn from the experience (Bishogea et al. 2020; Burton 2004; Cornwall 2008; Furness and Nelson 2016; Swapan 2016). Scholars have described various forms and levels of participation in different disciplines from non-participation and tokenism to citizen power (Arnstein 1969) and demonstrated that practical community participation often falls on the tokenism layer and is highly contextualised (e.g. Burton 2004; Carvalho et al. 2016; Hügel and Davies 2020; Swapan 2014). To examine various levels of participation in both planning and implementing adaptation, Sarzynski (2015) suggested six types of public participation, varying from traditional government-led and non-governmental-led to inclusive climate planning and from partnerships and non-governmental provision to the co-production of climate actions. These six types of participation refer to the selection of participants to decide how much and to what extent they can participate on the basis of the purpose and the exercise of the approach (Sarzynski 2015). While other scholars provided various frameworks with advanced methods to widen participation in planning around climate topics (see Amorim-Maia et al. 2022; Hügel and Davies 2020; Strange et al. 2022), Sarzynski (2015) provided tools to determine the breadth, openness, intensity, influence, and goals of participation in adaptation, which are useful in the identification of characteristics to classify the level of public participation in governance processes. In this study, we adopted the latter framework to reflect the levels of participation in agricultural adaptation projects and to disentangle the factors driving community participation in the research sites.

Subjectivities and participation are intricately intertwined in multi-faceted forms which can be best understood by examining the interplay between power relations and social-cultural contexts (Burton et al. 2006; Carvalho et al. 2016; Few et al. 2007; Nissen 2005).

As subjectivity creates domination and imbalanced power relations, a new subjectivity can alter existing participatory patterns based on how individuals or groups are presented as having or lacking the ability to avoid potentially negative impacts (Centeno 2020; Garcia et al. 2022; Nissen 2005). Therefore, it is critical to understand how decision-makers dominate power relations by imposing on devolved decision-making in the locality (Burton et al. 2006). Decisions can be influenced by subjective perceptions based on prejudice which directly shapes purposes and approaches for community participation. For instance, Liu et al. (2018) have described how stakeholders, particularly decision-makers, interpret and conceptualise the idea of participation, which then affects participation on the ground. Thus, community participation is driven by whether powerholders perceive others as supportive or challenging actors that they determine how and when participation can occur and for whom.

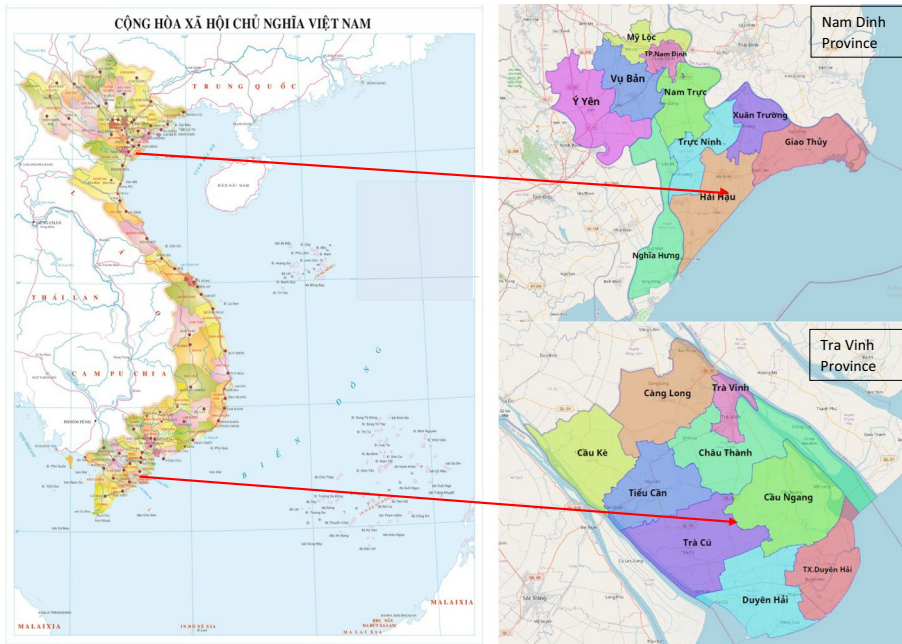
As a case in point, Carvalho et al. (2016) described that one of the factors that influences community participation is how people are labelled as '*interested people*' or '*affected people*', which influences the purpose, methods, and targets of participation. On the one hand, when categorised as '*interested people*', individuals and groups are given opportunities to participate and develop alternative solutions. On the other hand, being labelled as '*affected people*' can prevent local people from becoming active (Carvalho et al. 2016; Centeno 2020; Eriksen et al. 2015; Ylipaa et al. 2019). Furthermore, research on power relations and climate change adaptation has highlighted the lack of participation as an outcome of unequal power operation (Garcia et al. 2022; Hügel and Davies 2020) but falls short of demonstrating how and why such factors could constrain public participation. Answers to these questions provide crucial insights into efforts in solving the limited public participation in climate change adaptation.

In Vietnam, as Lindegaard (2020) argues, the government creates climate subjects by using global knowledge on climate change to govern climate responses and reproduce political structures. Her study illustrated the influence of climate policies on implementing agencies by systematising the concepts and the need to raise awareness among governmental bodies and communities. Climate subject-making occurred through descriptions of the roles of various political agencies, actors, and local communities. These descriptions (un)intentionally perpetuated the unique and dominant roles of the central government (Lindegaard 2020). However, to what extent such subject formation may diminish community participation has not so far been examined. In this paper, we examine the process of subject-making and its impact on community participation. We employed two case studies in Vietnam to answer the question of how subjectivities and subject-making processes influence the engagement of local communities in adaptive actions under a centralised political regime.

