

Understanding Child-Centred Climate Action for Environmental Communication in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria

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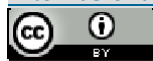
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ABSTRACT

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria faces severe environmental degradation due to oil spills, gas flaring, deforestation, and urbanization, which have drastically impacted local communities and ecosystems. These issues are exacerbated by climate change, resulting in increased flooding, erosion, and loss of livelihoods, particularly for vulnerable demographics like children, necessitating innovative approaches to climate action. Based on the foregoing, this study adopts Psychoanalytic Theory and Digital Generative Multimedia Tool Theory (DGMTT) in examining how child-centred approaches can enhance environmental communication efforts in the Niger Delta. This study employed a qualitative research design, utilizing a combination of in-depth interview, focus group discussions, and secondary data. The research was conducted in selected communities across Bayelsa, Delta, Imo, and Rivers States of Nigeria, which are among the most impacted by oil pollution and climate change in the Niger Delta. The communities studied include: Elebele in Bayelsa, Warri in Delta State, Izombe in Imo State, and Oyigbo in River States. The findings reveal that children not only possess a strong awareness of environmental challenges but also demonstrate innovative attitudes toward solutions. The research emphasizes the potential of child-centred approaches to enhance community engagement and foster a culture of environmental stewardship. This study contributes to the discourse on environmental communication by highlighting the unique role of children as change agents, suggesting that empowering young voices can lead to more effective climate action and a deeper commitment to environmental sustainability within the Niger Delta.

INTRODUCTION

Recognizing the intricate connections between environmental issues, children's rights, and community communication practices is essential to comprehending child-centered climate action in Nigeria's Niger Delta, especially in an area that is constantly experiencing ecological degradation, oil pollution, and climate shocks. According to UNICEF Children's Climate Risk Index, Nigeria is the second-most vulnerable country in the world to climate change. While the resilience of vital infrastructure like health, education, water, and sanitation services is still low, young people in Nigeria and particularly those in the Niger Delta are more vulnerable to risks like vector-borne illnesses, coastal floods, and contaminated air and water. Chronic oil spills exacerbate the environmental problem in the Niger Delta; research indicates that babies born to mothers within 10 km of oil spills had twice the neonatal mortality rate, suggesting long-term contamination of the food, water, and soil systems (Onyejelem & Nwokeocha, 2024).

In a child-centered approach to climate change, children are viewed as active participants and agents in determining solutions, in addition to being the most vulnerable victims of environmental degradation. According to UNICEF's Climate Landscape Analysis for Nigeria (2023–2027), children make up more than half of Nigeria's population and are particularly vulnerable because of their physiological vulnerability, reliance on adult decisions, and exposure to climate-related disruptions in access to safe water and sanitation, education, and nutrition (Onianwa, 2024). In order to address these issues, it is necessary to incorporate children's viewpoints into communication, education, and adaptation plans, making sure that climate initiatives take into account their rights and needs.

Historically, top-down narratives have dominated environmental communication in the Niger Delta, marginalizing local voices and eroding confidence in environmental governance. The success of including marginalized populations through indigenous languages, storytelling, and local knowledge systems is emphasized in scholarly studies of participatory communication approaches. Vernacular usage, cultural customs, and group decision-making have all been crucial in the Niger Delta for building trust and involvement with climate messaging (Penawou, 2012). Initiatives spearheaded by young people provide encouraging examples of child-centered climate action in action. By use of smartphone reporting technologies, school-based climate literacy programs, advocacy campaigns, and tree planting and cleanup efforts, modern movements in Port Harcourt, Bayelsa, Delta, Rivers, and Edo States are inspiring young people. The Niger Delta Climate Watch mobile app is an example of participatory communication enabled by digital means, enabling communities, including youth, to geotag pollution occurrences and interact directly with policymakers. In keeping with the "catch them young" philosophy of preparing children to be future environmental stewards, educational initiatives like Climate Stories 4 Kids, started by Climate Action Africa, are also bringing climate education to kids through fiction-based audiovisual content.

