Volume 3 Issue 1

International Journal of Social Work and Development Studies (IJSDS)

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL WORK
FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
RIVERS STATE UNIVERSITY
EMOHUA CAMPUS, P.M.B 5080, PORT HARCOURT
RIVERS STATE NIGERIA

Vol. 3. Issue 1.
ISSN: 3115-6940
EISSN: 3115-6932

International Journal of Social Work and Development Studies (IJSDS)

Vol 3 Issue 1

editor@ijsds.org

www.ijsds.org

editor.ijsds@gmail.com

+234 808 022 4405

Vol. 3. Issue 1.
ISSN: 3115-6940
EISSN: 3115-6932

ECOSOCIAL RESILIENCE THEORY: OPPORTUNITIES FOR SUSTAINABILITY IN THE NIGER DELTA

Professor Mina Margaret Ogbanga[1]

[1]Department of Social Work and Gender Studies Rivers State University, Port Harcourt, Nigeria

[1]*mina.ogbanga@ust.edu.ng*

Corresponding author: *mina.ogbanga@ust.edu.ng*

DOI: https://doi.org/10.67007/ijsds-2026-v3_i1_001

© 2026 The Author(s). Open Access under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) · ISSN 3115-6940 | eISSN 3115-6932

Vol. 3. Issue 1.
ISSN: 3115-6940
EISSN: 3115-6932

ABSTRACT

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria stands at a complex crossroads of ecological devastation, social marginalisation, and deepening climate vulnerability. Decades of petroleum extraction have left behind a landscape scarred by oil spills, gas flaring, and habitat destruction, while the communities dependent on these ecosystems for their livelihoods and cultural identity continue to bear disproportionate burdens of poverty, displacement, and violence. This paper proposes and elaborates the Ecosocial Resilience Theory (ERT) as a framework for rethinking sustainability responses in this context. Drawing from ecosocial work, systems theory, political ecology, and community-based participatory research, ERT posits that true sustainability in the Niger Delta must integrate ecological restoration with social equity, community agency, cultural revitalisation, and structural reform. The paper articulates the theoretical foundations of ERT, maps its five core pillars, examines its empirical relevance to Niger Delta communities, and identifies strategic opportunities for applying ERT across social work practice, policy, and advocacy. It concludes that ERT offers a transformative pathway for rebuilding the human-nature relationship in one of Africa's most contested and ecologically sensitive regions.

Keywords: Ecosocial Resilience Theory, Niger Delta, sustainability, eco-social work, environmental justice, community resilience, ecological restoration, political ecology

Vol. 3. Issue 1.
ISSN: 3115-6940
EISSN: 3115-6932

1. INTRODUCTION

The Niger Delta is one of the most biologically productive and ecologically sensitive regions on the African continent. Spanning approximately 70,000 square kilometres across nine Nigerian states, it encompasses tropical rainforests, freshwater swamps, mangrove ecosystems, and coastal marine environments. It is home to an estimated 30–35 million people belonging to diverse ethnic nationalities, including the Ijaw, Ogoni, Itsekiri, Urhobo, Isoko, Efik, and many others. For millennia, these communities have built intricate relationships with the land, water, and forest systems that surround them, deriving food, medicine, spiritual meaning, and cultural identity from the natural environment.

Yet the Niger Delta today presents a paradox of catastrophic proportions. The region sits atop one of the largest crude oil reserves in Africa. Since commercial oil production began in 1956, the Niger Delta has generated trillions of dollars in petroleum revenues that have fuelled Nigeria's national economy and enriched transnational oil corporations. In exchange, Niger Delta communities have received environmental devastation on a scale that remains difficult to fully quantify. Oil spills numbering in the thousands have poisoned rivers, destroyed farmland, killed marine life, and contaminated drinking water. Gas flaring—one of the most egregious and persistent of these harms—has continued for decades despite regulatory prohibitions, releasing toxic compounds into the atmosphere and contributing disproportionately to Nigeria's greenhouse gas emissions. Habitat destruction has accelerated loss of biodiversity. Deforestation has stripped mangrove forests that once served as natural buffers against coastal flooding.

The social consequences of this ecological destruction are equally severe. Fishing and farming communities that once achieved self-sufficiency through sustainable use of natural resources have been rendered food insecure. Youth unemployment has driven many into militancy, oil bunkering, or outward migration. Women and girls face amplified gender-based vulnerability, including loss of access to forest resources, increased unpaid care burdens, and higher exposure to violence in contexts of conflict and displacement. The institutions of governance — federal, state, and local — have largely failed these communities, and decades of civil society agitation for resource justice have yielded limited structural change.