### 3 Research method

#### 3.1 Background of the case study

The research was conducted in Nam Dinh and Tra Vinh provinces, in two different geographical river deltas: the Red River Delta in the North and the Mekong River Delta in the South of Vietnam (Fig. 1). These areas were chosen as they have the highest population density and account for most of the rice production in the country (Centre for Excellence 2018). Moreover, these two deltas are located 1902 km apart from each other and have



**Fig. 1** Map of Vietnam and the two research provinces. Source: <http://gis.chinhphu.vn>

different geography (one tropical and another a temperate climate), providing two contrasting case studies. While the two deltas are climate change hotspots, where multiple adaptation programs have been implemented with a central focus on agriculture adaptation and disaster risk mitigation, they have differences in social, cultural, and political histories. Investigating contemporary dynamics taking place in these river deltas will provide rich and detailed insights into how authority and power are exercised by various stakeholders in adaptation to prevent or promote community participation.

### 3.2 Study sites, data collection, and analysis

We employed two agricultural adaptation projects in these two provinces as exemplary case studies. These two projects are under the Vietnam Forests and Deltas Programs in Nam Dinh Province and the Climate Change Adaptation in Mekong Deltas in Tra Vinh Province. These projects were selected because their main adaptation activities focussed on agriculture production that involved participation of local communities. Here, we conceptualised the practicality of community participation to identify what other factors may determine who can participate in adaptation projects and when they can participate. Respondents involved in the discussion on the two projects were classified into two clusters: project implementers and local community members as beneficiaries (see Table 1). We drew on how they described the adaptation process based on their experience. Using the six forms of participation identified by Sarzynski (2015), we compared how the two groups of stakeholders described the participation and classified the participation level.

**Table 1** Number of respondents in Nam Dinh and Tra Vinh provinces

Informant group	Number of respondents					Clusters
	By gender		By province			
	Male	Female	Nam Dinh	Tra Vinh	Others	
<i>Interviews</i>	47	19	32	27	7	
Policymakers	4	0	1	2	1	Project implementors
Practitioners	10	6	4	6	6	
Local authorities	6	3	5	4	0	
Community members	27	10	22	15	0	
<i>FGDs</i>	60	48	54	54	0	

A qualitative case study approach (Yin 2018) was used in this study. A total of 66 semi-structured interviews (SSI) and 10 focus group discussions (FGD) with 108 stakeholders were conducted (Table 1). Four groups of respondents, namely policymakers, practitioners, local authorities, and community members, were recruited to collect the data. Respondents were selected using the snowball sampling technique (Neuman 2014). The FGDs with practitioners were mixed groups, with both male and female participants working in different agencies from the provincial to the commune level. In contrast, community-based group discussions were undertaken separately with male and female participants who lived in the same commune but had different income levels. The average length for each SSI was 80 min, while the FGD was 90 min. All interviews and discussions were undertaken by the first author in Vietnamese, which was audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. The research team took notes and audio-recorded the interview simultaneously to ensure the accuracy of the information provided. The notes were also compared with the transcripts of the recorded interviews. In some cases, the transcripts were returned to the interviewees for feedback and to remove sensitive information (if needed). As a result, we received seven responses (out of fourteen emails) from people who used email for communication.

Data were analysed using a qualitative analytical approach, which involved two rounds of coding. In the first round, we used NVivo software to organise all transcribed text into themes that described the configuration of subjectivities, subject-making, authorities, and power relations within adaptation processes. This allowed researchers to store and classify a large amount of qualitative data based on research questions or themes (Sotiriadou et al. 2014; Wong 2008). In the second step, we conducted an in-depth analysis of the categorised themes to understand their patterns and connections throughout the text. The analytical tools were based on the thematic domains identified from the literature, including adaptation processes (Moser and Ekstrom 2010), subjectivity (Eriksen et al. 2015; Manuel-Navarrete and Pelling 2015), and public participation (Sarzynski 2015). These domains are homologous in viewing adaptation under three lenses: i.e. knowledge/understanding; planning/decision-making; and managing, which helped researchers gain a comprehensive picture of the subject-making processes. Content analysis was then applied to draw the intertwined nature of subject-making, perceptions towards local communities' roles, and capacities in adaptation. Document analysis was also employed to analyse 20 collected national and provincial strategies and action plans to examine the subject-making processes and their influence on stakeholder perceptions and actions in adaptation.

Overall, these methods are essential to investigate climate change adaptation in the context of Vietnam. In particular, they contribute to exploring the interpretation of climate-related policies in general and local strategies to reduce vulnerabilities and risks by different stakeholder groups. They also help reveal how people interpret climate change adaptation processes as well as their roles and responsibilities. As these methods attempt to investigate the intersection between knowledge, authority, and subjectivity within adaptation processes, examining these issues, therefore, enabled us to understand how power operates, how authority is practically exercised, and how agency can be enhanced to respond to the root causes of vulnerability.

## 4 Results and discussions

### 4.1 Subject formation in climate policy

We analysed subjectivities as described in climate-related documents that categorised different groups into one of the following: (1) being severely impacted by climate change with minimal capacity to respond to the change or avoid its impacts (victims); (2) having knowledge, resources, and capacities to respond or support others to cope better with climate change and its impacts (champions); and (3) implementing activities which caused environmental changes or exacerbated the impacts of climate change (villains). It is worth noting that, due to a lack of knowledge of climate change and its impacts, individuals either struggled to adapt effectively or kept participating in activities harmful to the environment. Thus, they are part of the villain group described as ‘unwittingly villains’. This classification results in different interventions proposed in those documents, specifically to raise awareness or educate certain groups to change their practices. Analysing governmental documents provides insights into how the general population is constructed and positioned in relation to climate change, which later affects their inclusion or exclusion in adaptation processes. The results are presented in Fig. 2.

