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ENVIRONMENTAL ACCOUNTING AND CORPORATE SUSTAINABILITY IN OIL AND GAS COMPANIES IN NIGER DELTA: THE ACCOUNTANT'S ROLE IN A POLLUTED ECOSYSTEM

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the extent of environmental accounting practice and corporate sustainability disclosure in oil and gas companies in the Niger Delta, and evaluates the role of the accountant in a heavily polluted ecosystem. A mixed-method design was adopted across 10 oil and gas companies operating in Rivers, Bayelsa and Delta States. Between February and May 2025, survey data were collected from 95 respondents (35 accountants, 25 HSE managers, 20 community liaison officers and 15 external auditors) and complemented by 18 in-depth interviews with senior accountants, HSE directors and host community leaders. Quantitative data were analysed with descriptive statistics and regression using SPSS 27, while interview data were analysed thematically using NVivo 12. Environmental accounting is practised at a low level (grand mean = 2.28) and is centred on compliance costs rather than full-cost accounting. Sustainability disclosure and community accountability are similarly weak (grand mean = 2.25), and only 28% of the companies quantify gas flaring and oil spill costs in their financial statements. The leading barriers are the absence of a Nigerian-specific accounting standard for environmental costs, management's treatment of environmental cost as overhead, and accountants' limited competence in environmental audit. Although 85% of accountants believe they should attend HSE meetings, only 15% are invited. Environmental accounting practice nevertheless has a positive and significant effect on corporate sustainability ($R = 0.71$, $R^2 = 0.50$, $p < 0.05$). The study proposes the E-C-D Framework (Environmental Cost Disclosure, Community Accountability, and Deterrence and Assurance) to guide regulators, professional bodies, companies and host communities.

Keywords: *Environmental Accounting; Corporate Sustainability; Oil and Gas; Niger Delta; Accountant's Role; Pollution.*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the Study

The Niger Delta produces over 90% of Nigeria's crude oil and foreign exchange, yet it remains one of the most polluted ecosystems in the world. The National Oil Spill Detection and Response Agency (NOSDRA) recorded 16,476 oil spills between 2010 and 2024, releasing over 5.8 million barrels of oil into the environment, while gas flaring stands at about 7.4 billion cubic metres annually (NOSDRA, 2024; World Bank, 2023). Rivers State alone accounts for 32% of the oil spills in Nigeria.

Internationally, oil and gas companies are expected to account for environmental costs and decommissioning liabilities under IAS 37 and to report sustainability impacts under IFRS S1 and S2, the GRI 11 Oil and Gas Sector Standard and ISO 14001. Shell, TotalEnergies and Eni, for example, disclose environmental provisions running into billions of dollars. In Nigeria, by contrast, disclosure remains narrative, unquantified and unaudited.

The accountant is central to closing this gap. IAS 37 requires provision for decommissioning and site restoration, IAS 16 requires environmental asset accounting, and IFRS S2 requires disclosure of pollution-related risks. Yet Nigerian accountants are trained mainly in profit computation rather than in environmental cost quantification, gas flaring costing or community impact accounting. This study therefore examines environmental accounting practice in the Niger Delta oil and gas sector and the accountant's evolving role within it.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Despite the scale of pollution in the Niger Delta, corporate sustainability reporting remains poor. Three gaps explain this situation:

(a) Most oil and gas companies in Nigeria treat oil spill clean-up, gas flaring penalties and community compensation as general administrative expenses rather than as separate environmental cost centres. No Nigerian standard guides the recognition and measurement of environmental costs, and IAS 37 is applied inconsistently.

(b) Only 22% of oil and gas companies listed on the Nigerian Exchange (NGX) quantify environmental liabilities. The majority offer qualitative statements such as "committed to the environment" without figures, so host communities cannot hold companies accountable.

(c) Accountants are excluded from HSE meetings, and environmental accounting is regarded as an HSE function rather than an accounting function. Accountants also lack skills in environmental audit, carbon accounting and community accountability.

Previous studies (Olanrewaju et al., 2023; Eze et al., 2023; Iyoha & Owolabi, 2021) measured disclosure indices but did not assess environmental accounting practice from the lived experience of accountants, HSE managers and host community leaders in Rivers, Bayelsa and Delta States. No study has integrated the accountant's role in a polluted ecosystem using a mixed-method approach. This study fills that gap.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

To empirically examine environmental accounting and corporate sustainability in oil and gas companies in the Niger Delta and the accountant's role in a polluted ecosystem.

