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The Influence of Poverty and Unemployment on Child Labour in Oil-Producing Communities of the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria

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ABSTRACT
Environmental degradation in the Niger Delta has disrupted traditional livelihoods dependent on land and water. This disruption has deepened household poverty and unemployment, creating conditions that make children vulnerable to labour. This study examines how poverty and unemployment influence child labour in oil-producing communities of the Niger Delta. Environmental degradation from oil spills and gas flaring has undermined traditional livelihoods in farming and fishing, deepening household economic vulnerability. Anchored on Ostrom's Social-Ecological Systems Theory, the study argues that household adaptation to resource collapse manifests as child labour. A cross-sectional household survey in Rivers, Bayelsa States was conducted using a structured questionnaire. Analysis using descriptive statistics, and regression revealed that poverty and unemployment are significant predictors of child labour, jointly explaining 61% of its variance. Poverty emerged as the stronger driver, linked to inability to afford school fees and meet basic needs, while unemployment linked to loss of adult livelihoods pushes children into menial and informal oil-related work. The study recommends livelihood restoration, adult employment creation, and social protection programmes to reduce dependence on child income.
Keywords: child labour, poverty, unemployment, environmental degradation

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Niger Delta Region of Nigeria is endowed with crude oil and gas resources that drive the national economy and attract multinational corporations (Ezeh et al., 2024; United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), 2011). However, the extraction process has led to widespread environmental degradation through oil spills, gas flaring, and pollution (Nwosu & Okafor, 2023). Despite having enormous amount of crude oil and gas, resource scarcity in the Niger Delta region is a critical environmental factor that drives child labour practices, particularly in the context of diminished access to essential resources such as clean water, arable land, and fish stocks. The region's reliance on natural resources for livelihoods, coupled with environmental degradation, exacerbates scarcity challenges and pushes children into exploitative labour situations (ILO, 2020). Siloko et al. (2025) looked at the prevalence of child labour in the Niger Delta region and found that child labour practice is directly linked to environmental degradation, with children being forced to work in hazardous conditions in order to support their families. This degradation has damaged farmlands and fisheries, which are central to the livelihoods loss, food insecurity and income decline of host communities (Okeke & Bello, 2022).

As household incomes decline and employment opportunities shrink, families face increasing economic pressure (Etekpe & Isaac, 2021). In such contexts, children often become part of the household survival strategy (United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 2022).

While literature has established the existence of environmental degradation and child labour in the region, less attention has been given to how poverty and unemployment specifically mediate their relationship. This paper therefore examines the influence of poverty and unemployment on child labour in oil-producing communities of the Niger Delta. The central argument is that socio-economic deprivation, triggered by environmental decline, functions as a primary driver of child labour.