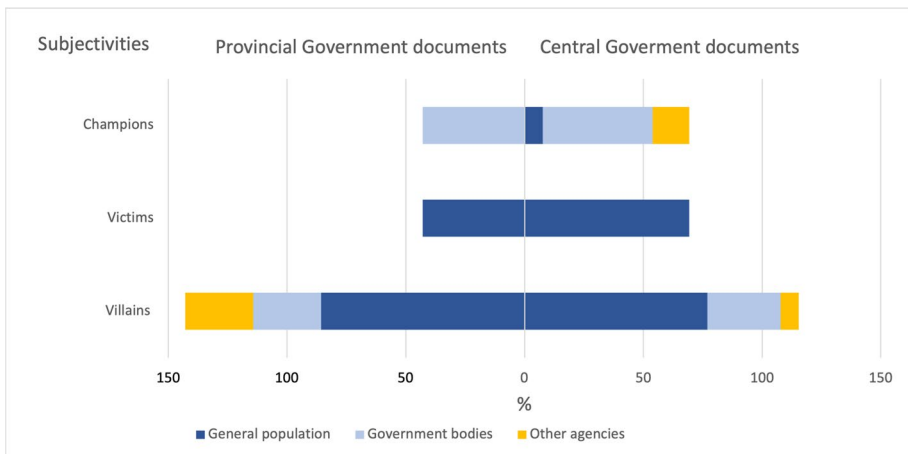


Fig. 2 Frequency of reference to subjectivities in the context of climate change in government documents

Figure 2 shows that governmental bodies are generally positioned as champions. Less than 10% of the central government's documents described the general population as champions, and less than 20% labelled other agencies as champions who could contribute (mainly resources) in implementing adaptation or other preventive measures. None of the provincial government's documents described the general population as champions.

With regards to villains, all three groups appeared in this category, with the general population receiving around 80%, government bodies 30%, and other agencies 10–30% of counts. The general population is considered to have little knowledge of climate change and its impacts and has a poor capacity to respond.

Our analysis found that local people are mostly framed as victims of climate change, as indicated in 43% and 70% of the provincial and central government documents, respectively. They are described as being severely affected by climatic events, thus needing significant support to strengthen their knowledge and capacity to buffer against climate impacts and disasters. In contrast, none of the governmental bodies or other agencies is viewed as victims, as these agencies have the resources, the authority, and the ability to facilitate adaptation measures. These framings identify government bodies as powerholders and local communities as followers. For example, one document describes the issues, solutions, and roles in responding to climate change as follows:

*Another challenge is that the community's awareness of climate change is still very limited and only focuses on its negative impacts. There is a significant lack of attention to the need to change lifestyles, behaviours, consumption, and production patterns to be more environmentally friendly....*

*.... It is crucial to improve the awareness and responsibility of individuals and communities in preventing and overcoming the consequences of natural disasters....*

*Government at all levels needs to take leading roles in facilitating participation in, and mobilising resources for, adaptation measures (Vietnam NSCC, 2011; pp. 3–4).*

Our results indicated that governmental bodies and stakeholders in Vietnam employed government documents, including laws, decrees, and strategic socio-economic development plans, as the regulatory framework and guideline to perform their climate responses. Yet, these documents serve as a means to enact biases against community participation through subjectivities and blaming the victims. When people are constructed as victims being impacted by climate change and having limited capacity to respond or avoid losses, they are considered passive dependents requiring support rather than active agents who can implement adaptive measures effectively. This practice of blaming the victims undermines community participation in two indirect ways. First, it influences the perception of practitioners and local authorities who read and implement those adaptation strategies and selected measures. Unintentionally, local authorities and practitioners, acting as the ultimate authority, could take away opportunities from communities to participate in adaptation, except when they think it is suitable for the community's capacity. This insight is similar to the example regarding traditional government-led and non-governmental-led climate planning presented by Sarzynski (2015), who indicated that the government's stereotyping of local communities affects their decisions on when and who can participate.

Second, it affects the perceptions of local communities themselves. As Vulturius et al. (2020) suggested, communication profoundly influences how local people are labelled as having adaptive knowledge and capacity or not, which then affects their engagement. In