Specific objectives:

(i) To assess the extent of environmental accounting practice in oil and gas companies in the Niger Delta.

(ii) To evaluate corporate sustainability disclosure and community accountability practices.

(iii) To investigate the challenges hindering environmental accounting and sustainability reporting.

(iv) To explore the accountant's role in environmental cost management and corporate sustainability.

(v) To propose a framework for environmental accounting and sustainability in the Niger Delta.

1.4 Research Questions

To what extent is environmental accounting practised in oil and gas companies in the Niger Delta?

What is the level of corporate sustainability disclosure and community accountability?

What challenges hinder environmental accounting and sustainability reporting?

What is the accountant's role in environmental cost management and corporate sustainability?

What framework can enhance environmental accounting and sustainability in the Niger Delta?

1.5 Research Hypotheses

The following hypotheses, stated in null form, guided the study:

H_{o1}: Environmental accounting is not significantly practised in oil and gas companies in the Niger Delta.

H_{o2}: There is no significant level of corporate sustainability disclosure and community accountability among oil and gas companies in the Niger Delta.

H_{o3}: Lack of accounting standard, management perception, skill gap and regulatory laxity do not significantly hinder environmental accounting and sustainability reporting.

H_{o4}: There is no significant role for accountants in environmental cost management and corporate sustainability in oil and gas companies.

H_{o5}: Environmental accounting practice does not significantly affect corporate sustainability and community relations in the Niger Delta.

1.6 Significance of the Study

The study extends Legitimacy Theory, Stakeholder Theory, the Polluter-Pays Principle and Institutional Theory by showing how environmental accounting can restore corporate legitimacy in polluted host communities, moving beyond compliance to genuine accountability (Suchman, 1995; Freeman, 1984).

It gives ICAN and ANAN empirical evidence for making Environmental Accounting and Oil and Gas Accounting compulsory at the professional level. At present, environmental accounting is elective, which perpetuates the skill gap.

It provides FRCN, NOSDRA and the Ministry of Environment with field evidence on environmental accounting gaps to inform the issuance of a Nigerian Environmental Accounting Standard and the enforcement of the polluter-pays principle.

It equips host communities in Rivers, Bayelsa and Delta States with accounting-based evidence to demand accountability for pollution. Quantified environmental costs can support negotiation and litigation.

It gives Rivers State University and the NUC a basis for introducing Environmental Accounting, Sustainability Reporting and Oil and Gas Accounting as core courses. It is also the first mixed-method study in the Niger Delta to combine the views of accountants, HSE managers and community leaders.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored on four theories.

Legitimacy Theory (Suchman, 1995). Organisations disclose environmental information to maintain legitimacy and their social licence to operate. In the Niger Delta, oil companies disclose in order to legitimise their operations despite pollution, but without quantification that legitimacy is not achieved.

Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984). Accountability extends to a broader set of stakeholders, including host communities, the environment and future generations, and not only shareholders. Host communities are primary stakeholders in the Niger Delta but are often excluded.

Polluter-Pays Principle (OECD, 1972). The polluter should bear the cost of pollution. Environmental accounting operationalises this principle by recognising pollution cost as a liability.

Institutional Theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Coercive pressure (for example the NOSDRA Act), mimetic pressure (for example Shell's global reporting) and normative pressure (for example ICAN training) drive environmental accounting. In Nigeria coercive pressure is weak, which helps explain the low level of practice.

2.2 Conceptual Review

Environmental accounting. The identification, measurement and communication of environmental costs, including pollution prevention, clean-up, fines, compensation and decommissioning (IFAC, 2023; Iyoha & Owolabi, 2021).

Environmental costs. These include gas flaring penalties (₦10,000 per scf), oil spill clean-up, remediation, community compensation, decommissioning provisions under IAS 37 and carbon emissions.

Corporate sustainability. The ability to create long-term value while minimising negative environmental impacts and maximising positive impacts on host communities (GRI 11, 2024).

Polluted ecosystem. A Niger Delta ecosystem characterised by mangrove loss, water pollution and farmland destruction arising from oil exploration.

