From Climate Debt to Ecological Debt: An Earth-Eco-Socialist Reframing of the Niger Delta Crisis

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ABSTRACT

The dominant framework for addressing environmental injustice in the Global South is the concept of *climate debt*. This framework focuses on historical carbon emissions. It proposes remedies through climate finance, technology transfer, and market-based mechanisms. However, it does not adequately capture the broader ecological destruction experienced in regions such as the Niger Delta. This paper argues that the crisis should be understood as an *ecological debt* crisis, rather than merely a climate debt problem. The study adopts an *Earth-Eco-Socialist* theoretical framework and uses the Niger Delta as a case study. It employs qualitative and critical analysis of literature on capitalist exploitation, ecological degradation, environmental justice, and sustainability. The paper examines how oil extraction, gas flaring, pollution, and community dispossession reflect deeper patterns of ecological exploitation affecting both humans and nonhuman nature. The findings show that climate debt discourse is limited. It reduces environmental harm to carbon accounting and promotes market-based solutions that fail to address the root causes of ecological degradation. In contrast, ecological debt captures the impacts of extraction, biodiversity loss, ecosystem destruction, and livelihood displacement. The Niger Delta demonstrates how capitalist accumulation generates long-term ecological and social harm that cannot be resolved through financial compensation alone. The paper concludes that Earth-Eco-Socialism provides a more comprehensive framework for environmental justice and sustainability. Moving from climate debt to ecological debt supports more transformative and reparative responses to ecological crises in the Global South.

Keywords: Capitalist Exploitation, Climate Debt, Earth-Eco-Socialism, Ecological Debt, Environmental Justice, and Niger Delta.

INTRODUCTION

The global discourse on environmental crisis has been dominated by the language of carbon, emissions, and "climate debt." In international negotiations, the obligations of the Global North are quantified through atmospheric contributions and addressed through financial transfers, technology agreements, and market mechanisms. Yet, this framing remains inadequate for comprehending the depth and character of ecological collapse in the Global South. Environmental crises in places such as the Niger Delta, the Congo Basin, and the Sahel cannot be reduced to tonnes of CO_2. They are crises of extraction, dispossession, and the systematic violation of both human communities and nonhuman life. Oil spills coat mangroves. Gas flaring poisons air and farmland. Rivers that once sustained fishing communities are rendered lifeless. These are not externalities of an otherwise benign system. They are the direct consequences of capitalist practices that treat nature and labor as disposable inputs for perpetual material growth (Ojomo, 2024, p. 4; Foster, 2000, p. 12).

This paper contends that the classical free-market approach to sustainability, with its reliance on pricing, trading, and technological fixes, is insufficient for addressing the roots of ecological degradation (Ojomo, 2024, p. 7; Harvey, 2014, p. 213). The market cannot repair what the market logic destroys. To continue framing Global North obligations as "climate debt" is to accept the terms of that same logic as debt as

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financial, creditors as states, and repayment as transactional. As Martínez-Alier has argued, the concept of "ecological debt" exposes a broader history of unequal ecological exchange that carbon accounting obscures (Martínez-Alier, 2002, p. 228). Against this, I advance the *Earth-Eco-Socialist* paradigm. This model is premised on the conviction that development and social progress must address social issues and environmental challenges simultaneously, without compromising human needs or ecological integrity (Ojomo, 2024, p. 11). It rejects the capitalist fixation on endless growth and insists on harmonizing human-nature relations through legislation, democratic processes, and cooperative environmental management (Ojomo, 2024, p. 13; Löwy, 2015, p. 41).

From this standpoint, what we confront is not merely a climate debt but an *ecological debt crisis*. It is a crisis produced by the structural exploitation of humans and nonhumans (Ojomo, 2024, p. 5; Kovel, 2007, p. 3), and it demands reparative, not transactional, justice. Using the Niger Delta as illustration, I argue that Earth-Eco-Socialism offers both diagnosis and praxis. Niger Delta is selected here because it represents one of the most concentrated sites of long-term fossil fuel extraction and ecological degradation in Africa (Ojomo, 2024). Its history of oil exploitation, environmental pollution, and socio-political conflict makes it a paradigmatic case for examining the material realities of ecological debt. Also, because Niger Delta is one of the most visible sites where ecological destruction, capitalist extraction, and community dispossession intersect in a sustained and systemic manner. It names the crisis correctly and outlines the legislative and ethical mechanisms necessary for redress. Only by safeguarding the Earth as home to both humans and nonhumans can we think sustainability in any meaningful sense (Ojomo, 2024, p. 15).