From an institutional perspective, youth organizations in Delta State and throughout Ni-ger Delta are becoming more capable of engaging in climate policy processes (such as National Adaptation Plans and NDCs) thanks to the Nigeria Youth SDGs Network and other civil society platforms (Uzuegbunam, 2024). These projects improve the role of community voices in forming policy and adaptation strategies by ensuring that youth, especially children and adolescents, are positioned within local climate governance discussions.

Ajiboye et al., (2024) observed that in the meantime, federal and state-level programs, such as the Niger Delta Climate Change Program and Action Plan (NDRCCP AP) and infra-structure projects like the Emadike Shoreline protection scheme, aim to incorporate climate resili-ence into flood control and planning, with provisions for stakeholder awareness-raising and community-based adaptation. By ensuring safe water and hygiene throughout the year, UNICEF-supported solutions in Delta State communities, such as solar-powered boreholes and elevated water stations in flooded zones, showcase how climate adaptation can be child-responsive.

Ippolito (2023) is of the view that the Niger Delta's child-centered climate action needs a multifaceted framework that includes integrating climate risk assessment for kids, integrating in-clusive participatory communication practices, facilitating digital and arts-based climate literacy, empowering youth (including kids) in governance, and launching locally relevant adaptation initiatives. When taken as a whole, these elements assist in transforming kids from assistance recipi-ents into knowledgeable activists, communicators, and change agents influencing the future of the climate in the area.

Statement of the Problem

The Niger Delta region is confronted with a dual crisis of severe environmental degradation and the escalating impacts of climate change. While the environmental consequences of oil exploration are well-documented, there is a significant gap in understanding how these challenges are experienced by and can be addressed through the perspectives of children. Conventional environmental communication and climate action strategies have predominantly been top-down, failing to engage meaningfully with the most vulnerable segments of the population. This study addresses the urgent need to explore and understand child-centered approaches as a viable and effective strategy for environmental communication and climate action in this uniquely challenged region.

Objectives of the Study

The general objective of this study is to examine how child-centred approaches can enhance environmental communication efforts in the Niger Delta. Specifically, the following objectives were formulated ton guide the study:

1. Examine the perceptions and awareness of environmental issues and climate change among children in the Niger Delta.
2. Investigate the capacity of children to act as agents of change and influence community-level environmental and development efforts.
3. Analyze the effectiveness of existing child-centered initiatives in promoting environmental stewardship and climate resilience.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual Discussions

Child Vulnerability to Climate Change

Children are uniquely vulnerable to the impacts of climate change due to a combination of physiological susceptibility and developmental dependency (Onyejelem, 2023). Their bodies are less able to cope with heat stress, and their developing respiratory systems are more susceptible to the effects of air pollution, which is often exacerbated by climate change (Onyejelem et al., 2021). This vulnerability is particularly acute in Nigeria, which ranks second on UNICEF's Children's Climate Risk Index due to a combination of high exposure to hazards like flooding and heatwaves, and poor access to essential services.

Climate-related events have cascading effects on children's well-being. Increased flooding and changing rainfall patterns heighten the risk of waterborne and vector-borne diseases to which children are disproportionately susceptible. Simultaneously, droughts and floods disrupt food systems, leading to malnutrition and stunting, which can have lifelong developmental consequences (Onyejelem, 2020). Research demonstrates that these climate impacts intensify existing inequalities, with children in low-income nations bearing a significantly heavier burden due to a lack of social protections and resilient infrastructure. Addressing this requires integrated, multi-sectoral responses that place child rights, health, and education at the centre of all climate adaptation strategies (Onianwa, 2024).

Environmental Degradation in the Niger Delta

The Niger Delta faces one of Africa's most severe and protracted ecological crises, driven primarily by decades of oil exploration, systemic institutional failure, and regulatory neglect. An estimated 13 million barrels of crude oil have been spilled over the last 50 years, causing widespread contamination of water sources and farmland (Beaufils, 2025). This pollution has devastated the region's ecosystems, leading to the destruction of up to ten percent of its vital mangrove forests, which serve as critical fisheries and coastal defences (Moulat et al., 2012). The collapse of these ecosystems has crippled the traditional livelihoods of farming and fishing communities, leading to food insecurity and profound economic hardship.