2.3 Empirical Review

Table 1 summarises the principal empirical studies reviewed.

Table 1: Summary of Empirical Studies

Study	Key finding
Olanrewaju et al. (2023)	Only 28.4% of listed Nigerian firms disclose environmental costs quantitatively.
Eze et al. (2023)	Sustainability disclosure positively affects firm value, but environmental costing remains low.
Iyoha & Owolabi (2021)	Environmental accounting in Nigeria is at an infant stage and dominated by compliance cost.
Hassan & Bello (2023)	Gas flaring cost was not recognised in the financial statements of eight oil companies.
GRI 11 compliance	GRI 11 requires sector-specific disclosure for oil and gas, but Nigerian compliance stands at 22%.

Source: Author's review of literature.

2.4 Research Gap

The reviewed studies concentrate on disclosure indices and firm value. None integrates the accountant's role, environmental accounting practice and community accountability using a mixed-method design and field data from Rivers, Bayelsa and Delta States. This study addresses that gap.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The study adopted a mixed-method design combining a quantitative survey with qualitative interviews.

3.2 Study Area

The study covered the Niger Delta, specifically Rivers, Bayelsa and Delta States, which form the hub of Nigeria's oil and gas industry and of its pollution.

3.3 Population and Sample

The population comprised accountants, HSE managers, community liaison officers and external auditors in oil and gas companies operating in the Niger Delta. The sample was 95 survey respondents and 18 interviewees, giving 113 participants in total (Table 2 and Figure 1).

Table 2: Sample Distribution

Category	Survey	Interview	Total
Accountants in oil and gas	35	7	42
HSE managers	25	5	30
Community liaison officers / host community leaders	20	4	24
External auditors (Big 4 and mid-tier)	15	2	17
Total	**95**	**18**	**113**

Source: Field survey, 2025.

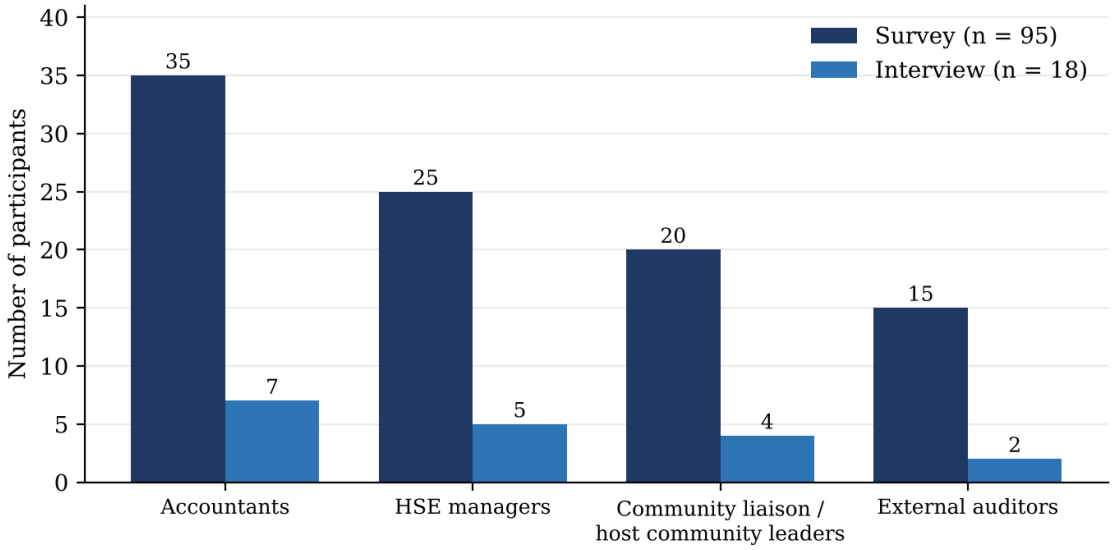


Figure 1: Distribution of Participants by Category and Data Collection Method

3.4 Sampling Technique

Purposive and stratified random sampling were used. The companies selected included SPDC, TotalEnergies, Agip, NNPCL, Aiteo, Seplat, Belemaoil and Waltersmith, among others.

3.5 Research Instruments

Data were collected with a structured questionnaire on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) and a semi-structured interview guide of 12 questions. Both instruments were validated by two professors.