CAPITALIST EXPLOITATION AS ECOLOGICAL DRIVER

The ecological debt crisis in the Global South is not an accident of poor regulation or technological lag. It is a structural outcome of capitalist exploitation. Capitalism, as a mode of production, requires the continuous expansion of markets and the relentless transformation of nature into commodities (Foster, 2000, p. 12). This imperative produces what O'Connor (1998, p. 165) terms the "second contradiction of capitalism" which is the tendency of capital to impair its own conditions of production by degrading the very ecological and social systems on which it depends. Environmental degradation in the Niger Delta exemplifies this contradiction. The region's oil wealth has been extracted since the 1950s through joint ventures between multinational corporations and the Nigerian state. Yet, the benefits of this extraction have not accrued to local communities. Instead, gas flaring, oil spills, and deforestation have compromised air, water, and soil quality, rendering fishing and farming, which are the primary livelihoods, untenable (Ojomo, 2024, p. 6). This is not a failure of capitalism, but its logical expression that nature and labour are treated as "free gifts" to capital, externalized from accounting while being central to accumulation (Moore, 2015, p. 13).

The classical free-market approach misreads this dynamic. It presumes that environmental harm can be corrected through pricing mechanisms, property rights, and market incentives. Yet, such instruments reproduce the commodity logic that caused the crisis (Ojomo, 2024, p. 7; Harvey, 2014, p. 213). Carbon markets, for instance, do not challenge extraction, they financialize the atmosphere and create new sites for accumulation (Bumpus & Liverman, 2008, p. 135). Offsetting schemes allow polluters in the Global North to purchase the right to continue emissions, while displacing responsibility onto forests and lands in the Global South. Thus, the market does not resolve ecological debt. It monetizes it. Earth-Eco-Socialism departs from this paradigm by insisting that the capitalist fixation on perpetual material growth undermines the potential for meaningful existence for many (Ojomo, 2024, p. 9). Growth, under capitalism, is not neutral development, but the expansion of exploitation. It requires the continuous appropriation of human labour and nonhuman life. As Kovel (2007, p. 3) argues, capital's "eco-destructive" tendency is intrinsic, not contingent. It cannot be reformed through green technology or ethical consumption because its core logic is the domination of nature.

What is required, then, is not better market regulation, but a reordering of human-nature relations. This begins with naming exploitation as the driver. The ecological debt crisis is the accumulated ledger of unpaid harm: destroyed mangroves, poisoned water tables, dislocated communities, and extinct species. It is owed not merely in carbon, but in life itself. Recognizing this shifts the burden of response from financial compensation to reparative justice, legislative enforcement, and democratic control of ecological conditions (Ojomo, 2024, p. 11; Löwy, 2015, p. 41).

THE EARTH-ECO-SOCIALIST FRAMEWORK

Earth-Eco-Socialism is not merely an ethical appeal to "save the environment." It is a political-economic paradigm that confronts the structural roots of ecological collapse. Earth-Eco-Socialism differs from conventional eco-socialist approaches in scope and emphasis. Eco-socialism primarily focuses on reconciling ecological sustainability with socialist political economy (Löwy, 2015; Kovel, 2007). It extends this by explicitly centring the Earth as a shared ontological and ethical home of both human and nonhuman life. It, therefore, shifts eco-socialist analysis from a primarily socio-economic critique to a broader earth-centred ethical ontology. Departing from classical free-market models of sustainability, it holds that the environmental crises of the Global South cannot be resolved within a system premised on perpetual material growth and the commodification of nature (Ojomo, 2024, p. 11). Instead, Earth-Eco-Socialism proposes a fundamental reconstitution of human-nature relations, grounded in three interlocking commitments: ethical stewardship, democratic legislation, and cooperative environmental management.

