

# Globalization and Environmental Conflict in Africa

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## Introduction

This paper examines the relationship between the processes of globalisation, mineral/resource extraction in Africa, and the deepening of environmental conflict on the continent since the late 1970s, and especially with the onset of structural adjustment which imposed the hegemony of the free market on the African ecology. It is based on a case study of the interface between global oil capital and the intensification of environmental conflict in Nigeria's oil-producing communities mainly located in the Niger Delta. Specifically, it examines the ways the social contradictions and scarcities of resources spawned by global conglomerates operating in the Nigerian oil industry, provoke conflict. The subordination of the rights of the populations of the oil producing areas in Nigeria by oil multinationals and their partner the state, in the quest for profit is thus a critical, explosive element in the linkage between politics and the ecology.

Environmental conflict in the Nigerian oil industry, particularly in the oil-rich region of the Niger Delta, is "globalised" in the sense of the presence of global actors in the local communities; the integration of the communities via oil production into the global economic system and the connections being forged by local social movements to the global human rights agenda; and international human and environmental rights groups in the fight against the state-global oil alliance. At another level, it reflects how globalisation defined as "a process of global integration in which diverse peoples, economies, cultures, and political processes are increasingly subjected to international influences, and people are made aware of the role of these influences in their everyday lives" (Midgeley, 1997), finds expression in the identities, constituents, and modalities of the various social forces immersed in the environmental conflicts in the Niger Delta. For example, the hanging of nine Ogoni (MOSOP) leaders in November 1995 on

grounds of inciting a mob to murder four prominent Ogoni citizens, in spite of pleas for clemency from all parts of the world, led to virtual isolation of Nigeria in international circles. The country was suspended from the Commonwealth; the European Union recalled its ambassadors; while sanctions aimed at the military and top government officials were imposed on the country by the United States, the EU, and Canada. In addition, several international organisations sent teams to the Niger Delta to investigate the abuse of rights of the oil minorities by Shell, and the Nigerian state (Project Underground, 1997). World bodies such as the United Nations, the Commonwealth of Nations, the British House of Lords, the US Congress and even the Shell AGM, have hosted lobby groups on both sides on the environmental conflict in the Niger Delta. The struggles have also been waged in cyberspace, on television networks, and in countless press releases and briefings, involving the lobbies of parliamentary groups, international human and environmental rights groups, journalists, PR consultants, oil multinationals, politicians, social movements of the Niger Delta, and even the clergy. Globalization has not merely deepened environmental crises in the Niger Delta, it has provided a global canvass for the local environmental conflicts. Thus, while the physical site of the oil production and conflict is in the Niger Delta, the struggles have been waged across the world.

For the first time in the recent history of Africa, the Ogoni struggle for self-determination and their environmental rights, and their conflict with Shell has become a major global issue. In spite of the huge effort of the Nigerian state to put a lid on the resistance in the Niger Delta, it has not succeeded, neither has its partner, Shell, been able to re-commence operations halted in Ogoniland in 1993 at the height of the Ogoni resistance, despite an estimated daily loss of N9.9 million in oil revenue to Shell. This, to some extent underscores the success of a local group in using the global approach of rights to construct social networks of resistance.

This paper dwells on the Ogoni resistance – the case of the Movement For the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) versus Shell and the Nigerian state. It does not however deny the equally relevant struggles of other minority ethnic groups living in the Niger Delta, who in some cases suffer worse deprivations and pollution than the Ogoni, and who are in some cases also beginning to “globalise” their resistance to global oil capital. The focus on the Ogoni is based on MOSOP’s successful use of the global discourse on rights to empower its case at the international level, particularly the United Nations. In the course of the globalisation of this local resistance, the Ogoni have emulated a whole range of strategies and tactics from the similar struggles of indigenous peoples in other parts of the (fourth) world. The (Unrepresented Peoples and Nations Organisation) UNPO, which MOSOP joined in the early 1990s had a catalytic effect on the internationalisation of its struggle. From such forums, the organisation gathered experiences which proved strategic to the positive use of the label of a “persecuted” ethnic minority group threatened

with genocide by Shell and the Nigerian state, as an important device of local resistance.