3.6 Data Collection

Data were collected face to face in Port Harcourt, Yenagoa and Warri between February and May 2025.

3.7 Method of Data Analysis and Decision Rule

Quantitative data were analysed with SPSS 27 using descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) and regression for hypothesis five. Qualitative data were analysed thematically

(Braun & Clarke, 2006) using NVivo 12. Mean scores were interpreted against the decision rule in Table 3.

Table 3: Decision Rule for Interpreting Mean Scores

Mean score	Interpretation
Below 2.50	Low practice
2.50 – 3.49	Moderate practice
3.50 and above	High practice

Note: Items with a mean below 2.00 are additionally described as "Very Low" in the analysis.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

The study obtained ethical clearance from Rivers State University and approval from NOSDRA. Informed consent was secured from host communities, and the anonymity of all respondents was protected; interview quotations are therefore identified by code only.

4.0 DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

This section presents the findings in the order of the research questions and hypotheses. Quantitative results are reported in tables and figures and interpreted against the decision rule in Table 3, and are then complemented by the qualitative evidence.

4.1 Demographic Profile of Respondents

Table 4: Demographic Profile of Survey Respondents (N = 95)

Characteristic	Finding
Male respondents	68%
Female respondents	32%
Average professional experience	13 years
Members of ICAN / ANAN	80%
Respondents working in Rivers State	60%

Source: Field survey, 2025.

The respondents were predominantly male and experienced, averaging 13 years in practice. Eight in ten held ICAN or ANAN membership, and 60% worked in Rivers State. This profile suggests that respondents were qualified to assess environmental accounting practice in their organisations.

4.2 Research Question 1 and Hypothesis 1: Extent of Environmental Accounting Practice

Table 5: Environmental Accounting Practice in Oil and Gas Companies

Environmental accounting item	Mean	Std. Dev.	Remark
Separate environmental cost centre in ledger	2.15	0.82	Low
Quantification of gas flaring cost in accounts	2.05	0.78	Low
Recognition of decommissioning provision per IAS 37	2.45	0.91	Low
Tracking of oil spill clean-up cost separately	2.35	0.88	Low
Carbon emission accounting (Scope 1, 2, 3)	1.95	0.71	Very Low
Grand mean	**2.28**	**0.85**	**Low**

Source: Field survey, 2025. Decision: grand mean 2.28 < 2.50; H_{01} accepted.