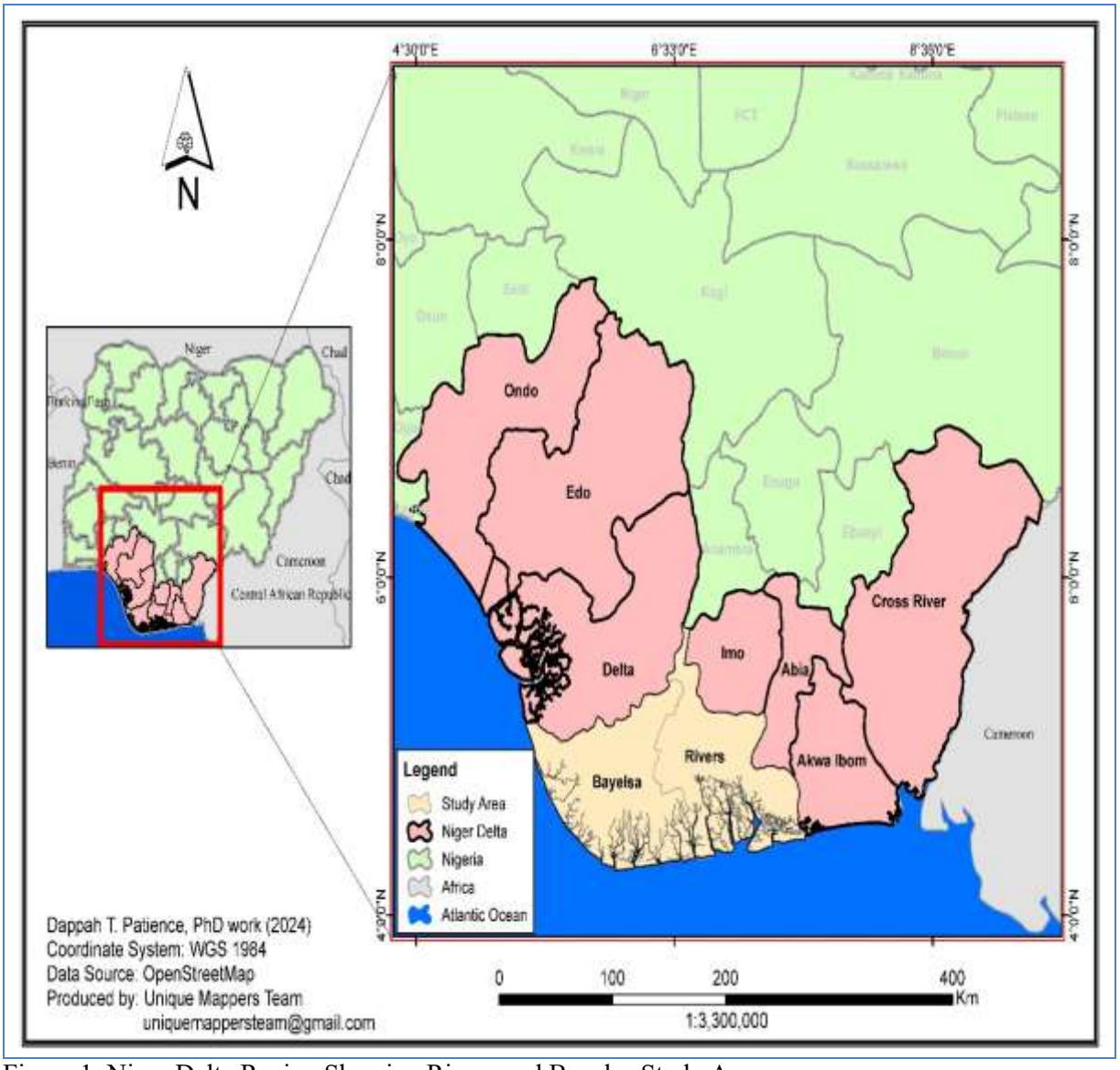

Figure.1: Niger Delta Region Showing Rivers and Bayelsa Study Area

2.0 Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Environmental Degradation and Livelihood Loss

One prominent environmental factor is oil pollution, particularly in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria where child labour practices thrive. This has also helped caused widespread environmental destruction from oil exploration and production; oil spills have completely contaminated water sources, presenting

harmful effects on small-scale farmer's livelihood threatening child labour exploitation. Other basic sources of living and income for the communities, such as agricultural terraces mangrove forests and aquifers are ruined by oil pollution in Niger Delta region (Ajaegbu et al., 2024). This increased reliance on child labour as a means to survive has the same destabilizing force that can transform environmental degradation into its own feedback loop, more people dispossessed of their lands and access to natural resources will only lead them further into poverty, which then increases vulnerability. Studies show that decades of oil exploration have degraded land, water, and air in the Niger Delta (Ezeh et al., 2024). This has undermined agriculture and fishing, leading to food insecurity and income loss (Okeke & Bello, 2022).

2.2 Poverty, Unemployment and Child Labour

Poverty erodes a household's capacity to meet basic needs and invest in children's education (Adeola & Adesina, 2021). Unemployment further reduces adult earning power, pushing economic responsibilities onto children (Olusegun & Bello, 2023). In resource-dependent communities, the loss of livelihoods often results in children being withdrawn from school and engaged in informal work (Etekpe & Isaac, 2021; UNICEF, 2022). Children in rural settings are more exposed to environmental stress and shocks than urban children, and poorer households tend to respond by disrupting their children's education and sending them to work (ILO, 2025; UNICEF, 2025).

2.3 Theoretical Framework: Social-Ecological Systems Theory

This paper adopts Elinor Ostrom's Social-Ecological Systems Theory (1997). The theory explains interactions between resource systems and resource users. Here, the resource system includes land and water degraded by oil and gas activities, while resource users are households and children dependent on these resources. Ostrom (1997) argues that when resource systems are degraded, users adapt. In the Niger Delta, adaptation manifests as increased child labour as a coping strategy for household survival.

2.3.1 Poverty, Unemployment and Child Labour: A Conceptual Link

It is also very essential to understand that child labour denote any form of work or economic activity performed by children that is exploitative, hazardous, and interferes with their education and development, this is the root cause of poverty and underdevelopment in the society (National Bureau of Statistics, NBS, 2020).