## **The Niger Delta and Oil**

The Niger Delta is the "gold mine" of the Nigerian oil industry. It accounts for over 70% of Nigeria's on shore oil and upstream operations. According to Khan (1994: 40) "Since oil was discovered at Oloibiri, the Niger Delta basin has proved to be the most prolific producing area in Nigeria, containing seventy eight oil fields, including the largest, Forcados and Yorke". In a region where land scarcity is rampant the exploration, production and transportation of oil means that oil installations and operations occupy a lot of physical space (at the expense of the indigenous land owners), and has had a pronounced impact on the environment. Also because the Niger Delta has been subjected to both onshore and offshore operations for over four decades, the social relations of oil production has penetrated the social structure of the local communities and defined their place, largely as the "excluded, the alienated, and the exploited" in the larger Nigerian society. The critical issues therefore are: what is the social impact of oil production in the Niger Delta, and how does this "produce" resource scarcities, and conflict; who controls, and has access to, the resources being produced from this area; and who bears the environmental costs of oil production? These issues define the conflictual relations prevailing in Nigeria's oil industry today.

The major players in this saga are the oil multinationals (which mine and produce the oil), the Nigerian state (which depends on oil for 80% of its revenue, and over 95% of the country's foreign exchange earnings), and the communities (and social movements) of the oil producing communities of the Niger Delta. However, the central role of oil multinationals in the global economy as suppliers of very cheap source energy, makes them a central player not only in the global accumulation of capital. They are even more strategically so in the context of a global political economy that "simultaneously concentrates wealth and energy both in certain locales and at certain social levels by extracting and dispossessing from other locales and social levels" (Saurin, 1996a: 87). It is this globally structured social relation of production that defines the Niger Delta as "a locale and social level of dispossession", and dialectically, a site of local resistance.

What constitutes the "global context remains an empty abstraction unless mediated, translated towards concrete settings where we can discern concrete actors" (Binsbergen: 1997). Therefore, this paper analyses the concrete situation in the Niger Delta, the "golden goose" of the Nigerian oil industry. It focuses on the various contending interests/social forces in the Niger Delta as a source of "discrimination, exploitation, degradation and abuse of rights."

Globalization itself has to be understood not just within the context of the restructuring of global capitalism and the shrinking of time and space through the

use of technology, but within the context of the deepening economic crisis in Africa and its pervasive adverse political and social ramifications. Applied to the situation of the Niger Delta, we are faced with an interesting situation in which “both forces of extraction and resistance connect the local to the global, and assume complex forms in which social networks/coalitions can be located within, or connect with two or more levels” (Obi, 1998a). As such the conflicts are waged, not just in the oil communities, but beyond – at the national and global levels. It is important to capture the role of the oil-dependent state in mediating such conflicts, in which it is itself an active protagonists. The immersion of Nigeria in an economic and external debt crisis since the mid 1980s has weakened the state vis a vis global capital. At the same time, the heavy demands of economic adjustment and debt servicing have committed the state to promoting the expansion of investments in the oil industry and the intensification of oil extraction (and consequently far greater environmental degradation of the oil producing communities of the Niger Delta). The state is therefore compelled to mediate the attendant conflicts at all three levels: the global, national and local in a manner that is broadly protective of the interests of global capital, and safeguards its own interest in a manner that will secure the balance of social forces within the ruling class, as well as the reproduction of its hegemonic bloc. At stake is not only the issue of power and control of the environment for oil production and capital accumulation, the distribution of oil rents or surplus in favour of the ruling class and related interests but also the critical one of equation of state to oil power. Thus, the social forces of local resistance in the Niger Delta seeking to block extraction from, expropriation and degradation of their environment have had to contend, not just with the might of the transnational global oil interests, but also with the power of the state itself.

In the rest of this paper, we first deal with some conceptual issues. This section is followed by a section on the Nigerian oil industry in which we discuss the history of the industry and what has defined its present structure. We then examine the relationship between globalisation and environmental conflict in the Niger Delta. The final section sums up the arguments, and examines the prospects for resolving environmental conflicts in the oil producing communities of the Niger Delta.

## **Conceptual Issues**

In this section we examine the interface between globalisation, environmental conflict and the oil industry, and how they relate to the “processes of accumulation, production and reproduction central to capitalism” (William, 1996: 41), and to the processes of local resistance.