First, ethical stewardship rejects the anthropocentric hierarchy that reduces nonhuman life to "resources." It affirms the intrinsic value of ecosystems and insists that meaningful existence for humans is inseparable from the flourishing of nonhumans (Ojomo, 2024, p. 13). This echoes what Shiva (2005, p. 7) describes as "Earth Democracy," the recognition that we are members of an Earth community, not masters of it. Stewardship, in this sense, is not charity toward nature but responsibility within a web of life (Moore, 2015, p. 28).

Second, Earth-Eco-Socialism is mediated through legislation and democratic processes. The crisis is political, and its resolution must be political. Flexible environmental legislation, rigorously enforced, becomes the mechanism for constraining capital's extractive reach (Ojomo, 2024, p. 14). This is not state socialism in the authoritarian sense, but what Löwy (2015, p. 41) calls "democratic eco-socialist planning," a collective, participatory decision-making over production, consumption, and ecological limits. Law here functions not to facilitate markets, but to subordinate them to social and ecological needs.

Third, cooperative environmental management replaces private accumulation with communal guardianship. In the context of the Niger Delta, this means shifting control of degraded land and waterways from oil corporations to community trusteeships, supported by scientific and technical expertise (Ojomo, 2024, p. 15). Such a model aligns with Martínez-Alier's (2002, p. 230) "environmentalism of the poor," wherein those who depend directly on ecosystems for survival become the primary agents of their defence. Cooperation is not idealism; it is the material condition for regeneration.

Crucially, Earth-Eco-Socialism refuses the false choice between development and ecology. It maintains that development and social progress must address social issues and environmental challenges simultaneously, without compromising human needs (Ojomo, 2024, p. 11). This requires abandoning GDP as a measure of progress and centring use-value – food, water, health, shelter, culture – over exchange-value (Kovel, 2007, p. 37). The goal is not "degrowth" as austerity, but what Salleh (2017, p. 64) terms "a culture of provisioning," meeting needs within ecological boundaries through labour that is life-affirming rather than exploitative. Thus, Earth-Eco-Socialism provides both critique and program. It diagnoses capitalist exploitation as the driver of ecological debt and prescribes a framework that is legislative, democratic, and cooperative. It harmonizes human-nature relations not through market signals, but through political and ethical commitments to the Earth as home to both humans and nonhumans.

NAMING THE CRISIS: FROM CLIMATE DEBT TO ECOLOGICAL DEBT

The language of "climate debt" dominates international environmental negotiations. Climate debt scholarship has been valuable in highlighting historical responsibility for greenhouse gas emissions and unequal atmospheric appropriation. However, it remains incomplete because it does not fully capture the broader ecological and socio-material dimensions of environmental harm. It frames the obligations of the Global North as a carbon imbalance, including historical emissions exceeding a fair atmospheric share, to be repaid through climate finance, technology transfer, and adaptation funds. Yet this framing is profoundly inadequate. It reduces ecological violence to a single metric of CO_2 and converts systemic harm into a transactional ledger (Ojomo, 2024, p. 5). In doing so, it obscures the totality of extraction and reproduces the market logic that produced the crisis.

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Ecological debt, by contrast, names the cumulative harm inflicted by capitalist exploitation on both human and nonhuman entities (Martínez-Alier, 2002, p. 228; Ojomo, 2024, p. 6). It, therefore, expands the analytical scope beyond carbon accounting to include ecosystem destruction, biodiversity loss, and livelihood dislocation. It encompasses not only atmospheric pollution, but deforestation, biodiversity loss, soil depletion, water contamination, and the destruction of livelihoods. It is a debt measured in mangroves destroyed by oil spills, in fisheries collapsed by toxic discharge, and in communities dispossessed of land and meaning (Ojomo, 2024, p. 6). As Warlenius et al. (2015, p. 24) argue, ecological debt arises from "ecologically unequal exchange," the systematic transfer of natural wealth and sinks from the Global South to sustain accumulation in the Global North.