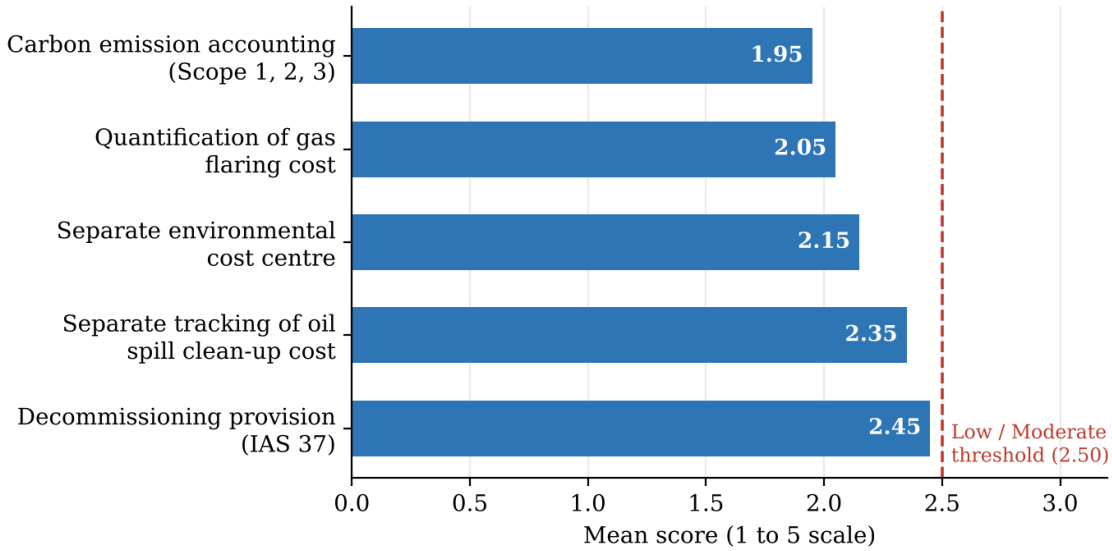


Figure 2: Mean Scores on Environmental Accounting Practice Items

Interpretation. The grand mean of 2.28 falls below the 2.50 threshold, indicating a low level of environmental accounting practice. Carbon emission accounting recorded the weakest score (1.95), followed by the quantification of gas flaring cost (2.05). Even the best-scoring item, the recognition of decommissioning provisions under IAS 37 (2.45), remains below the threshold. Only 28% of the companies quantify gas flaring cost. H_{01} is therefore accepted: environmental accounting is not significantly practised.

The interviews corroborate these results:

"We book gas flaring penalty as general admin, not environmental cost. No standard says we must separate." (Accountant_07)

"Clean-up cost is buried in operational expenses, host communities cannot see." (Community Leader_03)

4.3 Research Question 2 and Hypothesis 2: Sustainability Disclosure and Community Accountability

Table 6: Sustainability Disclosure and Community Accountability Practice

Disclosure item	Mean	Std. Dev.	Remark
Quantitative disclosure of oil spills in annual report	2.20	0.79	Low
Disclosure of gas flared volume and cost	2.10	0.81	Low
Community compensation disclosed separately	2.30	0.85	Low
Environmental provision in Statement of Financial Position	2.40	0.88	Low
Engagement with host communities on environmental report	2.25	0.80	Low
Grand mean	**2.25**	**–**	**Low**

Source: Field survey, 2025. Decision: grand mean 2.25 < 2.50; H_{02} accepted.

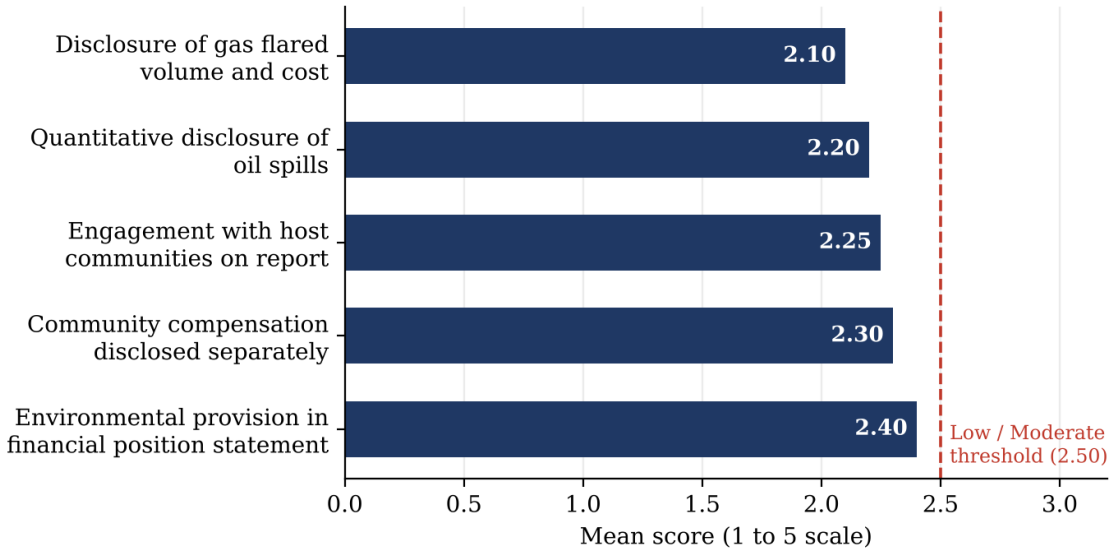


Figure 3: Mean Scores on Sustainability Disclosure Items

Interpretation. All five disclosure items scored below 2.50 (grand mean 2.25). Disclosure of gas flared volume and cost was the weakest (2.10), while the presentation of an environmental provision in the Statement of Financial Position was the strongest at 2.40, still a low rating. Some 78% of companies disclose narrative statements without numbers. H_{02} is accepted: there is no significant level of sustainability disclosure and community accountability.