### *Globalisation*

Globalisation is a complex process. According to Aina, (1996: 5), globalisation has “created new conditions of proximity, intensity, and even intimacy with what used

to be distant faraway worlds". Yet, it is possible to isolate different perspectives regarding this process. From an "economic" perspective, globalisation is a process of "the transformation of the capitalist world system", within an expansionist logic that drives it to further exploitation and accumulation (Wilkin: 1996: 229). This view has been criticized on the basis of its linearity. While admitting that in a sense, "the global capitalist system has evidently become more structurally interlocked", Marshall (1996: 894 895) asserts that, "it is not enough to argue that global capitalism is undergoing an epochal shift. Capitalist accumulation was globalist in its expression long before the changeover from machino- to systemo facturing" (*sic*). In the same manner, the assumption that globalisation is "dissolving" international borders, and rendering the nation state and traditional concepts of sovereignty irrelevant or obsolete (Ohmae, 1995, 1996; Drezner, 1998: 209), has been rejected by those insisting that globalisation is still far from a linear, uniform or homogenising process (Boyer and Drache, 1996; Zyman, 1996; Saurin, 1996b). Of late, there is even talk of a globalisation "model" in crisis (Bello, 1998: 10 17).

There are others, who see globalisation as being emblematic of an "unfinished project" hinged on "enduring national foundations and emerging regional realities" and more of a label "that points at expanding market interconnections in the form of investments, financial networks and trade" (Zyman, 1996: 157). Another important contribution to the ongoing debate is that by Mittleman (1995: 275), who interprets global restructuring as a "market driven and multidimensional process, [in which] globalisation renders obsolete invented divisions of the world into developed and developing countries, industrialised and industrialising nations, and core and periphery." (Cited in Saurin, 1996b: 679).

But clearly recent global transformations are not uniform in their reach or impact. Nor would the same forces operate in all areas of globalisation. Indeed, globalisation is as complex as it is ideological, and great care must be taken to address its specifics. As such, the focus here will be more on the social response to "economic" globalisation and its implications for Africa. The issue of how Africans are responding to "the production and reproduction of their own lives, including the global structuring of production and reproduction" (Saurin, 1996b: 661), is addressed, based on a case study of the local resistance of the Ogoni, and how they have formed social networks connecting "the local" to "the global".

### *Environmental Conflict*

The question of "scarcity" of resources, resulting from the interaction of economic modes/forces and the ecosystem, or as a result of the pressures of overpopulation on shrinking resources and the implications for global (western) security, has dominated the discourse on environmental conflict in recent times (Obi, 1997c: 2-3). In this section, the focus is on the causal links between environmental/resource scarcity and conflict, and on a critique of the orthodox environmental

security analysis (and the neo-Malthusian perspective which fetishizes the "demographic trap").

Environmental conflict in recent times has been associated with how struggles over shrinking environmental resources – as a result of overuse, unfair distribution, misuse or degradation – build up the stresses which trigger conflict. According to Homer-Dixon (1996: 359):

Scarcities of environmental resources – in particular cropland, fresh water, and forest – are contributing to mass violence in several areas of the world. While these "environmental scarcities" do not cause wars between countries, they do sometimes aggregate stresses within countries, helping stimulate ethnic clashes, urban unrest, and insurgencies.

The other strand of the environmental scarcity thesis is neo-Malthusian, which links conflict to situations in which population growth overwhelms the local resource base. Rapid population growth beyond the limits of the carrying capacity of the ecosystem or "resource threshold", feeds into stresses which directly, or indirectly provoke conflict (Brown and Jacobson, 1986; Klare, 1996; Homer-Dixon, 1994). As a strategy for ensuring that less stress is placed on renewable resources and constructing a potential framework of global security, population growth control, especially fertility reduction in the developing world, is seen as an important part of the solution to the problem of environmental threats to (western) global security.