This environmental damage is compounded by near-constant gas flaring, which releases a cocktail of carcinogenic pollutants into the atmosphere, creating significant public health risks for nearby communities (Mandavilli, 2025). The institutional response to this crisis has been wholly inadequate. The National Oil Spill Detection and Response Agency (NOSDRA) has been hampered by political interference and underfunding, while high-profile cleanup efforts like the HYPREP project in Ogoniland have been widely condemned as failures. This regulatory inertia, coupled with a lack of corporate accountability, has entrenched a deep-seated crisis of environmental injustice (Uzuegbunam, 2024). Consequently, the Niger Delta stands as a critical case study of socio-ecological collapse, where unresolved conflicts over resources persist amid environmental ruin.

Child-Centred Climate Action

A child-centred approach to climate action reframes children from passive victims to active agents of change, whose perspectives and rights are central to policy and practice. This approach is founded on the recognition that children are not only disproportionately affected by climate disasters but are also consistently excluded from the decision-making processes that will shape their futures (Onyejelem, 2025; Rashid et al., 2022). Incorporating children's voices into environmental governance is therefore both a moral imperative under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and a practical strategy for developing more effective and contextually relevant adaptation measures (Bartlett, 2008).

Engaging children promotes environmental stewardship and enhances the efficacy of climate responses (Hart, 2022). While global youth movements like Fridays for Future demonstrate the power of youth advocacy (Han & Ahn, 2020), children in the Global South often face structural barriers that limit their participation. Key tools to overcome this include Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), which equips children with the knowledge and skills to address climate challenges (Ochieng et al., 2021), and child-sensitive social protection systems that integrate vulnerability assessments into climate finance and planning (UNICEF & Save the Children, 2022). Mainstreaming child participation is essential for bridging the gap between policy, sustainability, and the well-being of future generations.

Rights-Based Approach to Communication

A rights-based approach to communication embeds principles of human rights – such as participation, empowerment, and accountability – into the core of communication practice (Onyejelem & Ridwan, 2025). It moves beyond viewing communication as a mere technical tool for information dissemination and redefines it as a fundamental human right, as enshrined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This framework is crucial for amplifying the voices of marginalised groups and enabling them to claim their rights and hold duty-bearers accountable (Tomaselli, 2009).

In practice, this approach fosters dialogic and participatory communication that is anchored in local cultures and sensitive to power dynamics. It has proven effective in improving democratic governance by enabling civil society to use media platforms for "accountability politics" (Fox, 2007) and in promoting grassroots mobilisation through community-led platforms like participatory video and community radio (Gumucio-Dagron & Tufte, 2006). This approach also demands a critical awareness of structural inequalities, advocating for the decolonisation of communication by valuing indigenous knowledge systems over Western-centric models (Servaes, 2020). In development and humanitarian contexts, this means ensuring affected communities are not just informed but are active participants in decision-making, which is fundamental for building genuine community resilience (CDAC Network, 2019).

Community Profiles of Elebele, Warri, Izombe, And Oyigbo at a Glance

Elebele

Elebele, a community located in the Ogbia Local Government Area of Bayelsa State, is a rural settlement whose inhabitants are predominantly of the Ijaw ethnic group. The primary occupations are farming and fishing, with the community situated within the freshwater swamp forest zone of the Niger Delta. Like many communities in the region, Elebele has been significantly impacted by oil exploration and exploitation activities. This has led to environmental challenges, including soil and water pollution, which adversely affect agricultural yields and aquatic life, thereby threatening the traditional livelihoods of the people (Enetjärn, 2017). The socio-economic fabric of the community is closely tied to the health of its environment, and any degradation has direct consequences on the well-being of its residents, particularly children, who are vulnerable to malnutrition and diseases arising from contaminated food and water sources. The community's infrastructure is modest, and access to basic amenities such as healthcare and quality education can be limited, further compounding the vulnerabilities of its younger population in the face of climate-related and environmental stressors (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2022).