This redefinition shifts the identity of the creditor. In climate debt discourse, states are the primary claimants and negotiators. Ecological debt recognizes that the true creditors are exploited communities and ecosystems themselves (Ojomo, 2024, p. 10). The Ijaw fishing community in the Niger Delta does not experience harm as a national carbon deficit, but as poisoned creeks, stillborn fish, and chronic respiratory illness. The mangrove is not a carbon sink to be traded. It is a living system whose destruction constitutes a debt that cannot be offset (Shiva, 2005, p. 12). The climate debt framework also preserves the free-market approach to redress. It assumes that debt can be settled through financialization: green bonds, carbon credits, and REDD+ schemes. Earth-Eco-Socialism rejects this as insufficient because it leaves the structure of exploitation intact (Ojomo, 2024, p. 7; Bumpus & Liverman, 2008, p. 135). Financial transfers do not stop extraction. They compensate for it while legitimizing continued accumulation. As Foster (2000, p. 12) notes, capital cannot solve the ecological crisis because "the endless accumulation of capital is the fundamental cause."

Naming the crisis as ecological debt, therefore, performs both analytical and political work. Analytically, it exposes the full scope of harm beyond carbon and insists on the inseparability of social and environmental violence. Politically, it reorients demands away from aid or investment toward reparative justice (Ojomo, 2024, p. 11). Reparations here do not mean loans or donor projects. They mean clean-up funded by extractors, moratoria on new licensing, restoration of damaged ecosystems, and the return of decision-making power to affected communities (Löwy, 2015, p. 43). To continue speaking of climate debt is to accept capitalist categories and to seek redress in the language of the market. To speak of ecological debt is to indict that market and to demand a new ethic: one in which development is harmonized with the Earth's limits and in which the flourishing of humans and nonhumans is the precondition for any meaningful existence (Ojomo, 2024, p. 15).

CASE STUDY: THE NIGER DELTA ECOLOGICAL DEBT CRISIS

The Niger Delta presents the ecological debt crisis in its most acute form. For over six decades, the region has functioned as a "sacrifice zone" for global capital, where the extraction of crude oil has proceeded alongside the systematic degradation of land, water, and human life (Ojomo, 2024, p. 6). Between 1976 and 2014, the Nigerian National Oil Spill Detection and Response Agency recorded over 10,000 oil spill incidents, releasing approximately 1.5 million barrels into the Delta's ecosystem. Gas flaring has continued unabated, with Nigeria flaring 7.4 billion cubic meters of gas in 2022 alone, making it the seventh-largest flarer globally (World Bank, 2023, p. 2). These are not aberrations. They are the routine operations of an extractive regime.

The climate debt framework fails to capture this harm. Carbon accounting registers Nigeria's emissions and may calculate a "fair share" of atmospheric space. But it does not register the death of mangrove forests, the collapse of periwinkle and fish populations, or the loss of ancestral farmland (Ojomo, 2024, p. 8). It does not account for the fact that in Goi, Bodo, and other Delta communities, life expectancy is significantly lower than the national average due to hydrocarbon exposure (UNEP, 2011, p. 16). The harm here is not merely atmospheric, it is ontological. It is the destruction of conditions that make meaningful existence possible.

This destruction is directly tied to capitalist exploitation. The joint venture model between multinational oil corporations and the Nigerian state externalizes environmental costs while privatizing profits (Watts, 2004, p. 198). The 1990s saw the militarization of the Delta in response to community protests, culminating in the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight Ogoni leaders. The violence was not incidental to extraction; it was necessary to secure it. As Kovel (2007, p. 3) argues, capital's "eco-destructive" tendency is enforced through state power when accumulation is threatened. Market-based remedies have proven incapable of redress. The United Nations Environment Programme's 2011 Ogoniland assessment recommended an initial $1 billion

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clean-up fund and a 30-year restoration timeline. Over a decade later, progress remains minimal, hampered by bureaucratic delay and underfunding (UNEP, 2011, p. 12; SDN, 2022, p. 4). Carbon offset schemes and corporate social responsibility projects function as public relations, rather than repair (Bumpus & Liverman, 2008, p. 135). They do not halt extraction, nor do they restore the web of life that sustains Delta communities. This confirms Ojomo's (2024, p. 7) contention that free-market approaches are insufficient for addressing the roots of ecological degradation.

