Climate Action Against Disinformation

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Rain is Political and Other Climate Truths

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Abstract

In Uganda, particularly in Ngoma Sub-county, Ntungamo District located in the southwestern region, conversations about climate change are happening everywhere: in community meetings, on radio stations, among women's groups, in churches, in political spaces, and across social media. However, many people do not recognize that what they are discussing is climate change. They notice irregular rainfall and other environmental changes, but still struggle to link them to the broader climate crisis. At the same time, these conversations are often shaped by misinformation and disinformation. Politicians, religious leaders, and influential actors exploit cultural norms and the vulnerability of farmers to advance their interests, benefiting from climate solutions such as carbon markets, while manipulating public opinion and the democratic process.

This research seeks to understand how mis and disinformation narratives spread and how they influence farmers' participation in climate action and resilience-building. Through interviews with primarily female farmers, youth leaders, religious and cultural leaders, and elders, combined with an analysis of online content, it showcases how climate disinformation is not an abstract issue; it is actively shaping how people think, act, and respond to the climate crisis. False claims such as "Climate change nebba bazungu" (meaning climate change is a Western agenda) or "carbon markets nebiki!, nibenda kutukoloniza nk'ebiro ebyahise" (meaning: what are carbon markets? those white people want to colonize us again) create mistrust and delay action. Other narratives, such as portraying droughts as "divine punishment," replace scientific understanding with fatalism.

This research demonstrates that countering these narratives requires not only accurate information, but also trust-building, youth engagement, and communication strategies that connect with the real experiences of Ugandans, especially in the western part of the country.

Introduction

Climate change shows itself in the droughts that dry our fields, the floods that wash away homes, and the shrinking pastures that leave cattle without food. Yet, in the middle of these struggles, disinformation and misinformation shape the way communities respond. Some dismiss the crisis as a foreign agenda, others lose hope because they cannot separate truth from rumor, and many believe it is a divine punishment. Even worse, politicians often exploit the situation for their own benefit. While seeking votes, they sow and amplify confusion, using climate promises as campaign tools and offering quick fixes like tree planting, without understanding or explaining climate finance mechanisms such as carbon markets.

This study seeks to ask: *How do politicians abuse climate solutions while misinforming farmers about climate change, and what are the consequences for local communities?* It also considers how cultural and religious narratives, such as framing disasters as punishment from God or ancestral spirits, further complicate adaptation. The goal is to show how disinformation undermines resilience and to suggest practical ways forward, including engaging trusted community figures such as faith and cultural leaders.

Literature review

Climate disinformation is an existential risk to many on the African continent. Researchers like Lewandowsky et al. (2020) observe that misinformation undermines people and decelerates reactions. Attacks on information integrity decrease support for effective mitigation strategies and limit effective adaptation methods that focus on protecting people and the planet.

The implementation of climate projects is at times used by political players in Africa as a form of personal or political interest. Nhamo and Muchuru (2019), in Climate Change and Carbon Markets in Africa: Issues and Policy Implications (Springer Climate), demonstrate how carbon markets and climate finance are positioned as a kind of foreign intervention, which leads to mistrust. According to CAN-U (2025), when the benefits of such projects are not clear, communities tend to perceive them as unfair or neo-colonial. In Uganda, political leaders also exploit climate projects such as tree planting or green jobs initiatives for political gain. In this context, the urgency of the climate crisis is further compromised by misinformation and disinformation, meaning the climate action that we all so desperately require continues to be postponed—possibly to the point of never materializing.

Perceptions are also shaped by religion and culture. Jenkins et al. (2018) and Green Faith Africa (2023), in *Faith for Earth: Mobilizing Religious Leadership on Climate Change,* demonstrate that faith may inspire action but may also encourage fatalism. The droughts and floods in Western Uganda are occasionally perceived as either *kushesha kwa Ruhanga* (godly wrath) or ancestral frustrations (Muganda et al., 2022). These ideologies undermine the concept of adapting through science and, in some cases, overlap with politics when politicians present themselves as defenders of localized climate policies.

Digital media also enhances the spread of misinformation. According to BBC Africa Eye (2023) and Africa Check, Facebook, WhatsApp, and TikTok promote false information on the use of seeds, fertilizers, and weather, negatively affecting rural farmers, particularly women. As demonstrated by UNDP (2024), this intensifies soil erosion and financial loss, widening the gap between evidence-based adaptation and survival-oriented choices.