Warri

Warri, a major city in Delta State, serves as a crucial economic hub for Nigeria, primarily due to the presence of the petroleum industry. It is a densely populated urban area with a cosmopolitan mix of ethnic groups, including the Urhobo, Itsekiri, and Ijaw, though it has a significant population of other Nigerian ethnicities as well (World Council of Churches, n.d.). The city's profile is dominated by industrial and commercial activities, with a major port and several oil refineries and petrochemical industries (Amnesty International, 2018). This industrialisation, while driving economic growth, has also resulted in significant environmental pollution. Air quality is a major concern due to gas flaring and industrial emissions, and the Warri River, a vital water source, is threatened by industrial effluents and oil spills (Obafemi & Eludoyin, 2013). These environmental pressures, combined with the challenges of urbanisation such as inadequate waste management and housing, create a complex set of risks for its residents. Children in Warri are particularly exposed to these hazards, facing health risks from air and water pollution and the socio-economic challenges associated with urban poverty.

Izombe

Izombe is a community in the Oguta Local Government Area of Imo State and is a significant oil-producing area. The community has a long history of oil exploration, with several multinational corporations operating in the vicinity. This has made Izombe a focal point for the socio-economic and environmental consequences of the oil industry. The landscape is dotted with oil wells and pipelines, and the community has experienced recurrent oil spills and continuous gas flaring, leading to the degradation of farmlands and water sources (Environmental Justice Atlas, 2021). These environmental issues have had a profound impact on the livelihoods of the predominantly farming population, reducing crop yields and polluting the Njaba River, a major source of water and fish (Chukwu, 2015). The environmental degradation has also been a source of

social tension and conflict within the community. For the children of Izombe, these circumstances create a precarious existence, with their health, nutrition, and overall development being threatened by the polluted environment and the associated socio-economic instability.

Oyigbo

Oyigbo, (also called Obigbo) located in Rivers State, is a significant town that borders Abia State and is in close proximity to the major city of Port Harcourt. The community is inhabited by the Asa and Ndoki people, who are of Igbo extraction. Oyigbo is an economic centre with a mix of agricultural activities and a strong presence of the oil and gas industry. The Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) operates a major gas plant in the area, which is a critical part of Nigeria's power infrastructure. The economy is also supported by farming, with palm oil and cassava being major products (PropertyPro.ng, n.d.). However, the community faces significant environmental challenges associated with oil and gas activities, including pollution and the risks associated with gas pipelines that traverse the area. These environmental stressors, coupled with a history of social and political tensions, create a challenging living environment. The well-being of children in Oyigbo is impacted by these factors, facing potential health risks from industrial pollution and the socio-economic consequences of environmental degradation on their families' livelihoods.

Theoretical Framework

In communication and media studies, understanding phenomenon like child-centred climate action in an area that is challenged with environmental degradation like the Niger Delta region of Nigeria requires robust theoretical foundations with complementary underpinnings. This study, examining "understanding child-centred climate action for environmental communication in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria" necessitates a robust approach. Consequently, this study was underpinned by an integrated framework drawing upon two complementary perspectives namely: Psychoanalytic theory and Digital Generative Tool Theory (DGMTT).

Psychoanalytic Theory

Developed by Sigmund Freud, psychoanalytic theory offers a framework for understanding human behavior and personality development, emphasizing the influence of the unconscious mind and early life experiences. Central to this theory is the idea that suppressed thoughts and desires shape conscious actions. While initially focused on psychopathology, the theory has been adapted to various fields. Freud's concepts of psychosexual development, though debated, highlight the importance of early experiences. Erik Erikson later expanded on this, focusing on psychosocial development throughout the lifespan.

Modern psychoanalytic theorists have placed more emphasis on interpersonal relationships. Object relations theory, for instance, posits that human behavior is driven by the need for relationships rather than innate desires (Uzuegbunam, 2024). John Bowlby's attachment theory, which combines psychoanalytic ideas with empirical research, suggests that the need for secure emotional connections is an adaptive mechanism. These developments are part of a broader "relational turn" in psychoanalysis that prioritizes empathy and reciprocal influence. This theory is relevant to this study in understanding the

deep-seated psychological impacts of environmental degradation on children and how their early experiences shape their perceptions and actions towards the environment.