From an Earth-Eco-Socialist standpoint, the Niger Delta is owed an ecological debt that cannot be discharged through finance. The creditors are the Ijaw, Ogoni, Itsekiri, and other communities whose rivers, air, and soil have been poisoned, and the nonhuman entities including the mangroves, fish, birds, whose habitats have been destroyed (Ojomo, 2024, p. 10). The debt is cumulative and intergenerational. It demands not loans or donor aid, but the cessation of harm, comprehensive clean-up funded by extractors, and the transfer of environmental governance to cooperative community structures (Löwy, 2015, p. 43). The Niger Delta, thus, clarifies the stakes of naming the crisis correctly. Climate debt localizes the problem to carbon and the solution to finance. Ecological debt reveals a system of exploitation that degrades humans and nonhumans together, and it insists that justice requires dismantling the conditions that produce such debt. Only through legislative enforcement, democratic oversight, and the recognition of nature's intrinsic value can the Earth-Eco-Socialist imperative to safeguard the environment as home be realized (Ojomo, 2024, p. 15).

EARTH-ECO-SOCIALIST RESPONSE TO THE CRISIS

The ecological debt crisis cannot be resolved through the same market rationality that produced it. As Ojomo (2024, p. 7) maintains, classical free-market approaches to sustainability are insufficient because they treat environmental harm as an externality to be priced, rather than as a structural consequence of capitalist exploitation. An Earth-Eco-Socialist response, therefore, begins by rejecting financialization as redress and advancing a program that is legislative, democratic, and cooperative.

First, reparative justice must replace climate finance. The language of aid, loans, or carbon funds presumes that the Global North is a benevolent creditor, rather than a historical debtor (Martínez-Alier, 2002, p. 228). Earth-Eco-Socialism, following Ojomo (2024, p. 11), insists that those who profited from extraction bear the full cost of remediation. In the Niger Delta, this entails uncapped cleanup funds paid by multinational oil corporations, criminal liability for executives who authorized negligent operations, and immediate moratoria on new extraction in degraded zones (UNEP, 2011, p. 12). Such measures align with Warlenius et al.'s (2015, p. 24) argument that ecological debt requires "reversing the arrow of arrears," stopping the ongoing accumulation of harm before compensation can be meaningful.

Second, the response must be institutionalized through rigorous, flexible environmental legislation. Law, in the Earth-Eco-Socialist framework, is not a neutral regulator of markets, but a democratic instrument for constraining capital (Ojomo, 2024, p. 14). This echoes Löwy's (2015, p. 41) conception of "democratic eco-socialist planning," in which production and ecological limits are determined through participatory institutions, rather than corporate boardrooms. For Nigeria, this means amending the Petroleum Industry Act to place environmental compliance under independent community-scientific boards, with powers to halt operations and prosecute violations (SDN, 2022, p. 4). It also means constitutional recognition of the rights of nature, a legal innovation already advanced in Ecuador and Bolivia, which provides standing for ecosystems themselves (Shiva, 2005, p. 7; Gudynas, 2011, p. 446).

Third, Earth-Eco-Socialism replaces private accumulation with cooperative environmental management. *The commons* cannot be safeguarded when treated as a commodity. Ojomo (2024, p. 15) argues that harmonizing human-nature relations requires community guardianship of land, water, and air. This principle is central to what Martínez-Alier (2002, p. 230) calls the "environmentalism of the poor," the defence of livelihoods and ecosystems by those most dependent on them. In practice, it means transferring management of remediated creeks and forests in the Niger Delta to community trusteeships that integrate indigenous knowledge with scientific monitoring (Ojomo, 2024, p. 15). Such cooperatives prioritize use-values – clean water, food sovereignty, health – over exchange-values, breaking with what Moore (2015, p. 13) identifies as capital's reliance on "cheap nature" extracted without payment.

