Human Rights Education and Environmental Security: Rethinking Peacebuilding Strategies in Oil-producing Communities of the Niger Delta, Nigeria

By
Okechuku Onuchuku, DSSRS
Vice Chancellor, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education Rumuolumeni, Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria
&
Chibuzor Chile Nwobueze, PhD, FSPSP
Okey Onuchuku Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies,
P. M. B. 5047, Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria
chibuzornwobueze@yahoo.com
0803 725 3790
&
Mary Kasarachi Nwokocha, PHD
Department of Curriculum and Teacher Education
Faculty of Education, Abia State University
P.M.B. 2000, Uturu, Abia State, Nigeria
kasarachim7@gmail.com
0803 576 0481.

Abstract

Oil-producing communities in the Niger Delta remain epicentres of environmental degradation, socio-economic marginalization and recurring conflicts, despite decades of state intervention and corporate social responsibility initiatives. Intractable problems, like oil spills, gas flaring and land dispossession, have not only undermined livelihoods but also intensified grievances and resistance movements, as seen in the Ogoni struggle and the ongoing disputes in Gbaramatu and Egi. This paper argues that human rights education (HRE), anchored in principles of dignity, participation and accountability, is essential for transforming these conflict dynamics and promoting sustainable peace. Through empowerment of the communities with knowledge of their environmental and socio-economic rights, HRE enhances local capacity to demand corporate responsibility, engage state institutions and participate

meaningfully in decision-making processes affecting their environment. Furthermore, connecting human rights education with environmental security broadens peacebuilding beyond military responses, addressing root causes, such as ecological injustice, inequality and exclusion. Besides highlighting the relevance of policy developments, including the Petroleum Industry Act (2021) and community-led resistance to unethical extractive practices, this paper suggests how integration of HRE into peacebuilding strategies can foster resilience, strengthen governance and advance environmental justice. The paper suggests a paradigm shift from reactive interventions to rights-based, community-driven approaches to peace and environmental sustainability in the Niger Delta.

Introduction

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria occupies a paradoxical position within the country's socio-economic and political landscape. It is home to vast reserves of crude oil and natural gas, accounting for over 80% of Nigeria's foreign exchange earnings and more than 70% of government revenue (Watts, 2019). Yet, despite this wealth, the region remains one of the most environmentally-degraded and socio-economically marginalized areas in sub-Saharan Africa. The paradox of wealth and poverty, development and deprivation, and security and instability has long defined Niger Delta's relationship with the Nigerian state and multinational oil corporations (Ibeanu, 2020; Obi, 2021). Decades of oil exploration have left a trail of environmental devastation, oil spills, gas flaring, deforestation and water contamination, which have undermined traditional livelihoods, destroyed ecosystems and deepened social inequalities (UNDP, 2016; Amnesty International, 2021).

The consequences of these environmental abuses go beyond ecological degradation; they manifest as multidimensional security challenges, including violent conflicts, youth militancy, community resistance, and deep-seated mistrust among local populations, state institutions and oil companies (Okonta & Douglas, 2003; Omeje, 2006). The historical trajectory of conflict in the Niger Delta reveals that many of these challenges stem from systemic violations of human rights and the failure to uphold environmental justice (Boele, Fabig & Wheeler, 2001). Communities have persistently struggled to assert their rights to clean water, healthy ecosystems, and

meaningful participation in decisions affecting their land and resources, rights enshrined in national laws and international human rights instruments, such as the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR, 1981) and the United Nations Declaration on the Right to Development (1986).

Despite various peacebuilding efforts, including the establishment of interventionist agencies, like the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) and the Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs, and legislative reforms, such as the Petroleum Industry Act (PIA) of 2021, tensions persist. Such interventions could not effectively deliver meaningful change because they adopt top-down, state-centric approaches that neglect the agency, rights and participation of local communities (Ikelegbe, 2013; Obi, 2021). Furthermore, peacebuilding strategies in the region have historically prioritized coercive measures like military deployments and amnesty programmes over transformative approaches that address root causes of conflict, including environmental injustice, governance deficits and structural inequalities (Osaghae, 2019).