Digital Generative Multimedia Tool Theory (DGMTT)

Postulated by Onyejelem and Aondover in 2024, Digital Generative Multimedia Tool Theory (DGMTT) provides a framework for understanding how AI-mediated tools are transforming creative practices and meaning-making. DGMTT posits that modern generative systems, which utilize machine learning and user interfaces, are changing content creation and audience perception (Onyejelem & Aondover, 2024a). The theory highlights the coexistence of creative agency and generative AI, where AI tools offer new affordances for customization and participation in the creative process (Onyejelem & Aondover, 2024b).

DGMTT is situated at the intersection of media studies, algorithmic innovation, and sociocultural practice. It offers a lens through which to analyze how generative technologies mediate representation and expression. This theory is pertinent to this study as it provides a framework for exploring how digital tools can be used in child-centered climate action to create and disseminate environmental communication, empowering children to generate their own narratives and solutions.

Empirical Review

Matemilola et al. (2021) examined “Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) process in the Niger Delta” and revealed a significant institutional failure to effectively mainstream climate change considerations into project planning and approval. The study highlights that major development projects are frequently assessed without adequate analysis of their long-term climate vulnerabilities or their contribution to greenhouse gas emissions. This procedural gap means that the very systems designed to protect the environment are inadvertently sanctioning projects that may exacerbate climate risks, thereby heightening the exposure of local communities and, most critically, their children, to future climate-related disasters. The findings from Matemilola et al. are therefore crucial, as they underscore a profound governance deficit at the formal, top-down level. This deficit creates a compelling justification for investigating the potential of bottom-up, community-based approaches, such as child-centred environmental communication, which can serve as vital alternative pathways for building local resilience and fostering accountability where formal regulatory mechanisms are evidently falling short

Ogungweru (2023) in a comprehensive analysis of the nexus between climate change and insecurity in the Niger Delta, established a direct causal link between environmental degradation and the region's multifaceted security challenges. The study systematically outlines how the physical manifestations of climate change, specifically increased flooding, coastal erosion, and the loss of arable land, act as primary drivers of instability. Ogungweru posits that these environmental pressures are not isolated ecological events but are fundamental stressors that degrade the resource base upon which local livelihoods depend. The paper's contribution lies in its clear articulation of how these climatic impacts catalyse a cascade of insecurities, spanning the economic, social, and political

spheres, thereby providing a foundational understanding of the complex socio-ecological system of the Niger Delta. Ogungweru (2023) further elucidates how these environmental stressors translate directly into social and economic insecurity. The loss of farmable land and the destruction of fishing grounds lead to increased poverty, displacement, and competition over dwindling resources. This, in turn, fuels social tensions and conflicts, exacerbating the already fragile security situation in the region. While Ogungweru's (2023) study does not focus explicitly on children, its findings provide a critical and sobering context for understanding the landscape in which child-centred climate action must be situated. Ogungweru's (2023) underscores that environmental degradation is not a peripheral concern but is central to the economic instability and social conflict that define the region. Therefore, any framework for child-centred environmental communication must necessarily be designed to navigate and address the pervasive issues of insecurity that Ogungweru identifies, acknowledging that climate action in the Niger Delta region is inseparable from peace-building and social justice.

In a comprehensive systematic review of climate change research in Nigeria, Okon et al. (2021) provide a critical overview of the existing body of literature, mapping its trends, focus, and geographical distribution. By analysing 701 relevant articles, the authors reveal that while there was a significant increase in climate change research between 2011 and 2015, the focus has been overwhelmingly concentrated on the agricultural sector. This finding is significant as it highlights a potential imbalance in research priorities, where other critical areas may be receiving less scholarly attention. The review by Okon et al. (2021) is particularly salient for understanding the context of the Niger Delta because it identifies three crucial research gaps. Firstly, and most relevantly, the authors point to a "lack of research that investigated the magnitude of present and potential future impacts in the aquatic environment". Given that the Niger Delta is defined by its extensive coastline, rivers, creeks, and mangrove swamps, this identified gap underscores a critical deficiency in the understanding of climate impacts in the very region most vulnerable to them. Secondly, the study notes an absence of research investigating the effects of multiple, intersecting climate variables simultaneously.