It is within this context that this paper proposes the Ecosocial Resilience Theory (ERT) as a new theoretical framework for conceptualising and pursuing sustainability in the Niger Delta. ERT is not merely an academic exercise. It is a response to the urgent necessity of moving beyond fragmentary interventions — remediation projects here, social welfare programmes there — toward an integrated, community-grounded, and structurally attentive model of transformation. The paper is organised as follows: Section 2 reviews the theoretical landscape that informs ERT. Section 3 articulates the theory's core architecture. Section 4 situates ERT within the specific context of the Niger Delta. Section 5 explores practical opportunities for applying ERT. Section 6 addresses limitations and future directions. Section 7 concludes the paper.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 ECOSOCIAL WORK AND THE HUMAN-NATURE NEXUS

The theoretical antecedents of ERT are diverse and interdisciplinary. At its foundation lies the growing field of ecosocial work, which challenges the anthropocentric orientation of mainstream social work by situating human wellbeing within ecological systems. Ecosocial work reframes the fundamental mission of social work — enhancing individual and community wellbeing — by asserting that social wellbeing is inseparable from ecological health. Scholars such as Dominelli (2012) and Gray et al. (2013) have been instrumental in developing this perspective, arguing that social work must expand its

Vol. 3. Issue 1.
ISSN: 3115-6940
EISSN: 3115-6932

lens from the social environment to include the natural environment as a constitutive dimension of human experience.

The ecosocial perspective draws directly on systems theory, particularly the concept of open and interdependent systems advanced by von Bertalanffy (1968). In ecological terms, this translates into the understanding that communities are not bounded social units but dynamic nodes within larger socio-ecological systems. The health of a fishing village in the Niger Delta cannot be understood apart from the health of the mangroves and creeks on which villagers depend, nor from the global petroleum markets and regulatory architectures that determine what happens to those ecosystems.

2.2 POLITICAL ECOLOGY AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

Political ecology provides a second essential pillar for ERT. Unlike conventional ecology, which may treat environmental problems as primarily technical or natural phenomena, political ecology insists on understanding ecological conditions through the lens of power, history, and political economy. Blaikie and Brookfield (1987) pioneered this approach, demonstrating that land degradation in the Global South cannot be explained without examining colonial legacies, land tenure systems, and the structural inequalities that shape access to and control over natural resources.

In the Niger Delta context, political ecology directs attention to how petroleum capitalism has created what Watts (2004) terms a "resource curse"—a situation in which resource abundance paradoxically produces poverty, conflict, and underdevelopment. The theory also illuminates the racialised and colonial dimensions of environmental harm: the communities bearing the environmental costs of oil extraction are predominantly Black, rural, and politically marginalised, while the beneficiaries are overwhelmingly distant — transnational corporations, national elites, and Global North consumers of petroleum products.

Environmental justice theory (Bullard, 1990; Schlosberg, 2007) adds a normative dimension to this analysis. It insists that the distribution of environmental harms is not ethically neutral but reflects and reinforces systemic injustice. Environmental justice frameworks demand not only remediation of environmental damage but recognition of affected communities as rights-bearing subjects, equitable distribution of environmental benefits and burdens, and meaningful participation by communities in decisions that affect their ecological surroundings.

2.3 RESILIENCE THEORY

Resilience theory, initially developed in ecology (Holling, 1973) and subsequently extended to social-ecological systems (Walker et al., 2004), provides a third foundational stream. Resilience, in the socio-ecological literature, refers not merely to the ability to 'bounce back' from disturbance but to the capacity of a system to absorb change, reorganise, and continue developing along a positive trajectory. This conception of resilience is dynamic rather than static, and transformative rather than merely adaptive.

The distinction between adaptive resilience and transformative resilience is particularly significant for ERT. Adaptive resilience involves adjusting behaviours and practices to cope with existing conditions, while transformative resilience involves fundamental restructuring of the social, economic, and ecological arrangements that produce vulnerability in the first place (Folke et al., 2010). For Niger Delta communities whose vulnerability is produced not by natural limits but by systemic exploitation, adaptive resilience is insufficient. What is required is a form of resilience that challenges the structural drivers of ecological and social harm — a form that ERT seeks to theorise and operationalise.