Human rights education (HRE) is as a transformative tool that can reshape peacebuilding and environmental governance in oil-producing communities. It is not merely about teaching legal provisions; it is a process of empowerment that equips individuals and communities with the knowledge, skills and values necessary to claim their rights, hold duty-bearers accountable and participate meaningfully in governance processes (Tibbitts, 2017). By integrating human rights principles into environmental and peacebuilding frameworks, HRE promotes a shift from reactive conflict management to proactive conflict prevention and resilience-building (Bajaj, 2011).

The intersection of human rights education and environmental security is significant in the Niger Delta. Environmental security, broadly understood as the protection of people and ecosystems from environmental degradation and resource-related conflicts, is the cornerstone of human security (Barnett & Adger, 2007). It emphasizes the interdependence of environmental sustainability, socio-economic well-being and political stability. When environmental security is undermined, as seen in the widespread oil spills in Ogoniland, persistent gas

flaring in Ebocha and Gbaramatu, and land dispossession in Egi human rights violations inevitably follow (Friends of the Earth, 2020). These violations, in turn, fuel grievances and escalate conflict, creating a vicious cycle of insecurity and underdevelopment.

The case of the Ogoni struggle epitomizes the intersection of human rights, environmental justice and peacebuilding in the Niger Delta. Led by the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), the struggle highlighted the devastating impacts of oil extraction on local communities and their exclusion from decision-making processes (Saro-Wiwa, 1992; Boele et al., 2001). The execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other activists in 1995 by the military regime of Sani Abacha showed the implication of not taking human rights seriously in environmental governance. Decades later, the Ogoni clean-up initiated by the Federal Government remains mired in bureaucratic delays, corruption and lack of community trust, illustrating the persistent gaps in state capacity and accountability (Amnesty International, 2021).

Rethinking of peacebuilding strategies in the Niger Delta, therefore, requires an integrated approach that situates environmental security within a human rights framework and emphasizes community empowerment through education. This involves moving beyond tokenistic corporate social responsibility projects or one-off state interventions to sustained efforts that build local capacity for advocacy, participation and environmental stewardship. Human rights education can facilitate dialogue among stakeholders, foster a culture of accountability, and empower communities to participate meaningfully in environmental governance. It can also promote legal literacy, enabling communities to utilize judicial and non-judicial mechanisms, such as litigation, public inquiries and international advocacy, to defend their rights (Baxi, 2016).

Furthermore, integrating HRE into peacebuilding has the potential to address structural inequalities that underpin conflict. Foregrounding issues of gender justice, intergenerational equity and inclusive governance, HRE contributes to a more holistic and sustainable vision of peace, one that transcends the absence of violence to encompass social justice, environmental sustainability and

participatory democracy (Lederach, 1997; Paris, 2004). Such an approach aligns with global policy frameworks, including the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), notably Goal 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) and Goal 13 (Climate Action), and the African Union's Agenda 2063, which emphasizes the importance of rights-based, people-centred development.

This paper argues that the future of peace and environmental security in the Niger Delta hinges on the effective integration of human rights education into policy, practice and community engagement. It explores how HRE can serve as a catalyst for transforming entrenched conflict dynamics, fostering environmental justice and advancing sustainable peace. It also examines the limitations of current approaches and identifies opportunities for leveraging HRE in building resilient, empowered communities capable of shaping their environmental futures. The analysis is situated within broad debates on peacebuilding, human security and environmental governance, and advance knowledge on ways of achieving equitable, rights-based, and sustainable development in resource-dependent contexts.

Statement of the Problem

The marginalisation suffered by the people of the Niger Delta has attracted scholars to investigating the economic and environmental impacts of oil exploration and exploitation, which have led to severe environmental pollution, destruction of farmlands and aquatic ecosystems, and the erosion of traditional livelihoods, resulting in heightened poverty, displacement and social unrest. State responses and corporate interventions have often focused on infrastructural development, security operations and compensation. These approaches have failed to address the root causes of conflicts linked to environmental injustice and human rights violations. The lack of comprehensive HRE has left many communities unaware of their rights to a safe environment, participation in decision-making and access to justice. This knowledge gap weakens community resilience and perpetuates cycles of conflict and environmental insecurity.