This is highly pertinent to the Niger Delta, where communities face a complex interplay of sea-level rise, flooding, and pollution. While Okon et al. (2021) advocate for more quantitative data, their findings inadvertently strengthen the rationale for a study focused on environmental communication and child-centred action. The identified lack of research in aquatic regions makes a study situated in the Niger Delta not only relevant but essential. Therefore, understanding the human dimension—how communities, and specifically children, perceive, communicate, and respond to the complex environmental changes they face, is a vital precursor to developing the effective, locally-grounded adaptation strategies that quantitative data is meant to support. A child-centred approach addresses a deeper, more specific gap within the human dimension of climate research, exploring the unique vulnerabilities and potential agency of a demographic largely absent from the studies reviewed by Okon and

his colleagues. Thus, their work provides an authoritative, evidence-based justification for focusing research efforts on the under-represented aquatic environments of the Niger Delta and the human experiences within them.

Venton (2011) investigated a compelling economic case for adopting a child-centred approach to climate change adaptation, arguing that it is not only a moral imperative but also a strategically sound investment for sustainable development. Venton (2011) posits that the benefits of child-centred adaptation are exceptionally high because children are numerous and experience the impacts of climate change more acutely and over a longer duration. Venton's (2011) framework, while global in its scope, provides a powerful justification for research focused on the specific context of the Niger Delta. The region's unique combination of environmental degradation, socio-economic vulnerability, and a large youth population aligns directly with the high-risk conditions described in the report. By establishing the economic and developmental benefits of child-centred adaptation, the study provides a foundational rationale for investigating how such approaches can be effectively implemented. It underscores the urgent need to move beyond acknowledging children's vulnerability to actively empowering them as agents of change, for which environmental communication is a critical tool. Consequently, Venton's work validates the premise that understanding child-centred communication is not a peripheral concern but a necessary step towards operationalising effective and economically prudent climate adaptation in highly vulnerable regions like the Niger Delta.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design, utilizing data from primary and secondary sources, involving a combination of in-depth interview and focus group discussions. The research was conducted in selected communities across Bayelsa, Delta, Imo, and Rivers States, which are among the most impacted by oil pollution and climate change in the Niger Delta. The communities studied include: Elebele in Bayelsa, Warri in Delta, Izombe in Imo, and Oyigbo in River States.

A purposive sampling technique was used to select participants, including children aged 10-17, parents, teachers, community leaders, and representatives from local and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) involved in environmental and child rights advocacy. A total of 60 children participated in focus group discussions, while 20 in-depth interviews were conducted with adult stakeholders.

Data was collected over a period of six months. The focus group discussions with children were designed to be participatory and used age-appropriate methods, including drawing and storytelling, to elicit their perceptions and experiences of environmental issues. The in-depth interviews with adults focused on their views on child participation, the effectiveness of current environmental communication strategies, and the potential for child-centered approaches.

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. The data was transcribed, coded, and categorized to identify recurring themes and patterns. This approach

allowed for a rich and detailed understanding of the complex interplay between child-centered approaches, environmental communication, and climate action in the Niger Delta.

Data Presentation

The thematic analysis of data gathered from focus group discussions with 60 children and 20 in-depth interviews with adult stakeholders across Elebele, Warri, Izombe, and Oyigbo yielded five primary themes. These themes encapsulate the children's perceptions of their environment, their capacity for climate action, and the systemic barriers they face.

Theme 1: Sophisticated Environmental Awareness and Lived Experience

Across all four communities, children demonstrated a sophisticated and nuanced understanding of their local environmental challenges, rooted in their lived experiences. In the more rural communities of Elebele and Izombe, children articulated in detail the impacts of oil spills on farming and fishing. They described the rainbow sheen on the water, the smell of crude oil after a spill, and the subsequent decline in fish catch and crop viability, which directly affected their families' income and food security. A 14-year-old in Izombe explained, "The stream we used to swim in is now black. Our fathers say the fish are dead, and the yams do not grow well anymore."