Uganda, like many other countries, is susceptible to climate disinformation through political, cultural and moral narratives --especially in rural areas, that function via trust, authority and survival.

Very little research is done on the direct impact of these stories on the farmers. This study fills this research gap by targeting Ngoma Sub-county, Ntungamo District and examining the role of political, religious and digital factors in forming the local climate action and resiliency. Highlighting how narratives are rooted in history and sovereignty debates for example framing carbon markets as colonialism. At the same time, local beliefs often interpret droughts or floods as divine punishment or ancestral anger. These explanations make it harder to link climate events to human actions and science based adaptation. This work attempts to bridge this gap by focusing on those affected directly who sit at the intersection of politics, religion and climate vulnerability daily.

Methodology

This study has been carried out using a qualitative approach. Data has been collected through one to one interviews. One on one interviews were chosen because they are more personal and allow for a connection with people, feel their emotions and get deeper, more honest stories around their lived experiences. This method helps easily draw information from them compared to questionnaires. Youth, religious leaders and farmers were selected because they play key roles that youth drive change easily, religious leaders influence, guide the community and farmers are directly affected by community and climate issues with farmers, youth leaders, religious and cultural leaders. Each group consisted of about ten participants. This report will also analyse political speeches, media coverage and social media platforms, with a focus on Tiktok and radio through a thematic analysis to identify common narratives and their effects. Special attention was put on how disinformation differs between rural farmers (who rely more on radio, churches and political rallies) and digitally active youth (who encounter misinformation on social media). For example, some of the common narratives that were identified were things such as farmers believing that “climate change is punishment from God” or that “modern seeds cause famine on radio stations” and youth being misled by exaggerated farming claims on social media and TV programs. This showed how disinformation spreads differently. Rural farmers rely on radio, churches and political rallies, while digitally active youth encounter it mainly through social media platforms and online influencers.

Results

1. **Farmers**

Profile: Most farmers interviewed were aged 30–60, roughly balanced between men and women though more women, primarily engaged in subsistence and small-scale commercial farming in Ngoma.

In some communities, droughts and floods are seen as punishments from gods or signs of ancestral spirits, leading people to turn away from scientific explanations. Clan leaders known as "Abamuzi" are believed to control rainfall. People still call them to "withhold rain" for ceremonies, showing how traditional beliefs continue to shape community responses.

Most people in Rukungiri expressed themselves boldly in English: "Barya bazungu bakwenda kuturya bundi bushaho n'ebyo eby'okubaita carbon markets," which directly translates to creating suspicion about global climate finance mechanisms.

Many believe that "Planting trees alone will solve everything," showing how some communities oversimplify the crisis and ignore broader adaptation needs.

2. **Youth**

Profile: Digitally active youth aged 18–30, mostly students or young entrepreneurs, accessed climate information primarily via social media (TikTok, Facebook) and online TV programs.

Youth were misled by exaggerated farming success stories or unrealistic claims about modern seeds and techniques.

Young people questioned global climate talks and felt challenged by resistance from older community members, thinking "what can a young person do?"

3. **Religious Leaders**

Profile: Pastors and faith leaders from different denominations, mostly aged 40–60, actively involved in local congregations in Kashenyi and surrounding areas.

One pastor linked unreliable rainfall to ungodly acts and quoted 1 Kings 17:1 (Elijah announces a drought). People believed this message deeply, showing how faith leaders can shape understanding of climate change through religious framing.

4. Media

Women farmers complained that TV and radio programs like "Obuhingi Nobullisa" exaggerated farming success stories. When they tried the same methods, results were poor, causing disappointment and loss of confidence in climate information.

Authority Figures

These narratives are being spread by political speeches, religious sermons, and local leaders. Their impact is wide since people strongly believe in these figures:

- Politicians in Ngoma encouraged people to plant eucalyptus trees and commercial crops like chili without research on soil type or rainfall. When crops failed, people lost trust and started believing leaders only use climate projects for votes.
- Religious leaders frame climate events as divine punishment, influencing both farmers and congregants.
- Traditional leaders continue practices like withholding or calling rain through ceremonies, maintaining traditional control over environmental understanding.

This shows how authority figures act as key nodes for spreading climate narratives and shaping beliefs differently across farmers, youth and religious communities.

Discussion

These findings speak of trends globally but highlight Uganda's situation where disinformation intersects with politics, religion and local struggles.