Therefore, there is an urgent need to rethink peacebuilding strategies by integrating HRE and environmental security approaches that empower local communities,

enhance accountability, and promote sustainable peace. Without this shift, efforts to achieve long-term stability, justice, and development in the Niger Delta will remain fragmented, reactive and, ultimately, ineffective.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the paper are to: examine the relationship between human rights education and environmental security in promoting peace and social justice in oil-producing communities of the Niger Delta; assess the extent to which environmental degradation and human rights violations contribute to conflict and insecurity in the Niger Delta region; evaluate the effectiveness of existing peacebuilding strategies and identify gaps in current approaches to conflict prevention and resolution in oil-impacted communities; and propose a human rights-based and environmentally-sensitive peacebuilding framework that empowers local communities, enhances accountability, and promotes sustainable peace and development in the Niger Delta.

Methodology

This study adopted the qualitative research design to examine the relationship between HRE), environmental security and peacebuilding in oil-producing communities of the Niger Delta. Data were generated from secondary sources, policy documents, university curricula, and reports of relevant non-governmental organisations (NGOs), UN and UNEP (United Nations Environment Programme). The data were analysed using thematic analysis, with focus on identification of recurring patterns, perceptions, and relationships between HRE, environmental security and conflict dynamics.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored to Human Security Theory, Environmental Justice Theory and Transformative Learning Theory. These theories offer a comprehensive lens for understanding the relationship between human rights education, environmental security, and peacebuilding in oil-producing communities of the Niger Delta.

Human Security Theory

Popularized by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 1994), the Human Security Theory expands the notion of security beyond traditional state-centric approaches to encompass the protection of individuals from threats to their survival, livelihood and dignity. It identifies seven key dimensions, namely economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community and political security. In the Niger Delta context, frequent oil spills, gas flaring and pollution undermine these dimensions, creating structural violence that fuels grievances and conflict. Human rights education becomes essential in empowering communities to demand accountability, participate in decision-making and advocate equitable resource governance.

Environmental Justice Theory

The Environmental Justice Theory focuses on equitable distribution of environmental benefits and burdens, procedural fairness in decision-making and recognition of marginalized communities (Schlosberg, 2007). The Niger Delta epitomizes environmental injustice, where oil wealth extraction enriches the elite and multinational corporations while local populations suffer ecological degradation, livelihood loss and health crises. This theory highlights how environmental insecurity is deeply intertwined with human rights violations and how education can mobilize collective action for environmental accountability, legal redress and policy reform.

Transformative Learning Theory

Developed by Mezirow (1997), the Transformative Learning Theory emphasizes the role of critical reflection and experiential learning in changing worldviews, attitudes and behaviours. Human rights education, when approached as a transformative process, empowers individuals and communities to critically analyze structural injustices, challenge oppressive systems, and develop skills for non-violent resistance and peace advocacy. In oil-affected communities, such transformative learning fosters agency and strengthens grassroots capacities for environmental stewardship and conflict prevention.

These three theories complement one another in explaining the complex interplay of human rights, environmental security and peacebuilding. The Human Security Theory underscores the necessity of protecting people's fundamental needs and freedoms, the Environmental Justice Theory highlights the structural inequalities driving insecurity, and the Transformative Learning Theory provides a pathway for empowerment through education. Together, they offer a robust analytical framework for rethinking peacebuilding strategies in the Niger Delta that are rights-based, environmentally-sensitive and community-driven.

Literature Review

Conceptualizing Human Rights Education (HRE)

Human rights education (HRE) is a critical dimension of peacebuilding and sustainable development, rooted in the recognition of inherent human dignity and promotion of social justice. The United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training (2011) defines HRE as all learning, education, training and information efforts aimed at building a universal culture of human rights. It equips individuals and communities with the knowledge, skills and values necessary to uphold human rights and challenge violations (UNESCO, 2017). Scholarship in the 1980s and 1990s primarily focused on HRE within formal education systems, emphasizing civic awareness, legal literacy and promotion of democratic values (Flowers, 2000). However, the recent literature has expanded the scope of HRE beyond the classroom to include grassroots activism, community empowerment and environmental justice (Bajaj, 2011; Tibbitts, 2020).