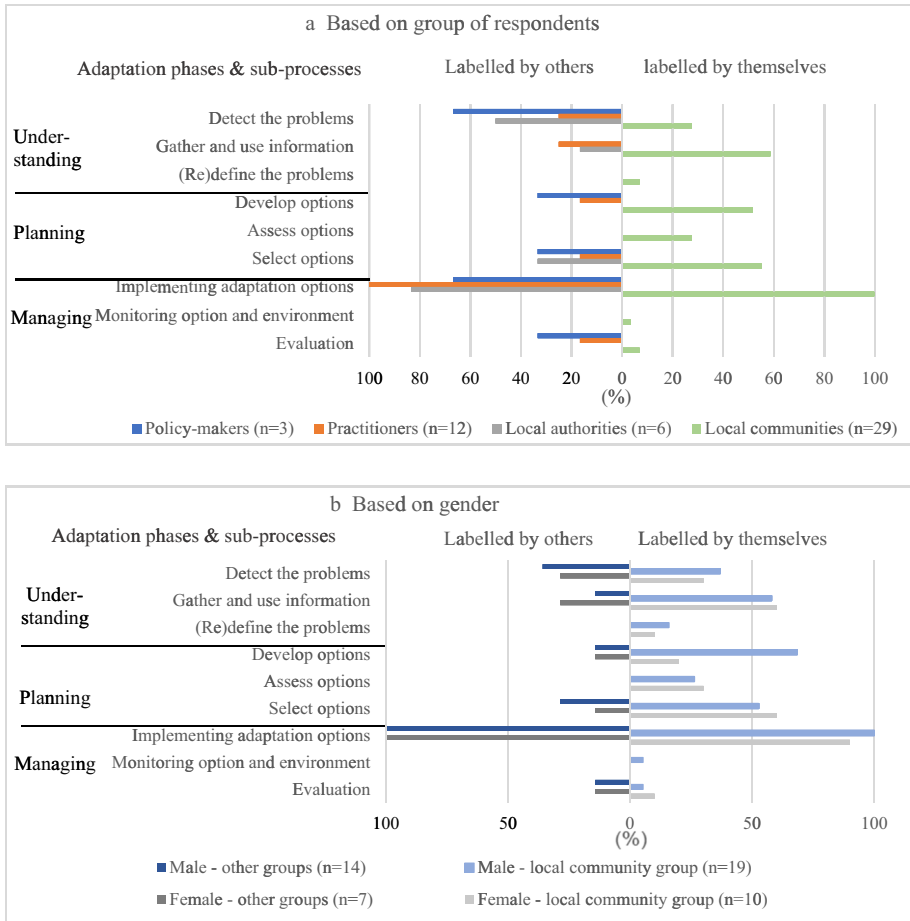


this case, local communities might not have read those documents directly, but they had indirectly accessed such information through media or local radio systems that cite and broadcast information from the perspective of the government. Being influenced by this form of stereotyping, local people are likely to downplay their own capacity to participate in climate change adaptation. As a result, local communities do not contest their right to participate but consent to the decisions made by governmental bodies on who, how, and when participation occurs.

Furthermore, some governmental documents strategically use the lack of knowledge on climate change and adaptation and the practice of harmful environmental techniques by a majority of farmers as the reason for governmental bodies to conduct awareness-raising activities for such groups. This stereotyping jeopardises the role of local communities in identifying their own needs and practices for adaptive measures and their ability to contribute to the government's adaptation strategies (Lindegaard 2020). The governmental bodies then use such stereotypes to justify their recommendations and to control adaptation measures. This was observed by Carvalho et al. (2016), who demonstrated how the discourse of 'affected people' and 'interested people' changed public participation. Therefore, understanding how local communities are positioned in government documents can explain how subject-making processes influence local participation.

The framing of communities as victims or villains demotivates communities to carry out adaptive measures independently. The subject-making of 'need to support communities to...', 'need more awareness-raising campaigns to change bad practices' or 'specialised agents need to develop and guide farmers to apply advanced techniques in cultivation...' results in the internalising of people's disempowerment, to be dependent subjects who best wait for governmental support and guidance. Such internalisation was evident while we were collecting the data. From our observations, community members implemented various adaptive measures, which are aligned with recent studies conducted by Le et al. (2017) and Tran and James (2017), who reported on several adaptive measures implemented by farmers in the Mekong Delta. However, in our study, we found most farmers have been passive in responding to climate change. For instance, some of them stated that: *Farmers are not active; they just wait for government support* (Interview, ND-LC19/TV-LC4/ND-LA2); *We do not know what to do to avoid losses* (Interview, TV-LC4/7/12) or *If the government does not instruct us, we will fail our crops* (Interview, ND-LC18/TV-LC2). It appears that the legitimate rights and/or motivation for community participation in climate change responses may have been taken away by the implementing agents.

Confucian traditions strongly influence Vietnamese people (e.g. Huntjens et al. 2014; Pham et al. 2016; Tran and Rodela 2019), creating a so-called culture of 'obedience'. This is demonstrated in the case of smallholder farmers, who are commonly regarded as a low class in society (Amorim-Maia et al. 2022; Brink et al. 2023). They might not be well-educated and not well-equipped with modern technologies, contributing to them being or feeling voiceless in most cases. Therefore, the perceived powerlessness and lack of capacity make them hesitate to act. Even though this perception is changing, and the government now requests public consultations before any policy is approved, the power domination still unintentionally falls on the governmental bodies and the higher classes in such hierarchical societies (Calderón-Argelich et al. 2021; Lee and Gerner 2020). These powerholders control the populace and decide who and to what extent different stakeholders can participate in adaptation options.



**Fig. 3** Perceptions of different stakeholders about local communities' roles in the adaptation process, based on the framework by Moser and Ekstrom (2010)

### 4.2 Role of local communities in adaptation

The results on how different stakeholders position the roles and responsibilities of local communities in the adaptation process are presented in Fig. 3. In particular, Fig. 3a shows that all practitioners and local community respondents, and more than 80% and almost 70% of local authorities and policymakers, stated that the role of local communities was to implement adaptation options. The other roles mentioned by the four groups of respondents were to detect problems, select options, and gather and use information (about 42% of all respondents). We found that the roles to (re)define problems, assess options, and monitor options were not associated with community members, although there were a few exceptions. These roles were commonly associated with governmental or funding agencies, who then decide what the problems are, how to respond, and who has the right to monitor the implementation of their selected options. Regarding the role in evaluation, roughly 10% of respondents credited this to the local communities. Analysing those responses in more

depth indicated that the evaluation role was mostly associated with the purpose of making recommendations to maintain or expand implemented adaptation options. This implied that communities had very little authority or legitimate rights in influencing the planning and implementation of adaptation options.