2.4 COMMUNITY-BASED PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH AND INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

A fourth stream informing ERT is community-based participatory research (CBPR) and the valorisation of indigenous and local knowledge (ILK). CBPR, as

Vol. 3. Issue 1.
ISSN: 3115-6940
EISSN: 3115-6932

articulated by Minkler and Wallerstein (2003), emphasises genuine partnership between researchers and communities in defining research questions, designing methodologies, collecting and interpreting data, and translating findings into action. It challenges extractive research models that harvest knowledge from communities without returning benefit to them.

Indigenous and local knowledge systems in the Niger Delta — including traditional ecological knowledge, community-based resource governance institutions, and cultural practices that encode sustainable relationships with nature — have been systematically devalued and displaced by colonial modernity and petroleum capitalism. ERT insists on the recovery and integration of these knowledge systems, not as romantic nostalgia, but as epistemically valid and practically effective resources for ecological restoration and community resilience.

3. ECOSOCIAL RESILIENCE THEORY: FRAMEWORK AND ARCHITECTURE

3.1 FOUNDATIONAL PREMISE

Ecosocial Resilience Theory is grounded in the proposition that ecological resilience and social resilience are mutually constitutive and cannot be addressed separately. The ecological and social are not parallel tracks that occasionally intersect; they are woven together in the everyday lives of communities, in the cultural practices that encode environmental knowledge, in the material dependencies that make survival possible, and in the power structures that determine who flourishes and who suffers. ERT therefore rejects any approach to sustainability that treats ecological restoration as a technical project separable from questions of social justice, political power, and community agency.

ERT further insists that resilience in the Niger Delta context must be oriented toward transformation, not mere adaptation. Given the depth of ecological destruction and social marginalisation that Niger Delta communities have endured, approaches that aim only at helping communities cope with or adjust to existing conditions are fundamentally inadequate. Sustainability, in the ERT framework, means not just the survival of communities and ecosystems but their regeneration — the restoration of productive, dignified, and self-determined lives within healthy and biodiverse ecosystems.

3.2 THE FIVE PILLARS OF ERT

ERT is structured around five interconnected pillars, each of which represents both a theoretical proposition and a domain of practical engagement.

The first pillar is Ecological Integrity. Ecological integrity refers to the capacity of an ecosystem to maintain its characteristic structures, functions, and biodiversity in the face of stress and disturbance. In the Niger Delta context, ecological integrity has been severely compromised by oil pollution, gas flaring, deforestation, and coastal erosion. Restoring ecological integrity is not simply an environmental priority; it is a social justice imperative, because the livelihoods, food security, health, and cultural vitality of Niger Delta communities are directly dependent on functional ecosystems. ERT posits that ecological integrity cannot be achieved through remediation projects alone; it requires the cessation of ongoing pollution, accountability by corporate actors, and restoration of natural ecological processes through community-led conservation and regeneration initiatives.

The second pillar is Social Equity. ERT holds that sustainability is impossible without addressing the structural inequalities that concentrate vulnerability among the poorest and most marginalised members of Niger Delta communities. This includes gender inequalities that leave women more exposed to environmental harms and less able to participate in governance and decision-making; economic inequalities that make poor fishing and farming households most vulnerable to livelihood disruption; and ethnic and political marginalisation that excludes Niger Delta communities from meaningful benefit-sharing and policy influence. Social equity in the ERT

Vol. 3. Issue 1.
ISSN: 3115-6940
EISSN: 3115-6932

framework is not merely about redistributing resources; it is about transforming the power relations that produce and perpetuate inequality.

The third pillar is Community Agency. Community agency refers to the capacity of communities to act as purposeful subjects in shaping their own futures, rather than passive objects of external intervention. In the context of Niger Delta sustainability, this means enabling communities to participate meaningfully in environmental governance, hold polluters accountable, advocate for their rights, and design and implement solutions grounded in their own knowledge and values. ERT draws from the traditions of participatory action research, community organising, and critical pedagogy to insist that communities must be the primary architects of sustainability initiatives, not merely beneficiaries.