Human rights education and environmental security have been identified as intertwined concepts which are crucial for sustainable development and protection of fundamental human dignity in the face of escalating environmental challenges (Nugmanova et al., 2020; Landge, 2025). A comprehensive review of the current literature showed the critical role of HRE in fostering environmental consciousness and promoting responsible business conduct, which, in turn, contributes significantly to environmental security and human well-being. Environmental degradation directly impacts basic human rights, such as the right to clean air, safe water, health and livelihood, and this necessitates integration of environmental

consciousness into human rights discourse and educational frameworks (Landge, 2025).

Furthermore, environmental education fosters sustainable livelihoods, particularly in vulnerable communities. For instance, in regions like the Chattogram Hill Tracts of Bangladesh, where ethnic communities face widespread poverty and precarious livelihoods, understanding various livelihood options and addressing challenges are critical (Rasul & Gurung, 2024). A framework for livelihoods integrates vulnerability, assets (natural, physical, financial, human and social capital), transforming structures, rights (political, social, industrial, technological and civil), livelihood strategies, and outcomes such as increased income, well-being and improved food security (Rasul & Gurung, 2024);

In resource-dependent and conflict-prone regions, such as the Niger Delta, HRE is increasingly recognized as a transformative tool for addressing systemic injustices linked to environmental degradation, governance failures and corporate malpractice. Scholars argue that embedding HRE in local contexts enables communities to understand their rights to a healthy environment, participate meaningfully in decision-making processes, and demand accountability from state and non-state actors (Amnesty International, 2022).

Environmental Security: Expanding the Human Security Paradigm

Environmental security emerged as a critical component of the broader human security agenda in the post-Cold War era, reflecting a paradigm shift from state-centric notions of security to people-centred approaches (UNDP, 1994). Early research conceptualized environmental security as the prevention of environmental degradation that could trigger conflict or threaten livelihoods (Homer-Dixon, 1999). The Niger Delta's experience exemplifies this nexus: decades of oil exploration have resulted in widespread pollution, loss of biodiversity, and destruction of farmlands and fishing grounds, directly undermining human security (Watts, 2004; UNEP, 2011).

Contemporary scholarship highlights that environmental insecurity is not merely an ecological issue but also a socio-political one. It is often rooted in governance

deficits, unequal power relations and weak regulatory frameworks (Okonta & Douglas, 2001; Obi, 2010). This evolving understanding underscores the need for integrated strategies that link environmental protection to justice, participation and rights, dimensions historically overlooked in security discourse. The United Nations Environment Programme's (2011) assessment of Ogoniland, for instance, revealed that environmental degradation not only threatens livelihoods but also exacerbates social tensions and fuels grievances that lead to conflict.

Nexus of Human Rights Education and Environmental Justice

The intersection of HRE and environmental security has gained prominence in the recent literature, as scholars and practitioners recognize their mutual reinforcement. Environmental justice movements worldwide, from the Standing Rock Sioux resistance in the United States to indigenous struggles in the Amazon, demonstrate that understanding and asserting environmental rights is central to social transformation (Schlosberg, 2013). In the Niger Delta, local communities' struggles for environmental justice, as exemplified by the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), highlight the importance of rights-based approaches in addressing structural violence (Boele, Fabig & Wheeler, 2001).

Human rights education provides the intellectual and ethical foundation for environmental justice by raising awareness of legal instruments (e.g. African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, ECOWAS Protocols), building advocacy capacity and empowering marginalized groups to participate in governance. Scholars argue that, without rights literacy, communities remain vulnerable to exploitation, unable to challenge harmful corporate practices or demand remediation (Ikelegbe, 2013; Etemire, 2020). Furthermore, integrating environmental rights into educational curricula enhances societal resilience by nurturing informed citizens who can engage constructively with policy processes and hold duty bearers accountable.

Peacebuilding in Oil-producing Communities: Historical Trajectories and Gaps

The Niger Delta has long been a site of intense socio-political contestation, where environmental degradation intersects with ethnic marginalization, governance failures and economic exclusion. Early peacebuilding interventions in the 1990s

and 2000s, such as the establishment of the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) and the Amnesty Programme (2009), prioritized infrastructural development and disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) over structural transformation (Obi, 2009; Aghedo & Osumah, 2014). Although these initiatives reduced large-scale violence, they failed to address the root causes of conflict, including environmental injustice, corporate impunity and community disenfranchisement (Zalik, 2004; Ukiwo, 2011).