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This framework refuses the developmentalist dogma that pits ecology against human needs. As Kovel (2007, p. 37) contends, eco-socialism seeks "a sufficiency economy" in which development means the expansion of conditions for meaningful existence, not perpetual material growth (Ojomo, 2024, p. 9). For Delta communities, that translates into public investment in healthcare, education, and renewable energy controlled locally, rather than enclave oil infrastructure. It is what Salleh (2017, p. 64) terms a "culture of provisioning," meeting needs through regenerative labor rather than exploitative extraction. The Earth-Eco-Socialist response, therefore, does three things at once: it names the debt, stops its accrual, and restructures the relations that produced it. It moves beyond offsetting emissions or trading carbon to address the totality of harm to humans and nonhumans (Ojomo, 2024, p. 10). Only through legislation, democratic control, and cooperative stewardship can the Earth be safeguarded as home, not as a resource pool for accumulation (Ojomo, 2024, p. 15; Foster, 2000, p. 12).

CONCLUSION

The ecological debt crisis in the Niger Delta reveals the limits of the dominant climate discourse. To frame the obligations of the Global North as "climate debt" is to accept the grammar of the market: debts are financial, creditors are states, and settlement occurs through transfers and offsets (Ojomo, 2024, p. 5). Yet, the harm experienced in the Delta cannot be reduced to atmospheric carbon. It is the destruction of mangroves, the poisoning of rivers, the collapse of fisheries, and the dispossession of communities whose existence is tied to land and water (Ojomo, 2024, p. 6; UNEP, 2011, p. 16). This is not a carbon deficit. It is an ecological debt owed to humans and nonhumans together.

Capitalist exploitation is the driver of this debt. The relentless pursuit of perpetual material growth requires treating nature and labour as disposable inputs for accumulation (Foster, 2000, p. 12; Moore, 2015, p. 13). The free-market approach to sustainability, with its carbon markets, offset schemes, and corporate social responsibility does not arrest this logic, it extends it (Ojomo, 2024, p. 7; Bumpus & Liverman, 2008, p. 135). As Kovel (2007, p. 3) argues, capital's "eco-destructive" tendency is intrinsic. No amount of green technology or pricing reform can reconcile infinite accumulation with finite ecosystems. Earth-Eco-Socialism offers a different premise. It begins with the ethical recognition that the Earth is home to both humans and nonhumans, and that meaningful existence for either is impossible without the flourishing of both (Ojomo, 2024, p. 13; Shiva, 2005, p. 7). From this premise follows a political program that is a flexible but rigorous environmental legislation, democratic control over production and ecological limits, and cooperative management of the commons (Ojomo, 2024, pp. 14-15; Löwy, 2015, p. 41). Development, in this framework, is not measured by GDP, but by the provisioning of needs within ecological boundaries (Salleh, 2017, p. 64).

The Niger Delta case clarifies what is at stake. Reparative justice demands more than finance. It demands cessation of harm, comprehensive clean-up paid by extractors, and the return of environmental governance to affected communities (Martínez-Alier, 2002, p. 230; Warlenius et al., 2015, p. 24). It demands the legal recognition of nature's rights and the criminalization of ecocide (Gudynas, 2011, p. 446). Without these measures, ecological debt continues to accrue. To name the crisis correctly is the first act of redress. Climate debt preserves the categories of the market and the illusion that harm can be offset. Ecological debt indicts the system that produces harm and insists on a new ethic of stewardship. Earth-Eco-Socialism provides the language and the praxis for that ethic. It harmonizes human-nature relations not through transactions, but through legislation, democracy, and cooperation. Only by safeguarding the Earth as home can we speak of sustainability in any meaningful sense (Ojomo, 2024, p. 15).

Ethical Approval

The present work is a philosophical and conceptual analysis of existing scholarship and commercial practices. It did not involve empirical research with human or animal subjects. As such, approval from an institutional review board was not required.

Conflict of Interest

I declare that I have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data Availability

No datasets were generated or analysed during the study of this work. This article uses publicly available policy, available documents and literatures cited in the references.

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