The fourth pillar is Cultural Revitalisation. Culture is not an epiphenomenon of material conditions; it is a constitutive dimension of community identity, social organisation, and ecological relationship. Niger Delta communities possess rich cultural traditions that encode sustainable practices, environmental ethics, and governance institutions. These traditions have been eroded by colonialism, petroleum capitalism, and the cultural disruptions of militancy and displacement. ERT argues that cultural revitalisation — the recovery, affirmation, and renewal of indigenous practices, languages, and knowledge systems — is an essential component of ecological and social resilience. Cultural vitality sustains the social bonds, collective identity, and ecological knowledge that communities need to navigate and recover from environmental crisis.

The fifth pillar is Structural Reform. The four preceding pillars cannot be fully realised without addressing the structural conditions — legal, regulatory, economic, and political — that produced and continue to reproduce the Niger Delta crisis. Structural reform in the ERT framework encompasses corporate accountability for environmental damage, reform of the legal frameworks governing resource extraction and environmental remediation, equitable fiscal arrangements that ensure Niger Delta communities receive a fair share of petroleum revenues, and transformation of governance structures to enable genuine community participation. ERT aligns itself with advocacy traditions in social work and social movements that insist on systemic change as a precondition for sustainable community wellbeing.

3.3 DYNAMICS AND INTERRELATIONSHIPS

The five pillars of ERT are not independent variables that can be addressed in isolation. They are dynamically interconnected in ways that can produce virtuous cycles of resilience or vicious cycles of degradation. A community whose ecological base is healthy (ecological integrity) is better positioned to maintain food security and livelihoods, which reduces social stress and creates conditions for collective action (social equity and community agency). Cultural revitalisation supports ecological knowledge and community cohesion, which enhances the capacity for both conservation and advocacy. Structural reforms create enabling environments for all of the above.

Conversely, ecological destruction undermines food security and livelihoods, exacerbates social inequalities, fragments communities, erodes cultural practices, and reinforces political marginalisation. The Niger Delta crisis is itself an illustration of how these negative dynamics compound one another. ERT therefore insists on integrated, multi-dimensional interventions rather than single-issue approaches.

4. ERT IN THE NIGER DELTA CONTEXT

4.1 ECOLOGICAL CONDITIONS

The ecological conditions of the Niger Delta make the application of ERT both urgent and complex. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP, 2011) produced a landmark assessment of Ogoniland — one of the most heavily polluted areas in the Niger Delta — that documented hydrocarbon contamination in soil and groundwater at levels rendering entire communities unfit for habitation or agriculture. The UNEP report found that some communities had been drinking water

Vol. 3. Issue 1.
ISSN: 3115-6940
EISSN: 3115-6932

contaminated with benzene — a known carcinogen — at levels 900 times above World Health Organization guidelines. Although the Ogoni Clean-Up project was formally launched in 2019, progress has been slow and incomplete, and pollution continues across the broader Niger Delta.

Beyond oil pollution, the Niger Delta faces accelerating impacts of climate change, including sea level rise, increased flooding, coastal erosion, and changing rainfall patterns that affect agricultural cycles. These climate impacts compound existing ecological stressors, creating what scholars have described as a double ecological burden. Mangrove forests — which serve as nurseries for fish species, buffers against storm surges, and significant carbon sinks — have been dramatically reduced in extent by pollution, deforestation, and coastal development. The loss of mangroves has cascading effects on fish populations, coastal protection, and carbon sequestration.

4.2 SOCIAL CONDITIONS

The social conditions of the Niger Delta are equally challenging. Poverty rates in Niger Delta states, despite proximity to enormous petroleum wealth, remain among the highest in Nigeria. Infrastructure deficits — including inadequate roads, hospitals, schools, and potable water systems — are chronic. Youth unemployment is severe and has historically been associated with recruitment into armed militant groups and oil theft syndicates. The violence of the militant insurgency period (roughly 2005–2009) left lasting traumas on communities and further degraded ecological conditions through pipeline bombings and oil spills.

Women in the Niger Delta face compounded vulnerabilities. They are primary users of natural resources for food production, water collection, and fuelwood gathering, making them disproportionately affected by environmental degradation. They face higher risks of gender-based violence in conflict contexts. They are largely excluded from the political and governance structures that make decisions about petroleum revenues and environmental policy. Yet women are also among the most persistent and creative actors in community-based resilience, organising protests, managing community food systems, and maintaining the cultural and social fabric of communities under stress.

Indigenous governance systems—including traditional leadership institutions, community associations, and customary resource management arrangements—retain significance in many Niger Delta communities but have been weakened by decades of external interference, co-optation by state and corporate actors, and the disruptive effects of conflict. The revitalisation of these institutions, within a framework that affirms women's participation and human rights, is an important dimension of community agency as envisioned by ERT.