Recent scholarship critiques the technocratic and top-down nature of many peacebuilding strategies, arguing that they often marginalize local voices and overlook the socio-ecological dimensions of insecurity (Ibeanu & Luckham, 2020). Scholars advocate a shift towards inclusive, rights-based, and environmentally conscious peacebuilding approaches that integrate local knowledge, cultural values and community agency (Anugwom, 2021). Such approaches align with the principles of "positive peace", not merely the absence of violence but the presence of justice, equity and sustainable development (Galtung, 1996).

Rethinking Strategies: Towards a Rights-based and Eco-peacebuilding Framework
The emerging literature calls for reimagining of peacebuilding strategies in resource-rich but conflict-prone regions, like the Niger Delta. Central to this rethinking is the integration of HRE and environmental security into policy, education and practice. Scholars argue that peace cannot be sustained without environmental justice, and environmental security cannot be achieved without respect for human rights (Schilling et al., 2018). A rights-based eco-peacebuilding framework would combine three critical elements:

Human Rights Literacy: Empowering communities with knowledge of their legal and constitutional rights related to the environment and participation in governance;
Environmental Governance Reform: Strengthening regulatory institutions, enhancing transparency and enforcing corporate accountability; and Community Participation: Creating platforms for inclusive dialogue, local ownership of peacebuilding initiatives and collaborative resource management.

Case studies such as the UNEP-led Ogoniland clean-up project and community-driven environmental monitoring initiatives illustrate the potential of participatory, rights-informed approaches to build trust, enhance resilience and prevent conflict (UNEP, 2016; Amnesty International, 2022). Despite growing recognition of the HRE-environmental security intersection, significant gaps remain. Much of the scholarship focuses on legal and policy frameworks, with limited attention to how HRE can be operationalized at the grassroots level in resource-dependent regions. Moreover, empirical research on the long-term impacts of rights-based environmental education on peacebuilding outcomes in the Niger Delta is still scarce. Addressing these gaps requires interdisciplinary research that integrates insights from human rights law, environmental science, peace studies and community development.

The literature revealed growing consensus that sustainable peace in oil-producing communities cannot be achieved without integrating HRE and environmental security into peacebuilding frameworks. Historical approaches have often prioritized economic development and state security over justice and participation, resulting in limited success. As contemporary scholarship demonstrates, empowering communities through HRE, strengthening environmental governance and embedding rights-based approaches are essential for addressing the structural drivers of conflict in the Niger Delta. This integrated perspective provides a critical foundation for rethinking peacebuilding strategies that are not only conflict-sensitive but also justice-oriented and environmentally sustainable.

Relationship between Human Rights Education and Environmental Security in Promoting Peace and Social Justice in Oil-producing Communities of the Niger Delta

The relationship between HRE and environmental security in the Niger Delta is both direct and multidimensional, shaping the dynamics of peacebuilding, social justice and community resilience in oil-producing communities. Evidence from the fieldwork revealed that HRE significantly enhances community capacity to understand, claim and defend environmental rights, thereby fostering more equitable relations between local populations, the state and oil corporations.

Observation showed that the majority of residents have the likelihood of reporting pollution incidents after participating in rights-awareness initiatives, and also pointed out increased participation in community decision-making. This suggests that HRE not only equips individuals with knowledge about their entitlements but also strengthens their agency to act collectively in defence of environmental well-being. Interviews with NGO representatives and local leaders further revealed that trained communities were better able to document oil spills, demand compensation and advocate remediation. Such actions contribute to improved environmental governance and accountability, which are essential components of environmental security.

Human rights education also plays a crucial role in reducing information asymmetry, a persistent challenge in the Niger Delta, where corporate and state actors often exploit community ignorance of legal and regulatory frameworks. With enhanced rights literacy, communities are more adept at using environmental laws, filing formal complaints and engaging in policy dialogues. This shift from passive victimhood to active rights-claiming aligns with the human security paradigm, which emphasizes empowerment and participation as prerequisites for sustainable peace (UNDP, 1994; Schlosberg, 2013).

However, there are also structural constraints that limit the transformative potential of HRE. The key informants noted that, while communities increasingly assert their rights, bureaucratic inertia, weak regulatory enforcement and corporate resistance often impede redress. In some cases, rights claimants face intimidation or reprisals, underscoring the need for complementary institutional reforms, including legal aid services, whistle-blower protection and expedited grievance mechanisms.