In the urban and industrialised settings of Warri and Oyigbo, children's narratives focused on air and water pollution from industrial activities and gas flaring. They spoke of respiratory difficulties, soot-covered surfaces, and the foul taste of borehole water. A 12-year-old from Oyigbo described the constant gas flare as "a sun that never sets," linking it to the heat and the "black rain" that sometimes fell. These accounts reveal that children are not just abstractly aware of 'climate change' but are acutely cognisant of the specific environmental hazards that define their daily lives.

Theme 2: Perceived Link Between Environmental Degradation and Personal Well-being

The data strongly indicates that children draw direct lines between environmental degradation and their personal and familial well-being. They frequently connected poor environmental quality to health issues, educational disruptions, and economic hardship. Children in all communities mentioned increased instances of malaria and cholera, which they associated with flooding and contaminated water.

Furthermore, children understood the economic ramifications. A participant from Elebele noted, "When the flood comes, we cannot go to school for weeks. And when the farm is washed away, my mother has no money for my books." This demonstrates a clear perception of how climate-related events disrupt their fundamental right to education and place economic stress on their families, a sentiment echoed by adult stakeholders who confirmed that school absenteeism rises sharply during periods of severe flooding.

Theme 3: High Capacity for Agency and Innovative Communication Solutions

Contrary to being passive victims, the children in this study exhibited a strong sense of agency and a desire to contribute to solutions. When asked what they would do to address the problems, their ideas were both practical and innovative. They suggested community-based actions like organised clean-up drives, tree planting initiatives, and waste sorting systems.

More significantly, their proposed solutions heavily featured communication and advocacy. The children suggested using culturally resonant forms of communication, such as creating dramas, songs, and poems in local languages to raise awareness among community members. Leveraging modern technology was also a prominent idea. Many children, particularly those in Warri and Oyiibo, proposed using their parents' smartphones to take pictures and videos of oil spills and illegal waste dumping to "show the world" via social media platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp. One 16-year-old in Warri stated, "If we make a video and it goes viral, maybe the government or the oil companies will have to listen to us."

Theme 4: Significant Barriers to Child Participation

Despite their enthusiasm, children identified significant barriers hindering their participation in climate action. The primary obstacle was the prevailing adult-centric mindset. Children felt their opinions were often dismissed by adults, who viewed them as too young to understand complex issues or contribute meaningfully. A common sentiment was, "The elders will say, 'This is not children's business!'"

This was compounded by a lack of formal platforms for their voices to be heard. Community meetings, planning sessions, and engagements with company or government officials were exclusively adult domains. Furthermore, a lack of resources—such as funding for school-based environmental clubs or access to digital tools for their communication ideas—was cited as a practical limitation to translating their ideas into action.

Theme 5: Adult Stakeholders' Corroboration and Perceived Potential

The in-depth interviews with parents, teachers, community leaders, and NGO representatives largely corroborated the children's perspectives. Adult stakeholders acknowledged the children's high level of awareness and their potential as powerful agents of change. A teacher in Delta State remarked, "The children see everything, and they are not afraid to speak the truth. If we support them, they can change this community."

However, these adults also confirmed the existence of the systemic barriers. They spoke of cultural norms that limit children's roles in public discourse and the institutional inertia that fails to create child-friendly participatory mechanisms. NGO representatives, in particular, highlighted the need for structured programmes that not only empower children with skills but also sensitise adults to the value of their contributions, thereby creating a more enabling environment for child-centred climate action.

RESULTS

This study's examination of child-centred climate action and environmental communication in the Niger Delta of Nigeria yielded the following principal results:

1. Children in the Niger Delta possess a detailed and sophisticated awareness of local environmental issues, including oil pollution, gas flaring, and flooding. They are able to articulate the direct impacts of these challenges on their health, education, and family livelihoods.