4.3 APPLYING ERT PILLARS TO NIGER DELTA REALITIES

The application of ERT's ecological integrity pillar in the Niger Delta begins with the acknowledgement that remediation cannot wait for the cessation of pollution. Multi-phase restoration programmes must simultaneously address legacy contamination, prevent new spills through regulatory enforcement, and invest in active ecological restoration — including replanting of mangroves, bioremediation of soils, and restoration of aquatic habitats. Community-based ecological monitoring systems, drawing on traditional ecological knowledge, can provide real-time data and early warning systems that supplement (and sometimes surpass) the capacity of government regulators.

Social equity in the Niger Delta context requires confronting both the legacy of extraction-driven impoverishment and the ongoing inequalities that structure community life. Social protection programmes targeted at communities most affected by ecological damage, gender-responsive approaches to livelihood restoration, and equitable benefit-sharing mechanisms are all necessary. ERT does not view social equity

Vol. 3. Issue 1.
ISSN: 3115-6940
EISSN: 3115-6932

initiatives as charitable assistance; they are investments in the social capital and collective capability that communities need to drive their own resilience.

Community agency in the Niger Delta must be supported through deliberate capacity-building investments: training community leaders in environmental law and rights advocacy, supporting the documentation and transmission of indigenous ecological knowledge, creating platforms for community voices in policy processes, and funding community-based organisations that can sustain long-term engagement. The history of external-led "development" in the Niger Delta — including Global Memoranda of Understanding (GMoUs) managed by oil companies — suggests that community agency requires not just consultation but genuine control over resources and decision-making.

Cultural revitalisation in the Niger Delta context can take many forms: the documentation and revitalisation of traditional ecological management practices, the integration of indigenous knowledge into formal educational curricula, support for cultural festivals and ceremonies that reinforce ecological stewardship values, and the use of storytelling, art, and music as vehicles for transmitting environmental knowledge across generations. Cultural revitalisation is not only intrinsically valuable; it is strategically important because it rebuilds the social bonds and shared identity that undergird collective action.

Structural reform requires sustained advocacy at multiple levels: corporate accountability through improved enforcement of the Petroleum Industry Act and existing environmental regulations; fiscal reform to increase state and local government allocations from petroleum revenues; judicial reform to improve communities' access to environmental justice; and political reform to increase the representation of Niger Delta communities and women in decision-making bodies. International dimensions of structural reform include advocacy for stronger due diligence obligations on transnational oil companies and accountability mechanisms at the level of international human rights law.

5. OPPORTUNITIES FOR APPLYING ERT

5.1 SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

The Ecosocial Resilience Theory offers rich opportunities for reorienting social work practice in the Niger Delta. Conventional social work in Nigeria, as in much of sub-Saharan Africa, has been dominated by individually-oriented casework and welfare provision — important but insufficient responses to the structurally produced crises of Niger Delta communities. ERT calls for a more expansive practice model in which social workers function as ecological advocates, community organisers, knowledge brokers, and policy influencers, in addition to their roles as direct service providers.

In practice, this means social workers developing ecological literacy — understanding the ecosystems in which communities are embedded and the ways in which environmental change affects social wellbeing. It means integrating environmental assessments into community and family practice, identifying how pollution, resource loss, and climate impacts are affecting clients' lives, and connecting ecological advocacy to social support. It means working alongside communities to document environmental damage, build cases for corporate accountability, and access environmental remediation funds.

University-based social work clinics, such as the RSU Social Work Clinic being developed at Rivers State University's Emohua campus, represent important institutional platforms for this kind of practice. Situated within a community that has experienced ecological disruption and social stress, the clinic can provide an integrated service model that addresses psychosocial needs while also supporting community-based ecological monitoring, rights advocacy, and livelihood regeneration. The clinic can serve as a living laboratory for ERT, generating evidence about what integrated

Vol. 3. Issue 1.
ISSN: 3115-6940
EISSN: 3115-6932

ecosocial practice looks like in a Niger Delta context and training new generations of social workers in this approach.

5.2 EDUCATION AND CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

One of the most significant opportunities for ERT lies in curriculum development within social work education. Currently, social work programmes in Nigerian universities — including Rivers State University — offer limited content on environmental social work, political ecology, or community-based resource management. Integrating ERT into social work curricula would equip graduates with the theoretical frameworks, analytical tools, and practical competencies to address the ecological dimensions of social problems.