In examining the context of child labour in Nigeria, it is important to consider how socio-economic factors such as poverty and unemployment have contributed to its prevalence over time. This situation, compounded by high levels of poverty and unemployment, has pushed many children into exploitative labour situations to contribute to their families' income or survive on their own (International Labour Organisation, ILO & NBS, 2024; Onanuga, 2020),

Poverty limits access to food, healthcare, and education (Adeola & Adesina, 2021). In oil-producing communities where traditional occupations have collapsed, poverty becomes structural and intergenerational (Nwosu & Okafor, 2023). Parents may withdraw children from school to engage in domestic work, trading, or hazardous labour.

Unemployment compounds this. Environmental damage reduces employment in agriculture and fishing (Olusegun & Bello, 2023). With fewer income-earning adults, children become alternative labour sources. They are often absorbed into informal sectors because they are accessible and require low wages (Etekpe & Isaac, 2021).

This creates a cycle: environmental degradation → livelihood loss → poverty and unemployment → child labour. The cycle persists where alternative economic opportunities are scarce and social protection is weak (Okeke & Bello, 2022).

3.0 METHODOLOGY AND DATA SOURCE

The study adopted a cross-sectional survey design. The study area comprised selected oil-producing communities in Rivers and Bayelsa, chosen for intensity of oil activities and livelihood disruption. The population comprised households with children aged 5-17 years. Respondents were selected using

multistage sampling (2) states purposively selected, (4 LGAs per state, 2 communities per LGA), households systematically selected based on Taro Yamane formula.

Data were collected with a structured questionnaire measured on various points Likert scale. The instrument covered demographics, poverty indicators ([income, livelihood, occupation, school affordability), unemployment and child labour (type and hours of work]. Validity was established by three experts in sociology and environmental studies. Reliability from a pilot study (n=40) yielded Cronbach Alpha values of 0.82 for poverty, 0.79 for unemployment and 0.85 for child labour. Fieldwork was conducted face-to-face by trained assistants over three weeks with informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality ensured. Ethical approval was obtained and no child was interviewed without parental consent. Data were analyzed with SPSS using mean, standard deviation, and multiple regression at 0.05 significance level.

4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic analysis shows majority of respondents [68%] were previously engaged in farming and fishing, with current average monthly income below ₦30,000, indicating pervasive poverty.

4.1 Livelihood,/Occupational , and Unemployed Status

The distribution of respondents by Livelihood/Occupation in Table 4.1 shows that most respondents (32.2%) were engaged in primary-sector occupations such as fishing and farming activities directly dependent on the environment.

Table 4.1: Distribution of Respondents by Occupation/Livelihood

Livelihood/Occupation	Frequency(n)	Percentage (%)
Fishermen/Farmers	128	32.2
Traders/Artisans	91	22.9
Civil Servants	67	16.8
Unemployed	102	28.2
Total	**398**	**100.0**

Source: Author's Compilation, 2026

It was recorded at the time of this study that the people across the study communities were engaged in primary-sector occupations such as farming, fishing, hunting and little trading before the operation of the oil and gas flaring activities of the oil companies. The people were directly dependent on the environment. Their main sources of livelihood are the water/river for fishing and other sea food collections, land/soil for farming and hunting. That the degraded environment (the river/ecosystem) has drastically reduced the livelihood of these Communities.

Table 4.1 reported that 16.6% of the respondents are employed as Civil Servants, 32.2% are engaged in fishing and farming, while 28.2% are unemployed.

The study also noticed and recorded that despite the location of oil and gas exploration facilities (Gas flow stations, oil wells and rigs) in these Communities, the level of unemployment is still very high; the number of unemployed adults within the working/ employable and economically active age bracket (18–45) is still very high due to the low employment opportunities given to the people of the host communities.

Poverty/Income as a Driver

The data on Table 4.2 shows that income level significantly predict child labour involvement. Children from higher-income households were 46% less likely to be involved in labour. The findings suggest that child labour in environmentally degraded communities is also driven by income as one of the socio-economic conditions that increases poverty.

Table 4.2: Logistic Regression Coefficient.

Predictor	B	SE	Wald	P	OR (B))	(Exp 95% CI for OR
Environmental degradation experienced	0.03	0.53	0.05	.957	1.03	[0.37, 2.90]
Degradation affects livelihood	1.11	0.79	1.40	.162	3.02	[0.64, 14.18]
Monthly household income level	-0.614	0.211	8.46	.004	0.54	
Constant	2.94	1.97	1.49	.136	18.81	—

Note. OR = odds ratio; CI = confidence interval. CIs are based on 96% confidence.

The overall model was statistically significant, $\chi^2(5) = 39.50$, $p < .001$, explaining 24.9% of variance (Nagelkerke $R^2 = .249$). Model fit was adequate (Hosmer–Leme show $p = .681$).