Political Manipulation

Politicians do manipulate climate solutions using tree planting –especially eucalyptus, agricultural seeds, carbon markets and subsidies –as campaign promises, while spreading misleading claims that serve their electoral interests while effectively greenwashing. This finding came up from field interviews conducted in Ngoma subcounty, where several of the people described how politicians use environmental projects for

political visibility. One participant explained, "Planting trees alone will solve everything," showing how eucalyptus tree planting is often promoted as a complete climate solution even in their area where it killed the soils. Another respondent added that politicians promise "farm subsidies and carbon projects that will bring money to farmers," but these rarely happen after elections.

Religious and Cultural Narratives

Religious and cultural explanations add another layer of complexity. When a flood is interpreted as divine punishment or a drought as ancestral anger, it becomes harder to link those events to climate change and adaptation measures. For instance, in the field interviews in Ngoma, several community members referred to the 2019 flood that destroyed gardens and homes near River Rwizi which flows in the neighboring district Kiruhura. One elder said, "Ekyo nikyo kizibu kyaitu, Ruhanga yatukubira orubaju kubw'okugaya," meaning "That flood was God's punishment because people have become disobedient." These made it difficult for many residents to connect the such to environmental degradation or changing rainfall patterns, limiting discussion on climate adaptation and preparedness (Field Interviews, Ngoma, 2025), which beliefs are powerful because they guide daily life and decision-making, which means addressing them requires sensitivity and respect as much as scientific clarity.

Youth and Local Initiatives

The study also revealed hope: youth groups and local organizations are actively debunking false claims when they have access to tools and information. For example, Kawodi, a Women Development Initiative Chairperson, said that she receives messages on farming solutions from a TV program of "Obuhingi Nobullisa" on TV West. This shows that when such platforms are well used and information verified, they can help farmers and community members learn better and avoid false claims.

Limitations

Limitations of the study include language platforms. Much of Uganda's conversation happens in local languages, and future research should look more closely at how misinformation spreads in those spaces. Language barriers in research make it hard to moderate disinformation on social media platforms. This means that most disinformation

is actually spread by community members and actors within the community through word of mouth

Conclusion

Climate disinformation in Uganda is not background noise sometimes not realised as something affecting the community but it does. It actively shapes decisions. For example, in Ngoma, a local female farmer says that when one of the contesting politicians supplied her with maize seeds for planting, the harvest was fair. However, when she tried to plant the maize in the following season using the seeds from the harvest, no germination took place, and yet she had phased out her traditional medicine seed, which she used to plant season after season. As a result of this, she experienced a seasonal famine in her family.

This shows how political misinformation shapes agricultural decisions, policies and behaviors. For example, people largely believe it is ancestral punishment or it is the gods who are angry with them while some are completely dependent on political promises even though they have waited for over 20 years now, though there are those that have studied their soils and plants and are flourishing which is the minority.

A local youth councillor in Ngoma sub-county, still in Ntungamo district, says when one of the politicians encouraged tree planting and supplied eucalyptus trees to the people at Kashenyi parish, little did he research and know about the adaptability of this particular type of tree in this area. As the community embraced the programme with vigour, the underlying rock did not support the trees' roots to go deep, and the trees died.

According to one farmer, a mother of five in Bunyusya cell, Kashenyi parish in Ntungamo district, she confessed that after being convinced by an NGO belonging to one of the incumbent politicians to grow chili and hot pepper for income generation, the activity required regular use of herbicides and pesticides due to the hot temperature in this dry corridor area, which supports vector multiplication. When the activity did not turn out to her expectations, she decided to grow the traditional crops familiar to her. The soil on her five-acre piece of land turned out to be very infertile, and due to the overuse of the pesticides and herbicides, farming has turned out to be very costly on her farm, as she's required to purchase more fertilizer before realising fair yields.

These stories show how compelling storytelling told by community leaders and farmers helps policymakers understand the realities on the ground and consult with communities on what works best before introducing any intervention. When we remain silent it risks slowing down our climate response at the very moment we need it most.

Recommendations rooted in community practices:

- Investing in climate literacy programs for youth and rural communities especially the women for example of a TV program on TV west Obuhingi Nobullisa.
- Building partnerships between media, researchers and civil society to stop false information early greatly helps the communities to have the right information with each party playing its own role from media spreading the information to researchers giving accurate information with evidence, which the civil society helps share with ease.
- Supporting negotiators and policymakers with communication tools grounded in science, but told in relatable ways is important because it helps people to see themselves in the stories.
- Expanding future research into local language misinformation and disinformation and cross-country studies across East Africa while translating the information to these different languages.