Curriculum development inspired by ERT should include courses on ecosocial work theory and practice, environmental justice and advocacy, indigenous and local knowledge systems, community-based environmental monitoring, climate justice and gender, and social work in the context of extractive industries. Field placements in communities affected by oil pollution, mangrove degradation, or climate-induced flooding would provide students with experiential learning that connects classroom theory to community reality. Interdisciplinary collaboration with environmental science, law, geography, and public health programmes would enrich the ecosocial curriculum.

Beyond formal degree programmes, continuing professional development workshops for practising social workers, community health workers, and community development officers can rapidly disseminate ERT principles and tools. Peer learning networks, including regional social work associations and online platforms, can support ongoing professional development and knowledge-sharing among practitioners working in ecologically stressed communities across the Niger Delta and beyond.

5.3 RESEARCH AND KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

ERT offers a productive framework for a new generation of research on the Niger Delta that integrates social and ecological dimensions of community life. Community-based participatory research (CBPR) methods are particularly well-suited to this agenda, enabling researchers and community members to co-produce knowledge about the ecological and social dynamics of their communities, the impacts of environmental degradation on wellbeing, and the effectiveness of community-led resilience initiatives.

Priority research areas identified by ERT include longitudinal studies of the psychosocial impacts of oil pollution on children and women; documentation of indigenous ecological knowledge systems and their relevance to contemporary restoration challenges; evaluation of community-based mangrove restoration and biodiversity conservation initiatives; analysis of the gendered dimensions of climate vulnerability and resilience in Niger Delta communities; and assessment of the effectiveness of different policy instruments — including corporate liability frameworks, environmental funds, and fiscal reform mechanisms — in advancing ecological and social resilience.

Collaboration between Nigerian universities, international research institutions, civil society organisations, and community groups can leverage complementary expertise and resources for this research agenda. Open-access publication, community dissemination events, and policy briefs can ensure that research findings reach the diverse audiences — community members, practitioners, policymakers, and advocates — who can translate them into action.

5.4 POLICY ADVOCACY

ERT provides a coherent framework for policy advocacy at local, national, and international levels. At the local level, social workers and community organisations informed by ERT can advocate for community-controlled environmental monitoring systems, improved health services for communities

Vol. 3. Issue 1.
ISSN: 3115-6940
EISSN: 3115-6932

living with toxic contamination, and the integration of ecological considerations into local government development planning.

At the national level, ERT-informed advocacy can target the full implementation of the Petroleum Industry Act 2021, particularly its Host Community Development Trust provisions; strengthening of the National Environmental Standards and Regulations Enforcement Agency (NESREA); reform of the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) to ensure transparent and community-driven allocation of development resources; and the development of a comprehensive Niger Delta Ecological Restoration Strategy that integrates social equity and community participation objectives.

Internationally, ERT-informed advocacy can engage with United Nations human rights mechanisms, including the Special Rapporteur on Toxics and Human Rights and the Working Group on Business and Human Rights, to advance accountability for corporate environmental harm. It can contribute to the development of international standards on environmental due diligence for transnational corporations, and support international climate finance mechanisms that prioritise frontline communities in oil-producing regions of the Global South.

5.5 COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND LIVELIHOODS

Perhaps the most immediate opportunity for ERT lies in its application to community development and livelihood regeneration programmes in the Niger Delta. Communities whose livelihoods have been disrupted by ecological degradation need both immediate support and long-term pathways to sustainable self-sufficiency. ERT suggests a community development model that integrates ecological restoration with economic diversification, cultural revitalisation, and governance strengthening.

Mangrove-based livelihoods — including sustainable fisheries management, ecotourism, carbon credit markets for community-led conservation, and non-timber forest product enterprises — offer economic opportunities that are both ecologically regenerative and culturally resonant. Women's cooperatives engaged in sustainable fishing, salt production, agro-processing, and handicrafts can combine livelihood support with cultural revitalisation and community agency. Youth enterprise programmes that combine technical training in environmental restoration with entrepreneurship support can engage young people as agents of ecological and social recovery rather than victims or perpetrators of environmental crime.