In terms of perceptions concerning gender, we found little differences between male and female perceptions of the role of communities throughout the adaptation process, except for developing options sub-process. Only 20% of females stated that local communities had this role, while nearly 70% of the male respondents discussed their local roles in this sub-process (Fig. 3b). This reflects how the local culture shapes gender roles, whereby men tend to be more confident in developing options and deciding what to do, in general, and responding to climate change. This finding corresponds to the claim that the Vietnamese culture was built on Confucianism. These findings are similar to other research results (e.g. Nong 2020; Ylipaa et al. 2019). However, looking more in-depth at the background of each respondent in this group, we found that more than 80% of those respondents are over 50 years old and that 60% belong to somewhat wealthier households. Overall, 40% hold certain esteemed positions (e.g. e.g., retired commune staff, village leaders, or leaders of civil organisations); and 20% are young (between 25 and 35 years old) or come from poor households, having been extensively supported by one project to become a role model. These indicated that the intersectionality of gender, wealth, class, and social hierarchy influences perceptions of how respondents' roles and abilities are linked to their decision-making at the household level.

Analysing interview transcripts of local community respondents (five) who discussed their roles in (re)defining the problems and monitoring options and environment sub-processes, we found that 4 out of 5 were better-off households (80%) with greater ability to mobilise resources for their actions. One respondent belonged to the group of households that first implemented the model of shifting from low rice production to aquaculture production in Nam Dinh Province. Most of the households who participated in this model from the beginning expressed that they worked closely with different stakeholders in all steps from defining the issues, analysing options, and testing different techniques to evaluating the effectiveness of the model. Consequently, they seemed to feel more confident in communicating with other powerful stakeholders and taking part in governmental or trial activities. This indicates that when people have more opportunities to participate in the whole process, a new subjectivity emerges, allowing them to mobilise resources and raise their voices. As a result, they become early adopters or mavericks in response to climate and environmental change. This result asserts the need to empower local communities to be able to increase their participation in adaptation measures.

### 4.3 Communities' capacity for adaptation

Another aspect that creates the opportunity for community participation is the perception of different stakeholders and local communities towards local capacity. Rating of adaptive capacity from very limited (people have limited capacity to respond) to adequate capacity (people can independently implement adaptive measures to avoid climate impacts), respondents' positioning reveals insights into who is positioned where and for what reason. This visualisation is used as an interpreting tool to probe if the perception of local capacity may affect local people's opportunities for and willingness to participate in adaptation.

Figure 4 shows that almost all respondents positioned local capacity from neutral to limited categories, suggesting they did not have sufficient capacity to respond to climate



**Fig. 4** Positioning of local capacity to adapt to climate change as described by four groups of respondents

change and its impacts. Individually, policymakers seem to positively perceive local capacity, as their responses ranged from medium to sufficient capacity to implement adaptation options. The other three groups had diverse views but mostly labelled local capacity as ranging from medium to limited. No respondent positioned local people as having adequate or very limited capacity (top or bottom level). The frequently mentioned aspects affecting local capacity included lack of knowledge, experience, and information on climate impacts; lack of skills and tools; lack of financial and technical ability to apply recommended adaptive measures; and an inability to deal with unexpected events. These perceptions are in line with the positioning of the general populace in government documents created by political and socio-cultural structures, as presented in the previous section (4.1). Our data suggested that the positioning of local people, especially farmers, as victims of, or villains in climate change, appeared to cause the negative perceptions that local capacity is low because community members (i) do not understand the issues, (ii) do not know how to respond, (iii) lack the financial and technical capacity to apply adaptive measures, or (iv) even lack the willingness to take action.

We found that most local communities did not acknowledge their ability to implement adaptive measures. This was attributed to two main reasons. First, climate change and its impacts are relatively new to local farmers. During the interviews and discussions, local respondents expressed that they had only experienced climate change and its impacts in recent years. Some of them even expressed their confusion about the changing climate. As a result, they did not have sufficient knowledge and experience of adaptive options. For example, one farmer said: *The weather here was pretty stable until last year when we started to experience unpredictable weather patterns impacting our crops. Thus, many farmers still do not know how to avoid the impact effectively* (Interview, TV-LC4). This

reason was linked to the labelling of ‘people are not willing to take action’, as mentioned by several respondents in all groups (roughly 42% of respondents).

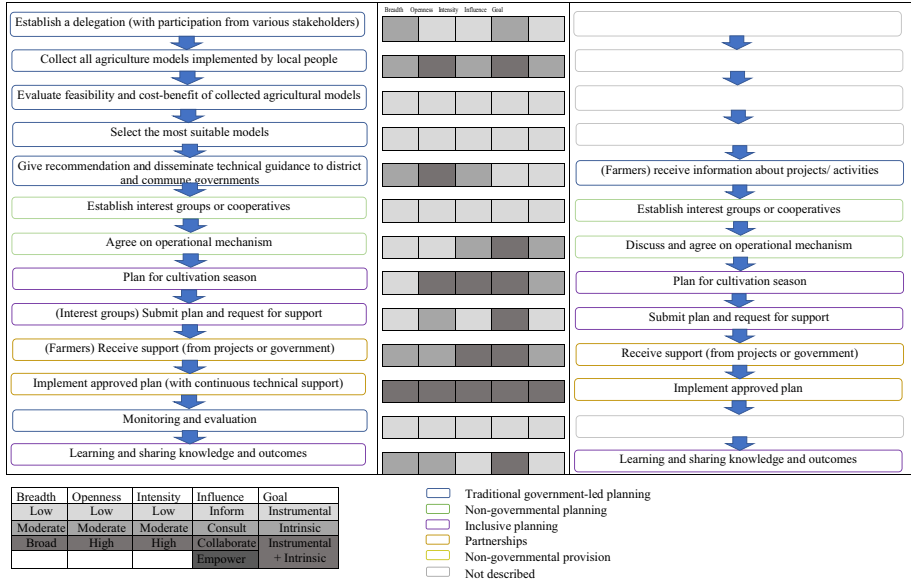
Second, many community respondents described themselves as powerless due to poor economic conditions, voiceless due to a lack of education (only having graduated from secondary or high school without attending any vocational training or specialised colleges), or ‘not knowing anything’. Others claimed that responding to climate change requires long-term and large-scale actions using advanced technology and significant financial resources, which go beyond local capacities and are something that only the government can do. This negative self-evaluation could be seen as a consequence of having internalised disempowerment in the culture’s social structure, where the power and management of resources belong to the government. Therefore, negative perceptions of local capacity could be seen as the most significant hurdle to their participation in the planning phase of adaptation.