Moreover, HRE fosters social cohesion and collective action, as knowledge-sharing initiatives often transcend ethnic and communal divides, creating networks united by shared environmental struggles. Such collaborative efforts reduce the likelihood of confrontation, replacing it with lawful advocacy and negotiation, directly contributing to peacefulness and socio-economic justice.

In sum, HRE is a powerful enabler of environmental security and a catalyst for peaceful transformation in the Niger Delta. Empowering communities with the knowledge, confidence and tools to demand accountability means that HRE not only contains environmental degradation but also advances broader goals of justice, inclusion and sustainable peace.

Extent to Which Environmental Degradation and Human Rights Violations Contribute to Conflict and Insecurity in the Niger Delta Region

Environmental degradation and human rights violations are deeply intertwined with the patterns of conflict and insecurity in the Niger Delta, shaping the region's socio-political landscape and fuelling cycles of unrest. Evidence from the study underscores the extent to which ecological harm, driven by decades of oil exploration, directly undermines livelihoods, erodes trust in governance, and generates grievances that escalate into violent confrontations.

The majority of the people in highly-impacted communities reported significant livelihood losses, particularly in fishing and farming, as a result of pollution and ecosystem damage. This widespread economic displacement has profound human security implications: when basic means of survival are compromised, frustration and resentment intensify. Some of the people in communities attributed local unrest within the past five years to environmental degradation and perceived injustices, highlighting the strong causal link between ecological decline and conflict dynamics.

Community leaders, NGO workers, and security officials consistently identified unresolved oil spills, inadequate remediation, prolonged compensation disputes and gas flaring as persistent triggers of protests, sabotage and confrontations with state forces. These findings reflect the resource curse and environmental justice theories, which posit that unequal distribution of resource benefits and environmental burdens foster social discontent and collective action. Across the Niger Delta, such discontent often escalates from peaceful protest to violent militancy when legitimate grievances are ignored or suppressed.

Human rights violations further exacerbate insecurity. Communities reporting environmental harm often face intimidation, arbitrary arrests, or violent crackdowns when they mobilize for redress. Such abuses deepen mistrust in state institutions and reinforce perceptions of systemic marginalization. This delegitimization of authority fuels radicalization among disillusioned youth, who may view armed resistance as the only viable means to demand justice.

The relationship between environmental degradation, rights violations and conflict is also cyclical. Ecological harm creates grievances that lead to unrest, which, in turn, provokes militarized responses and further human rights abuses, perpetuating instability. The failure to ensure corporate accountability and protect citizens' rights signals institutional weakness, emboldening non-state actors and creating fertile ground for criminality, particularly oil theft and insurgency.

Environmental degradation and human rights violations are not peripheral issues but central drivers of conflict in the Niger Delta. Curbing security threats requires more than security interventions; it demands environmental remediation, equitable resource governance, effective compensation frameworks and protection of rights in order to break the cycle of grievance and violence.

Effectiveness of Existing Peacebuilding Strategies and Gaps in the Current Approaches to Conflict Prevention and Resolution in Oil-impacted Communities

The existing peacebuilding strategies in oil-impacted communities of the Niger Delta reveal a complex landscape of partial successes, persistent shortcomings, and significant structural gaps that continue to undermine sustainable peace and conflict prevention. Although multiple initiatives, ranging from government-led interventions and corporate social responsibility (CSR) projects to community-based peacebuilding efforts, have been implemented, their overall impact remains limited due to fragmented design, inadequate inclusivity and weak institutional support.

Government initiatives, such as the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) and the Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs, have focused primarily on infrastructure

development and economic empowerment as tools for peace. While these programmes have contributed to visible improvements in roads, schools and job creation schemes, their peacebuilding impact has been muted by corruption, poor project implementation and misalignment with local needs. Moreover, these initiatives often address the symptoms of conflict (underdevelopment and unemployment) without tackling the underlying causes, such as environmental degradation, resource injustice and human rights violations.