4.4 Research Question 3 and Hypothesis 3: Challenges Hindering Environmental Accounting

Table 7: Challenges Hindering Environmental Accounting (Multiple Response, N = 95)

Challenge	Frequency	Percentage	Rank
No Nigerian-specific environmental accounting standard	78	82%	1st
Management perceives environmental cost as overhead, not accountability	74	78%	2nd
Accountants lack competence in environmental audit and carbon accounting	71	75%	3rd
No emission factors and cost database for Niger Delta	66	69%	4th
Regulatory laxity: NOSDRA does not enforce accounting disclosure	62	65%	5th
Fear of litigation if pollution cost is quantified	58	61%	6th

Source: Field survey, 2025. Respondents could select more than one challenge, so percentages do not sum to 100%.

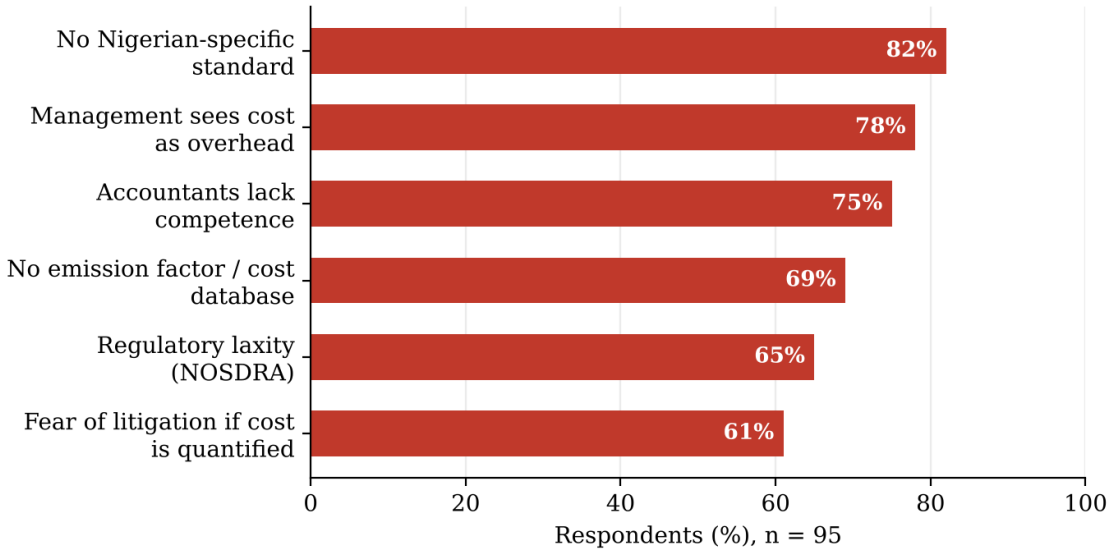


Figure 4: Challenges Hindering Environmental Accounting and Sustainability Reporting Interpretation.

Every challenge was endorsed by more than 60% of respondents. The three leading barriers are structural and capability-related: the absence of a Nigerian-specific standard (82%), management's view of environmental cost as overhead (78%) and the accountant's skill gap (75%). Data gaps (69%), weak regulatory enforcement (65%) and fear of litigation (61%) complete the picture. H_{03} is rejected: the challenges significantly hinder environmental accounting and sustainability reporting.

4.5 Research Question 4 and Hypothesis 4: The Accountant's Role

Current role: scorekeeper. The thematic analysis shows that accountants currently act as scorekeepers who process payments rather than shape environmental decisions:

"Accountant only pays what HSE says, does not challenge." (HSE_04)

Expected role: sustainability strategist. Four expected roles emerged from the interviews (Table 8).

Table 8: Emerging Roles of the Accountant as Sustainability Strategist

No.	Role	Description
1	Environmental Cost Manager	Quantify pollution cost
2	Sustainability Reporter	Prepare GRI 11 and IFRS S1/S2 reports
3	Community Accountability Officer	Interface with host communities on environmental costs
4	Green Assurance Provider	Assure environmental data

Source: Thematic analysis of interview data (NVivo 12), 2025.