Figure 4, however, depicted another narrative of adaptation. Four local respondents mentioned that they had adequate capacity to implement adaptive measures. This suggested that, while many community respondents described themselves as having low capacity or hardly able to implement adaptive options, others recognised their capability to respond to climate change. This positive perception was noted for local respondents who either had better economic conditions or were more accessible to resources and support from the government. Of all local respondents who mentioned this, 75% were relatively wealthy and better-off households, and 50% were receivers of adaptation programs and expressed that their awareness and economic conditions had significantly improved. Therefore, the negative perceptions regarding low capacity and what could be called crippling subject-making together undermined the local capacity to implement adaptation, particularly among the poor. This constrained their capacity and confidence to proactively engage in undertaking adaptation measures that went beyond their immediate household.

#### 4.4 Community participation in practice

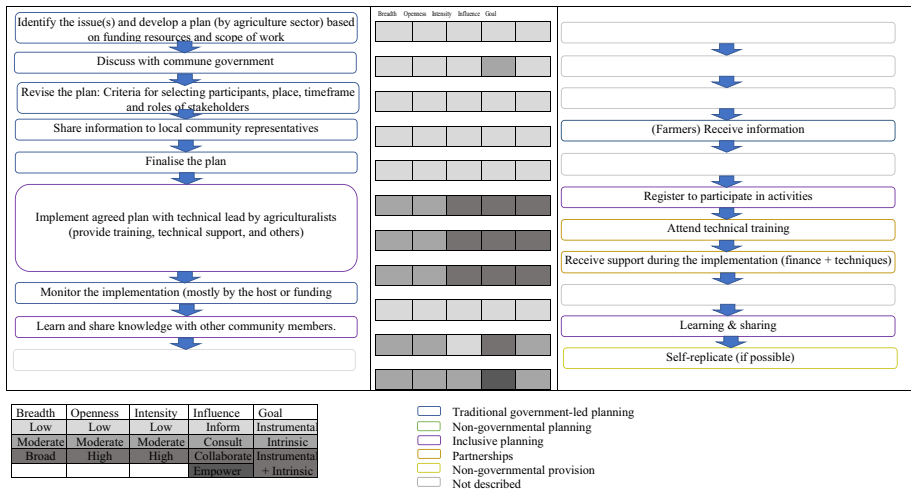
Figures 5 and 6 demonstrate noticeable mismatches between adaptation processes in both provinces as described by project implementers and by beneficiaries. The left column showed more steps while those in the right column were simpler with fewer steps. Practitioners of adaptation programs reported that they had applied a participatory approach in engaging local communities. However, when asked to explain, they admitted that the level of participation was limited. Their descriptions indicated a focus on leading and facilitating roles of practitioners, where they had authority to decide who could participate and when. This implied that the notion of participation was defined by the way powerholders tend to favour the traditional government-led model rather than how local communities were engaged and empowered. These adaptation models contain characteristics of the traditional government-led climate planning, with a few steps reflecting inclusive planning or partnerships, as described by Sarzynski (2015) (see Figs. 5 and 6). This mirrors the findings of Le et al. (2018), who also demonstrated that there was no substantive training on climate change adaptation and the application of participatory approaches. Policymakers and those who implement projects do not receive substantive training on how to involve local communities. They may call it ‘participation’, but as they are not required to report on local participation, their idea of participation does not necessarily reflect the involvement of communities in planning processes. This means whatever happens at the local level is up

Tra Vinh



**Fig. 5** Forms of community participation in Tra Vinh Province were ranked using the classification approach by Sarzynski (2015). The graph on the left-hand side was described by project implementers. The graph on the right-hand side was described by local community members (blank boxes mean no one mentioned that step). The middle column is the final ranking based on the characteristics of Sarzynski

Nam Dinh



**Fig. 6** Forms of community participation in Nam Dinh Province ranked using Sarzynski’s (2015) classification approach. The graph on the left-hand side was described by project implementers. The graph on the right-hand side was described by local community members (blank boxes mean no one mentioned that step). The middle column is the final ranking based on the characteristics of Sarzynski

to an individual official, and their choice can be influenced heavily by their conceptualisation of who is genuinely interested and has the capacity to be involved in making decisions.

Our data also suggested that the adaptation process in Nam Dinh Province was a traditional government-led model in which local communities played the role of followers in implementation (see Fig. 6). The level of participation here was at a tokenism level (Arnstein 1969), involving only informing and consulting and passive participation of the local community, as requested by the authorities. Of course, residents were free to make their own decisions by choosing to register for organised agriculture models or not; however, they had little ‘say’ on how the models should be implemented and simply followed the plan developed and agreed to by the project implementer(s) and local authorities.