Sacred forest conservation programmes, building on indigenous spiritual and cultural relationships with forest ecosystems, offer another domain for ERT application. Many Niger Delta communities maintain sacred groves and forests that serve both cultural and ecological functions — preserving biodiversity, maintaining spiritual practices, and encoding ecological knowledge. Supporting the legal recognition, community management, and ecological restoration of these sacred spaces can advance both ERT's ecological integrity and cultural revitalisation pillars simultaneously.

6. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The Ecosocial Resilience Theory, as articulated in this paper, faces several important limitations that must be acknowledged. First, ERT is primarily a theoretical framework, and its translation into practice requires context-specific adaptation, empirical testing, and iterative refinement. What works in one Niger Delta community may not be directly applicable in another, given significant variations in ecological conditions, cultural practices, governance structures, and political economies. Future work must engage in grounded empirical research to develop and validate context-sensitive applications of ERT.

Second, ERT's structural reform pillar faces the most significant political obstacles. Corporate accountability for oil pollution in the Niger Delta has been consistently resisted by transnational oil companies and shielded by inadequate regulatory enforcement.

Vol. 3. Issue 1.
ISSN: 3115-6940
EISSN: 3115-6932

Political reform to increase Niger Delta communities' influence over resource management and fiscal allocation faces entrenched resistance from national elites who benefit from existing arrangements. ERT must therefore engage seriously with the politics of structural change, including the role of social movements, civil society coalitions, international advocacy, and political mobilisation in creating enabling conditions for reform.

Third, the relationship between ERT and the state requires further theorisation. The Nigerian state has been both an instrument of extraction — enabling corporate pollution and suppressing community resistance — and a potential (if unreliable) vehicle for progressive change, through legislation, regulation, and resource allocation. ERT must navigate this ambivalence, neither abandoning engagement with state institutions nor placing naive faith in state-led solutions.

Fourth, ERT must grapple more deeply with intra-community dynamics, including the ways in which gender, age, ethnicity, and class shape differential exposures, vulnerabilities, and capacities within Niger Delta communities. The danger of treating 'communities' as homogeneous units must be resisted; ERT's commitment to social equity requires attention to the power dynamics that operate within communities, not only those between communities and external actors.

Future theoretical development of ERT should also engage more fully with the emerging literature on climate justice, loss and damage, and the rights of nature — legal frameworks that recognise the intrinsic rights of ecosystems themselves, separate from their instrumental value for human communities. As climate change intensifies ecological stress in the Niger Delta, these frameworks become increasingly relevant to the structural reform agenda that ERT envisions.

Methodologically, the development of ERT as a practice theory requires the creation of specific assessment tools, intervention frameworks, and evaluation metrics that translate its pillars into practical guidance for social workers, community development practitioners, and policymakers. The development of a Niger Delta Ecosocial Resilience Index — drawing on ecological, social, cultural, governance, and structural dimensions — could provide a valuable tool for tracking progress and targeting interventions.

7. CONCLUSION

The Niger Delta stands as one of the most important test cases for sustainability theory and practice in Africa. The region's extraordinary ecological richness, its communities' deep and long-standing relationship with the natural environment, and the catastrophic scale of ecological and social harm inflicted by petroleum capitalism make it both a site of profound crisis and a crucible for transformative innovation in sustainability thinking.

The Ecosocial Resilience Theory proposed in this paper responds to the inadequacy of existing frameworks — whether purely ecological, purely social, or narrowly technocratic — for addressing the complex, multi-dimensional challenges facing Niger Delta communities. By integrating ecological integrity, social equity, community agency, cultural revitalisation, and structural reform into a coherent theoretical architecture, ERT provides a framework for sustainability that is simultaneously rigorous, justice-oriented, community-grounded, and transformative in its ambitions.

ERT is not a final or closed theoretical system. It is an invitation to ongoing theoretical dialogue, empirical investigation, and practical experimentation. It draws from the wisdom of ecosocial work, political ecology, resilience theory, and indigenous knowledge traditions, while remaining open to new insights from community practice, policy innovation, and the lived experiences of Niger Delta communities themselves.

The opportunities for applying ERT are real and urgent. In social work practice, education, research, policy advocacy, and community development, the framework offers a productive guide for action that can contribute

Vol. 3. Issue 1.
ISSN: 3115-6940
EISSN: 3115-6932

to the restoration of both ecological health and community dignity in the Niger Delta. Realising these opportunities will require sustained commitment from social workers, scholars, policymakers, community organisations, and international partners. It will require the courage to challenge powerful interests that profit from the status quo. And it will require the humility to learn from communities who have survived, resisted, and adapted for generations in the face of extraordinary harm.