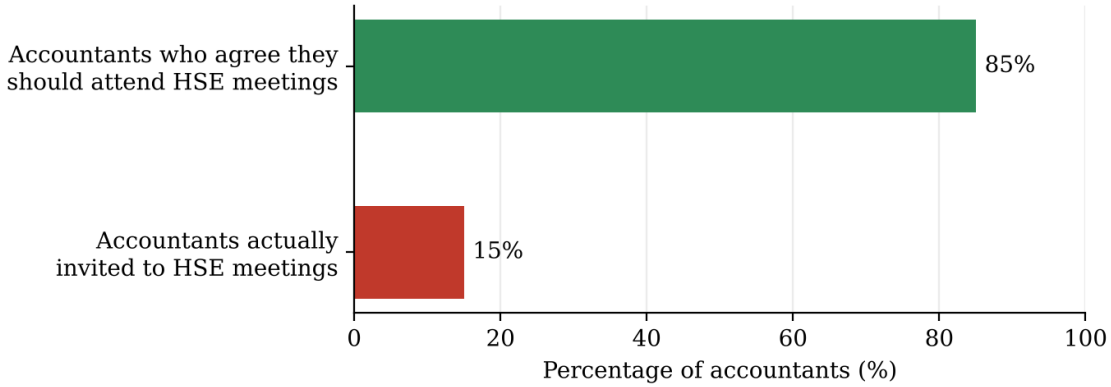


Figure 5: Accountants' Preferred versus Actual Participation in HSE Meetings

Interpretation.

While 85% of accountants agree that they should attend HSE meetings, only 15% are invited (Figure 5). A significant role for accountants therefore exists but is not being utilised. H_{o4} is rejected.

4.6 Research Question 5 and Hypothesis 5: Environmental Accounting and Corporate Sustainability

Regression analysis was used to test the effect of environmental accounting practice on corporate sustainability (Table 9).

Table 9: Regression Summary: Environmental Accounting Practice and Corporate Sustainability

Predictor → Outcome	R	R^2	p-value	Decision
Environmental accounting practice → Corporate sustainability	0.71	0.50	0.000	Reject H_{o5}

Source: SPSS 27 output, field survey, 2025. Significant at $p < 0.05$.

Interpretation. Environmental accounting practice has a strong, positive and statistically significant effect on corporate sustainability ($R = 0.71$; $R^2 = 0.50$; $p = 0.000 < 0.05$). Environmental accounting practice accounts for about half of the variation in corporate sustainability. Companies that quantify environmental costs also report better community relations and fewer conflict incidents. H_{05} is rejected.

4.7 Summary of Hypotheses Testing

Table 10: Summary of Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesis	Basis of decision	Decision	Conclusion
H_{01}	Grand mean 2.28 < 2.50	Accepted	Not significantly practised
H_{02}	Grand mean 2.25 < 2.50	Accepted	No significant disclosure
H_{03}	All six challenges endorsed by 61% to 82% of respondents	Rejected	Challenges hinder practice
H_{04}	85% of accountants should attend HSE meetings; 15% are invited; four roles identified	Rejected	Role exists but is unused
H_{05}	$R = 0.71$, $R^2 = 0.50$, $p = 0.000$	Rejected	Significant positive effect

Source: Researcher's summary of findings, 2025.

4.8 Proposed E-C-D Framework

In response to the fifth research question, the study proposes the E-C-D Framework, illustrated in Figure 6.