2. The study found that children are not passive victims but demonstrate a high capacity for agency and a strong desire to be involved in solutions. They proposed innovative and contextually relevant actions, with a notable emphasis on using both traditional (drama, song) and digital (social media, video) communication tools for advocacy.
3. The primary obstacle to effective child-centred climate action is the prevalence of structural and cultural barriers. These include adult-centric attitudes that dismiss children's contributions, the absence of formal platforms for their participation in community governance, and a lack of resources to support their initiatives.
4. There is a clear convergence between the perspectives of children and adult stakeholders (parents, teachers, NGO staff) on the untapped potential of youth to act as powerful agents of change, suggesting a foundational readiness for shifting towards more inclusive approaches.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study offer a profound insight into the untapped potential of child-centred climate action in the Niger Delta, providing empirical weight to the theoretical frameworks and literature reviewed. The sophisticated environmental awareness demonstrated by the children directly challenges narratives that position them solely as vulnerable victims. Instead, it aligns with rights-based frameworks that recognise children as knowledgeable actors with a right to participate in decisions that affect them (Bartlett, 2008; Hart, 2022). The deep connection the children made between their polluted environment and their personal well-being resonates with the tenets of Psychoanalytic Theory. The chronic environmental trauma experienced from a young age, witnessing degraded land and polluted water, shapes their worldview and emotional responses, embedding a deep-seated understanding of the precarity of their existence that informs their desire for action.

The children's capacity for agency and their innovative communication proposals are particularly striking. Their inclination to use digital media like smartphones and social media to document and disseminate environmental issues is a direct, real-world manifestation of the Digital Generative Multimedia Tool Theory (DGMTT) (Onyejelem & Aondover, 2024a). It shows an intuitive grasp of how modern communication tools can be harnessed to create compelling, user-generated narratives that can bypass traditional, often inaccessible, media gatekeepers. This finding suggests that children are not just potential recipients of environmental communication but are poised to be its creators and distributors, a paradigm shift from conventional top-down communication models.

However, the significant barriers to participation identified in this study underscore the gap between children's potential and their reality. The adult-centric attitudes and lack of participatory platforms reflect the systemic challenges highlighted by Ogungweru (2023), where entrenched power structures and socio-political instability create an environment ill-suited for inclusive governance. This finding reinforces the argument that effective child-centred climate action cannot be achieved through isolated projects alone; it

requires a fundamental shift in societal norms and institutional practices towards recognising and operationalising child rights.

The corroboration from adult stakeholders provides a crucial layer of validity to the children's claims and highlights a consensus on the need for change. This convergence of perspectives suggests that while the barriers are formidable, there is also a latent willingness among community leaders and facilitators to embrace a new approach. This aligns with Venton's (2011) argument that investing in child-centred adaptation is not only beneficial for children but is a strategically sound approach for overall community resilience. The findings, therefore, present a clear mandate: to bridge the gap between children's recognised potential and the structural barriers that suppress it through deliberate, well-designed communication and participation strategies.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study concludes that children in the Niger Delta are not merely passive victims of environmental degradation but are acutely aware, capable, and willing actors whose sophisticated understanding of local hazards represents a vital, untapped resource for climate action. A significant disconnect exists between this potential and their current exclusion, which is perpetuated by adult-centric norms and the absence of institutional platforms for their participation. The research asserts that bridging this gap requires a deliberate shift to a child-centred paradigm, one that not only creates spaces for children's voices but also empowers them with the digital and narrative tools to be influential communicators. Ultimately, implementing child-centred approaches is presented as an essential, transformative strategy for the Niger Delta, crucial for fostering genuine environmental stewardship, building intergenerational resilience, and breaking the cycle of ineffective top-down interventions, thereby linking the protection of the region's future directly to the empowerment of its youth.

FURTHER STUDY

Based on the findings and conclusion, this study recommends a multi-faceted and collaborative approach across all sectors to create a robust ecosystem that transforms children from passive victims into active agents of environmental change in the Niger Delta. This involves policymakers institutionalising child participation in environmental policies, establishing formal youth councils, and allocating dedicated funding for their initiatives. Concurrently, non-governmental organisations and educators are urged to build children's capacity in digital literacy and advocacy through targeted programmes and a reformed, action-oriented curriculum. These efforts must be underpinned by facilitating intergenerational dialogues to dismantle cultural barriers, while media practitioners actively shift the public narrative by amplifying children's voices and broadcasting their creative communication efforts.

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