The Niger Delta's communities deserve more than survival. They deserve flourishing — in all its ecological, social, cultural, and spiritual dimensions. The Ecosocial Resilience Theory is offered as a modest but serious contribution to building the intellectual and practical foundations for that flourishing.

REFERENCES

Agrawal, A. (2001). Common property institutions and sustainable governance of resources. World Development, 29(10), 1649–1672.

Amnesty International. (2015). Negligence in the Niger Delta: Holding Shell and Eni to account. Author.

Blaikie, P., & Brookfield, H. (1987). Land degradation and society. Methuen.

Bullard, R. D. (1990). Dumping in Dixie: Race, class, and environmental quality. Westview Press.

Dominelli, L. (2012). Green social work: From environmental crises to environmental justice. Polity Press.

Folke, C., Carpenter, S. R., Walker, B., Scheffer, M., Chapin, T., & Rockstrom, J. (2010). Resilience thinking: Integrating resilience, adaptability and transformability. Ecology and Society, 15(4), Article 20.

Gray, M., Coates, J., & Hetherington, T. (Eds.). (2013). Environmental social work. Routledge.

Holling, C. S. (1973). Resilience and stability of ecological systems. Annual Review of Ecology and Systematics, 4(1), 1–23.

Human Rights Watch. (2017). Nigeria: Events of 2016. Human Rights Watch World Report.

Idemudia, U. (2010). Corporate social responsibility and the Niger Delta conflict: Issues and prospects. African Journal of International Affairs, 13(1–2), 83–108.

Ite, A. E., & Ibok, U. J. (2013). Gas flaring and venting associated with petroleum exploration and production in the Nigeria's Niger Delta. American Journal of Environmental Protection, 1(4), 70–77.

Minkler, M., & Wallerstein, N. (Eds.). (2003). Community-based participatory research for health. Jossey-Bass.

Nriagu, J., Udofia, E. A., Ekong, I., & Ebuk, G. (2016). Health risks associated with oil pollution in the Niger Delta, Nigeria. International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 13(3), Article 346.

Nwosu, M. A. (2018). Resource governance and community development in the Niger Delta. African Development Review, 30(2), 145–159.

Ogbanga, M. M. (2021). Community-based social work practice in the Niger Delta: Ecological perspectives. Rivers State University Press.

Ogbanga, M. M. (2023). Gender, environment, and climate vulnerability in Nigerian coastal communities. Journal of Social Work and Society, 21(1), 44–62.

Ojo, G. U. (2012). Ecosystem services and livelihood assets of the Niger Delta. Ecological Economics, 78, 134–143.

Okorobia, A. M., & Olali, S. T. (2014). The historical roots of the Niger Delta crisis. Journal of African History and Culture, 6(2), 24–33.

Pelling, M. (2011). Adaptation to climate change: From resilience to transformation. Routledge.

Vol. 3. Issue 1.
ISSN: 3115-6940
EISSN: 3115-6932

Pyles, L., & Adam, G. (2016). Holistic engagement: Transformative social work education in the 21st century. Oxford University Press.

Schlosberg, D. (2007). Defining environmental justice: Theories, movements, and nature. Oxford University Press.

Timmer, V., & Bhatt, S. (2020). Ecosocial work in a climate-disrupted world. International Journal of Social Welfare, 29(3), 243–253.

United Nations Environment Programme. (2011). Environmental assessment of Ogoniland. Author.

von Bertalanffy, L. (1968). General system theory: Foundations, development, applications. George Braziller.

Walker, B., Holling, C. S., Carpenter, S. R., & Kinzig, A. (2004). Resilience, adaptability and transformability in social-ecological systems. Ecology and Society, 9(2), Article 5.

Watts, M. (2004). Resource curse? Governmentality, oil and power in the Niger Delta, Nigeria. Geopolitics, 9(1), 50–80.

Wogu, I. A. P., Sholarin, M. A., & Chukwuemeka, D. O. (2015). A critical evaluation of human resource management in Nigeria's Niger Delta. Research in Social Sciences and Technology, 1(1), 1–27.

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SOCIAL WORK AND DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

Department of Social Work

International Journal of Social Work and Development Studies (IJSDS)

PUBLISHED BY PARAKLETUS PUBLISHING

CONTACT THE UNIVERSITY @
dsw@ust.edu.ng