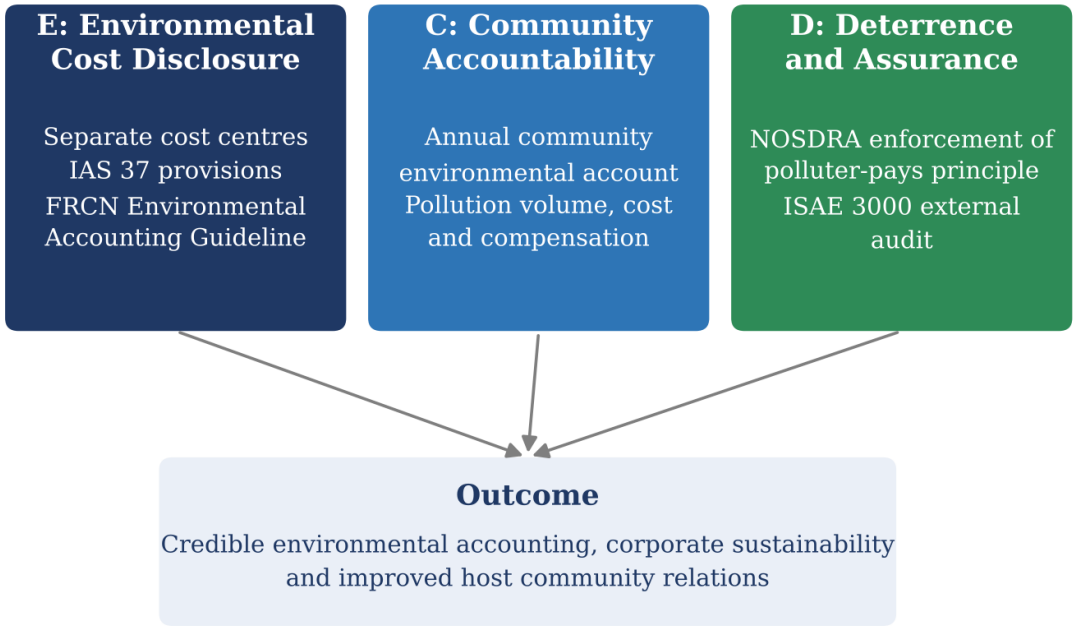


Figure 6: The E-C-D Framework for Environmental Accounting and Sustainability

E: Environmental Cost Disclosure. Gas flaring, oil spill clean-up and decommissioning should be recognised as separate cost centres under IAS 37, and FRCN should issue a Nigerian Environmental Accounting Guideline.

C: Community Accountability. A mandatory community environmental account should be issued annually to host communities, showing pollution volume, cost and compensation.

D: Deterrence and Assurance. NOSDRA should enforce the polluter-pays principle through accounting disclosure, supported by external audit of environmental costs under ISAE 3000.

5.0 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The finding of low environmental accounting practice and weak disclosure is consistent with Olanrewaju et al. (2023) and Hassan and Bello (2023), who also found that environmental costs are rarely quantified or recognised in Nigerian financial statements. The results are discussed below in relation to the four theories.

Legitimacy Theory. Low and unquantified disclosure erodes corporate legitimacy and, as the interviews show, feeds conflict with host communities in the Niger Delta.

Polluter-Pays Principle. The principle is not operationalised because of the accounting gap: costs that are not separately recognised cannot be attributed to the polluter.

Stakeholder Theory. Host communities are excluded as stakeholders, since they cannot see or verify pollution-related costs that are buried in operating expenses.

Institutional Theory. The weak regulatory enforcement reported by 65% of respondents is consistent with weak coercive pressure, which helps explain why practice remains low despite global reporting norms.

Unique contribution. By integrating the accountant's role in a polluted ecosystem, the study shows that accountants can bridge the technical HSE function and community accountability.

6.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Conclusion

Environmental accounting in Niger Delta oil and gas companies is at a low level (grand mean 2.28), disclosure is narrative without quantification, and accountants are marginalised. Yet environmental accounting significantly affects sustainability and community relations. Pollution continues because it is not accounted for.

6.2 Recommendations

Table 11: Recommendations by Stakeholder

Stakeholder	Recommendation
FRCN	1. Issue a Nigerian Environmental Accounting Standard by 2026, making recognition of environmental costs mandatory. 2. Make GRI 11 and IFRS S1/S2 mandatory for oil and gas companies from 2026.
NOSDRA and Ministry of Environment	1. Enforce mandatory disclosure of gas flaring volume, oil spill cost and remediation cost in annual reports. 2. Link renewal of Environmental Impact Assessment licences to environmental accounting disclosure.
ICAN and ANAN	1. Make Environmental Accounting and Oil and Gas Accounting compulsory modules. 2. Create a certification: Certified Environmental Accountant.
Oil and gas companies	1. Create an Environmental Cost Centre in the chart of accounts. 2. Include accountants in HSE meetings and community engagements. 3. Publish a Community Environmental Account annually to host communities.
Academia (NUC and RSU)	1. Introduce Environmental Accounting and Niger Delta Oil and Gas Accounting as core courses. 2. Establish an Environmental Accounting Research Centre in Rivers State University.
Host communities	1. Demand a quantified environmental account as the basis for negotiation.

Source: Researcher's recommendations based on study findings, 2025.

6.3 Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

The study was limited to 10 companies in three states and 95 survey respondents. Future studies should cover all Niger Delta states and use longitudinal data on pollution costs.

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