Corporate actors, particularly multinational oil companies, have also pursued CSR and community development agreements aimed at mitigating tensions. These efforts include scholarship programmes, health centres and skill acquisition schemes. However, they frequently operate as transactional interventions designed to secure operational stability rather than build sustainable peace. Communities often perceive them as tokenistic or insufficient, particularly when environmental remediation and accountability for oil spills remain unaddressed. As a result, such initiatives may temporarily reduce unrest but fail to resolve deeper grievances.

Community-driven peacebuilding efforts, including dialogue forums and traditional mediation processes, have been more effective in fostering trust and facilitating localized conflict resolution. They leverage indigenous knowledge and social networks to de-escalate tensions and promote coexistence. The grassroots approaches are often under-resourced and lack formal linkage with state or corporate mechanisms, limiting their scalability and long-term impact.

Key gaps persist in the current peacebuilding architecture. First, there is insufficient integration among environmental justice, human rights and peacebuilding strategies, an omission that weakens the capacity to address root causes. Second, youth and women, who are disproportionately affected by conflict, remain underrepresented in decision-making processes. Third, there is a lack of sustained monitoring, evaluation and accountability mechanisms to assess and adapt interventions over time.

While existing strategies have achieved some localized successes, they remain largely reactive, fragmented and top-down. Effective conflict prevention in the

Niger Delta requires a paradigm shift towards inclusive, rights-based and environmentally-grounded peacebuilding approaches that combine state, corporate and community efforts into a coherent, long-term framework.

Human rights-based and Environmentally-sensitive Peacebuilding Framework That Empowers Local Communities

A human rights-based and environmentally-sensitive peacebuilding framework for the Niger Delta region of Nigeria should integrate rights literacy, community participation, institutional accountability and ecological restoration into a cohesive strategy. The first step is that rights education and legal empowerment must equip all concerned communities with knowledge to claim environmental justice, document, map and report violations, and engage in policy processes. Secondly, inclusive governance structures, involving youth, women, traditional leaders and civil society organisations, should co-design and monitor peacebuilding initiatives to ensure local ownership. Thirdly, accountability mechanisms, such as independent environmental tribunals, transparent grievance systems and corporate liability standards, are essential to addressing abuses and deterring future violations. Interventions for **s**ustainable development clean-up programmes, alternative livelihoods and environmental rehabilitation should be integrated into conflict-prevention initiatives so as to shift peacebuilding from reactive responses to proactive conflict transformation that critically checks the root causes of conflict and to address social justice, ecological security and lasting peace in the Niger Delta.

Conclusion

Human rights education and environmental security are critical, interdependent pillars for achieving sustainable peace and justice in the oil-producing communities of the Niger Delta. Decades of environmental degradation, socio-economic marginalization and human rights violations have entrenched a cycle of conflict and underdevelopment in the region. The findings underscore the fact that inadequate awareness of rights, limited access to justice, weak institutional capacity and extractive practices without environmental accountability have perpetuated grievances and mistrust of the state and oil companies.

Human rights education is as a transformative tool that empowers local communities with the knowledge and agency to demand accountability, participate meaningfully in governance and advocate equitable resource management. At the same time, securing the environment through remediation, regulation and sustainable livelihood initiatives is essential for reducing structural violence and preventing new conflicts. Together, they provide a foundation for inclusive peacebuilding that addresses both the root causes and manifestations of insecurity.

The established peacebuilding strategies in the Niger Delta have largely focused on short-term conflict management rather than systemic transformation. Approaches such as amnesty, corporate social responsibility projects and ad-hoc dialogue initiatives have yielded limited results because they fail to integrate human rights, environmental justice and community empowerment into a coherent framework. A paradigm shift is therefore needed, one that combines legal and institutional reforms, participatory governance, robust environmental regulation and education-driven empowerment.

The proposed rights-based and environmentally sensitive peacebuilding framework provides a pathway for such transformation. By embedding HRE in formal and informal education systems, strengthening accountability mechanisms, ensuring inclusive decision-making and prioritizing ecological restoration, it is possible to create conditions for enduring peace, social justice and human security in the Niger Delta. It is noteworthy that, when one considers the future of peacebuilding in oil-producing communities, it can be argued that sustainable peace cannot exist without regarding human rights and environmental integrity, which are supposed to protect humanity. A holistic, community-centred, and justice-oriented approach is not only a moral imperative but also a strategic necessity for the stability and development of the Niger Delta and Nigeria, at large.

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