Analogously, in Tra Vinh Province, local respondents communicated that they felt empowered when they joined interest groups or cooperatives that functioned as local institutions. For example, some respondents who were members of vegetable planting and chicken/duck raising groups stated that participating in a group enabled them to negotiate with either specialised agencies or agricultural material providers regarding crop calendars, prices for materials, and products. This indicates that the emergence of a new agency enables local farmers in Tra Vinh Province to gain power in negotiating resources and increasing their income. From a large-scale perspective, however, local farmers were still framed within a set of recommended adaptation measures, wherein they did not have the opportunity to discuss the problems, develop options, or even mobilise the resources that they needed. A group leader of a growing peanut group described the process of developing their proposal to obtain support from adaptation projects:

*It was always the most difficult part when applying for support, as we have many demands and expectations. But to get support, we must choose our priorities based on what the project offers. If we request something else, they would not be able to provide it for us.... You know, little is better than nothing..., when we receive support, particularly money, we can save our resources for other activities. (Interview, TV-LC 7)*

Explaining why local communities were absent from the beginning of the process, one practitioner in Tra Vinh Province cited the following:

*We collected information on their (farmers’) experiences and difficulties, then used our scientific knowledge to develop solutions. Such discussions were all about technical aspects, and it would be difficult for farmers to participate in such meetings (Interview, TV-P1).*

Some respondents in Nam Dinh also provided a similar comment. Regarding the selection criteria for participants in agricultural adaptation models, both agricultural extension officers and local authority respondent groups shared comments such as the following:

*We have to choose farmers who have a certain level of knowledge and education so that they can understand and be able to apply the new technique(s). These farmers would, in turn, share and instruct other farmers to apply the techniques that they have learnt. If we choose the poor or others, they may learn the technique but will not be able to share/instruct others. Thus, our models would not be expanded (Interview, ND-LA1).*

This portrays local farmers, particularly the poor, as incapable of doing anything but instead being passive support recipients. This results in a situation where those in power rob communities of opportunities to participate in the understanding and planning

processes of adaptation and position farmers as followers to merely implement their recommended options. However, rather than disputing what practitioners have to say, local farmers endorsed the decisions made by governmental bodies. As a result, local people feel powerless in developing or proposing alternative adaptive options. One of the farmers stated the following:

*We are just farmers working with plants and animals, so we only know about our farms. Macro-level strategies should be decided by the government... For any representatives from our commune to attend such meetings, they are mostly well-educated with good economic conditions (Interview, ND-LC10).*

In contrast, when facing hazards and impacts of unexpected change, with or without support from the government, affected people find their own ways to recover from losses, either by migrating to a city or industrial zones to find alternative jobs or changing their practices to minimise risks (Nguyen 2022; Chau and Ahamed 2022; Krauser et al. 2022). Those responses reflect the ability of local farmers to make choices that best suit their conditions. These contradictory realities reflect the effects of a hierarchical and authoritarian regime concerning how individuals think, feel, and act. The hierarchical structure with class-based differences persistently disempowers the general populace (Huang and Liu 2020; Lindegaard 2018, 2020), particularly farmers, who were considered the lowest class lacking the capacity to participate in government-led activities. Consequently, the discursive construction of climate subjects disempowers and prevents them from claiming their agency to participate in decision-making processes.

In short, as argued by Samaddar et al. (2019) and Calderón-Argelich et al. (2021), the participation level depends on how powerholders conceptualise and operationalise the idea of participation. This research advances this understanding by illustrating how different subjectivation processes lead to a weak level of participation. By examining stakeholders' perceptions and the general environment for community participation, we demonstrate how adaptive governance performs to preserve the 'leading roles' of the government, in other words, a hierarchical structure and 'obedience' by the public.

In Vietnam, the hierarchical socio-political structure creates a clear superior-subordinate relationship between governmental levels. The lower levels of government and the general public are expected to obey the higher levels of government in all circumstances (Lee and Gerner 2020). As a result, the higher-level government bodies have the authority to control decision-making processes and resources (Garschagen 2016; Lee and Gerner 2020; Tran and Rodela 2019), which, in turn, gives them a uniquely powerful role in deciding what should be prioritised and how to execute it. Therefore, adaptation planning falls under the traditional government-led climate planning type (Aleksandrova and Costella 2021; Amorim-Maia et al. 2022; Brink et al. 2023), where the public is informed or consulted, but not more than that, as described by Sarzynski (2015). In fact, local communities are largely regarded as powerless followers who are affected severely by climate change and need support in terms of knowledge, techniques, and finances to respond to negative impacts and recover from losses. This creates a subtle yet pervasive perception of local communities as less able to adapt to climate change.

#### 4.5 What drives subject-making under authoritarian regimes

The portrayal of the general population as victims or villains in government documents subtly creates the image of 'givers and receivers' between the government and local



farmers. The positioning of governmental bodies as champions with knowledge, resources, and capacity to support the ‘victims’ undoubtedly endorses the legitimate right of the government to hold power and make decisions on, control, and allocate resources for adaptation options. Meanwhile, the subject-making processes of local people as resourceless and lacking in knowledge undermine their capability and opportunity to participate in decision-making on adaptation, which corroborates other scholars’ findings (e.g. Brink et al. 2023; Garcia et al. 2020; Millner et al. 2020; Müller 2020). As a result, even though local people know their roles in adaptation processes, their perception of having low capacity inhibits them from actively taking adaptation measures (Sapiains et al. 2021). Therefore, the government still takes control over decision-making processes, while local communities passively participate in adaptation upon the government’s requests.