Confirming the results, Income level negatively predicted child labour ($B = –.614$, $p = .004$). Children from higher-income households were 46% less likely to be involved in labour.

That despite the location of oil and gas facilities and oil servicing companies, the level of income in all the sample communities is still low due to the destruction of their main sources of livelihood and few persons are in low cadre of employment. The low economic activities; low fishing/sea foods, farming and hunting yield has contributed to the reduction in their income level.

Where p represents the probability that a household reports at least one child engaged in labour. The coefficient values indicate the direction and magnitude of influence each socio-economic predictor has on the log-odds of child labour. However, in this study, all predictors had p-values greater than .05, showing that none of the variables significantly contributed to predicting the presence of child labour.

Although the coefficients point in theoretically meaningful directions for example, the negative coefficient for education ($B = −0.504$) implies that higher parental education may reduce the likelihood of child labour (odds ratio = 0.604) these effects are not statistically reliable given the wide confidence intervals and lack of significance. Similarly, household income and household size displayed negligible and statistically insignificant influence on child labour involvement.

The classification results provide further insight into the model's limitations. The model predicted every case as "child labour present," resulting in a superficially high accuracy of 97.9%.

Taken together, these findings reveal that child labour in the study communities is nearly universal and not differentiated by variations in household socio-economic status. The logistic regression equation demonstrates that even when entered simultaneously income, perceived poverty level, and household size do not significantly alter the log-odds of child labour. This pattern suggests that the socio-economic vulnerability in these environmentally degraded communities is widespread and structural rather than concentrated household profiles. To examine whether socio-economic characteristics such as income/poverty influence the likelihood of child labour, logistic regression results were not statistically significant due to the near universality of child labour in the sampled communities. This suggests that poverty is so widespread that nearly all households, regardless of differences in income, unemployed/employed, rely on child labour as a survival strategy.

Environmental degradation has eroded livelihoods across all demographic sectors, forcing nearly every household regardless of income category or education level to rely on child labour as a survival strategy. The regression results therefore support the interpretation that child labour in the Niger Delta is driven more by systemic livelihood collapse caused by environmental damage than by household-level socio-economic variation. Consequently, policies aimed at reducing child labour in these communities must go beyond traditional poverty-targeting approaches. Instead, intervention must address the structural depletion of natural resources, strengthen social safety nets, and create sustainable livelihood pathways to reduce the widespread dependence on child labour.

These findings indicate the engagement of children in child labour in the Niger Delta reflects survival logic rather than parental preference (Adeola & Adesina, 2021). In the Niger Delta, this is directly tied to environmental change (Ezeh et al., 2024). The Social-Ecological Systems lens confirms that when resource systems collapse, household adaptation includes deploying children as economic contributors (Ostrom, 1997). This aligns with studies noting that policies addressing child labour in isolation, without tackling underlying poverty and unemployment are unlikely to succeed (Olusegun & Bello, 2023). Sustainable solutions must restore livelihoods while protecting children's rights (UNICEF, 2022). Nnama-Okechukwu and Erhumwunse (2021) discovered that intervention strategies such as family strengthening programmes and parenting skill training can be helpful. This study was conducted against the backdrop of the suffering of vulnerable children, which poses a substantial impediment to achieving targets 1-5 of the Sustainable Development Goal (SDGs) in Nigeria. Given the growing number of children classified as vulnerable and in need of care and protection, there is a need to prioritize resources and create social intervention programmes to address underlying causes.

5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings demonstrate a tightly linked cycle in which environmental degradation undermines livelihoods, and household poverty drives child labour. Poverty and unemployment are critical pathways through which environmental degradation leads to child labour in the Niger Delta. To break this cycle:

1. Reduce pollution in the host communities to enable those that can carry-on with their natural economic activities to improve their income and living conditions.
2. Environmental/ Livelihood Restoration: Comprehensive remediation of polluted farmlands and water bodies per UNEP recommendations to restore farming/fishing livelihoods.
3. Adult Employment Creation: Main stream employments of the oil & gas companies should be extended to the host communities and not just low-level contract employments. The companies and the Government should organize more empowerment for small scale businesses in the host communities.
4. Sustainable Empowerment programmes; Skills acquisition, aquaculture, alternative livelihood schemes, inclusion in oil company community development.
5. Social Protection: Conditional cash transfers, school feeding, free basic education, scholarships to reduce dependence on child income.
6. Policy Integration and Enforcement: Align environmental regulations [NOSDRA], labour laws, Child Rights Act and NAPTIP Act; strengthen community monitoring committees with child protection focus.

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