A subset of literature examining factors influencing subjectification processes and their interactions with one another to produce subjectivities has demonstrated diverse factors including but not limited to political structure, climate policies, social aspects, culture, intersectionality, and resources. For instance, critical scholars on power relations have highlighted that subject-making processes were strongly driven by the everyday operation of power, classes, and gender relations (Amorim-Maia et al. 2022; Garcia et al. 2020; Phan et al. 2019; Tschakert et al. 2016). In another context, some scholars argued that the lack of and internalisation of capabilities and resources on the side of communities sidelined vulnerable groups and constructed them as less likely or less able to adapt to climate change and heavily rely on support from outsiders (Burnham and Ma 2017; Grothmann&Patt 2005; Le et al. 2017). Examining the influence of governance structures, researchers have pointed out that the imposition of bureaucratic systems, professional and administrative institutions in general, negatively impacted the roles of stakeholders, especially affected communities by excluding them from decision-making (Aleksandrova and Costella 2021; Carmen et al. 2022; Funder&Mweemba 2019; Lindegaard 2020 Singto et al. 2018). These examples illustrate multiple factors that influence subjectivity in diverse ways. This begs the question of how and to what extent these factors intersect to shape subject-making and subjectivity.

In the context of the authoritarian regime in Vietnam, by examining climate policies and responses of stakeholders, this study highlights other hidden factors that drive subject-making processes. These factors include knowledge and skills relating to adaptation to climate change, Confucian traditions and expectations of obedience, centralised political structure or bureaucratic systems, power domination and institutional mechanisms, and self-efficacy towards roles and adaptive capacity. These factors intersect and drive one another in subject-making processes to (re)produce dominated subjectivities as a lack of capacity and/or being less likely to be able to adapt to climate change. Furthermore, as discussed in the previous sections, adaptation strategies that shaped the perceptions and actions of stakeholders, including local authorities, created crippling subjectivities of local communities, limited their roles and adaptive capacity, and ultimately minimised their participation in adaptation decision-making, as argued by Nguyen 2022 and Strange and colleagues 2023. Such interlaced relationships between policies, perception of implementing agencies, and community participation are further strengthened by intertwining socio-political, cultural, and institutional factors (Brink et al. 2023; Carmen et al. 2022; Lara García et al. 2022). For instance, the centralised political structures coupled with the Confucian traditions create obedience expectations and ‘givers and receivers’ relationships between the government and farmers. This interconnectedness somehow influences the self-efficacy of local communities that they downgrade their roles and capacity in climate change adaptation as demonstrated in the results presented in the previous sections.

Based on this research's empirical results and a subset of literature, we assume that there are hidden drivers that determine the (re)production of (dominated) subjectivities in authoritarian contexts. These hidden drivers enable government authorities and bureaucratic implementing agencies to continue to label local communities as less able or less likely to adapt to climate change. This emphasises the importance of understanding the dynamic intersection between various factors at the political and social structures that affect personal identity and subjectivity regarding knowledge, capacities, and assets among others (see Amorim-Maia et al. 2022; Brink et al. 2023; Garcia et al. 2022). This complexity requires more attention from scholarly communities to examine subjectification processes in dynamic intersections across multiple factors. This also draws attention to the importance of entrenched socio-political processes that continue to hold existing hindrances for (re)negotiating subjectivities and (re)distributing uneven power relations, as argued by Garcia et al. (2022). Insights into these complicated intersections within and intra-socio-political systems and how they affect collectives or individuals regarding internalising identity and subjectivity are critical to achieving more substantive changes.

## 5 Conclusion

This research examined dominant powers in the form of subject-making processes and subjectivities and their influence on community participation. The results revealed that, while subject-making may appear subtle, its impacts can be pervasive, limiting community participation in several ways. First, climate-related policies tended to label the general population as victims or villains while viewing government agencies as champions. This consequently disempowered local people while empowering government authorities to make decisions associated with adaptation processes unilaterally. Second, stakeholders' perceptions of local communities as having limited capacity, inadequate knowledge, skills, and tools; lacking financial and technical abilities; and unable to deal with unexpected climate events sidelined local roles and largely excluded community members from making climate-related decisions. Last, the traditional model of government-led climate adaptation planning and partial partnerships with targeted communities in terms of resource contribution for adaptation projects, as illustrated in the case of Nam Dinh, appeared to provide limited space for local communities to participate in decision-making when being asked to implement adaptation initiatives.

These results showed that, instead of supporting local adaptation efforts, crippling subject-making undermined local roles and capacity in undertaking adaptation initiatives. This perpetuates the power imbalance between local communities and different levels of government who consider community participation as purely implementing adaptation options, thus depriving communities of the opportunity to assert their voice and interests.

This study contributes to disentangling the unbalanced power distribution exacerbated under an authoritarian regime's (such as Vietnam's) hierarchical political structure, largely dominated by oppressive norms and a culture of superior and subordinate relations. The shaping of local communities by various perspectives has moulded their attitude towards themselves and their engagement (or lack thereof) in the decision-making behind government policies and implementing actions.

The culture of 'obedience', 'acting on requests', and 'givers and receivers' is worth noting when examining community participation in an authoritarian regime. This culture continuously takes away opportunities for community and stakeholder participation and

reinforces the imbalanced power relations between different levels of government and local communities. The subtle but pervasive expectation of the public to obey the government acts as a barrier to incorporating various stakeholders' perspectives on adaptation, particularly from those whose lives are directly affected by climate change.

Given the fact that climate change continues to impact people and requires inclusive responses from all stakeholders, it is necessary to understand the power dynamics that negatively affect the inclusion of local communities. This study, therefore, provides some recommendations and important lessons in improving participatory response to climate change. First, when developing adaptation strategies and plans, powerholders need to critically consider the use of language to avoid negative implications for local communities. Second, as subjectification processes take away opportunities for community participation, government bodies should create clearer mechanisms and institutions to engage communities in all processes of the adaptation framework. Here, a shift in hierarchical thinking towards a more decentralised political structure is essential to enable local communities to obtain more power and provide them with a better position to claim their agency by independently implementing adaptation.

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**Data availability** The data/code that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author (V. T. H.).

## Declarations

**Competing interests** The authors declare no competing interests.

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