A social perspective on the environment (Redclift, 1989; Redclift and Benton, 1995, Saurin, 1996a), exposes some of the limitations of the thesis of environmental scarcities. Rather than seeing environmental crises or scarcities as natural (Bush, 1997: 503-513), or the outcome of natural population increase (as if everyone had equal access to resources) it is useful to perceive the environment as being "socially constructed", as a "process rather than a form, as the result of a set of relationships between physical space, natural resources and a constantly changing pattern of economic forces" (Redclift, 1989: 79). This draws attention to the relationship between man and the ecology as resource base, and locates environmental conflict as the outcome of struggles between socio-economically defined groups for the control of resource(s) for profit, use, or distribution (Bookchin: 1992). In this way it is possible for a tiny fraction of the population (as is the case in all capitalist societies) to control a disproportionately large share of resources to the exclusion of the majority who have to struggle for the crumbs, or challenge the "hegemonic minority", in order to force through a project of redistribution.

How then can environmental conflict in Africa be located within the social theory of global environmental change? The answer lies in how the processes of

globalisation have defined the conflictual "social" relations between the "possessors" and the "dispossessed". It also can be found in the situation in which smaller populations in the "highly" industrialised world enjoy the benefits of the transformation of, and transfer of Africa's resources through "globalised" structures of production and exchange, leaving behind resource scarcities and the intense struggles for larger chunks of fast shrinking resources waged at local, national and global levels (Obi, 1997). The situation in Africa has become desperate in view of the failure of structural adjustment and the deepening of environmental conflict in the continent (Bush, 1997: 504). If anything, adjustment has devalued Africa's resources in the global market place and in the process exposed most Africans to greater exploitation, poverty and alienation from the state.

The ways in which "globalised oil production and exchange" defines "resource scarcities", and sharpens social contradictions have played a significant role in the environmental conflicts still ravaging the Niger Delta. It is thus more analytically rewarding to focus on the environment as a contested terrain – an arena of local resistance in the oil producing communities against the exploitative and polluting activities of global oil capital.

## **The Nigerian Oil Industry**

A lot has been written on the Nigerian oil industry, and its political economy (Shatzl, 1969; Turner, 1980; Amu, 1982; Edogun, 1985; Hutchful, 1985; Onoh, 1993; Ikein, 1990; Soremekun and Obi, 1993; Ihonybere and Shaw, 1988, Khan, 1994; Obi, 1994; 1997, 1998), therefore there will be no attempt to replicate it here. Therefore the following discussion merely expounds on the structure of the oil industry, the state-oil nexus, and the global interface.

### *The Structure of the Oil Industry*

The structure of the Nigerian oil industry cannot be fully grasped without adequate knowledge of its background and evolution. Its main characteristics are extraversion, state dependence and multinational control.

### *The Concessionaire Era (1914-1969)*

The Nigerian oil industry has its roots in the colonial state which, through the 1914 Colonial Minerals Ordinance, granted the monopoly of oil concessions in Nigeria to "British or British-allied capital" (Lolomari: 1976: 14). This provided the legal framework for the exclusion of Nigerians from any meaningful participation in the industry, and in 1938 served as the basis for the granting of an oil exploration licence to Shell (Shell D'Arcy and later Shell-BP) covering the entire mainland of Nigeria, an area of 367,000 square miles (Shatzl, 1969: 24-26). From 1957, a few years to Nigeria's independence, Shell surrendered some of its oil acreage to other oil multinationals and the state, leaving it with a total land area of 16,000 square

miles. This way, other oil multinationals such as Mobil, Gulf (now Chevron), Agip, Safrap (now Elf), Texaco and others gained a foothold in the Nigerian oil industry. At this point the oil industry, had no linkages with the rest of the Nigerian economy, save for the 50-50 profit sharing arrangement with the state under the rubric of the 1959 Petroleum Profits Tax Ordinance. As Amu (1982: 5), a former NNPC director, notes "under the concessionaire era, the oil industry was dominated by the oil multinationals, (and) government's role was limited to collecting rents and royalties from oil companies, and making laws to regulate the activities of the industry".

### *State Participation and State Capitalism (1970-1985)*

In 1969 the Federal government of Nigeria, abrogated the 1914 Ordinance, and transferred the "control" and "ownership" of oil to the state. It similarly imposed OPEC terms on all companies operating in the Nigerian oil industry, and formally joined OPEC in 1971. From the early 1970s, the state set up its own oil corporation (1971) and acquired majority equity participation in the industry by entering into joint venture agreements with the oil multinationals operating in Nigeria. It took up 60 per cent equity ownership in all the operating companies (Elf, Agip/Philips, Gulf (Chevron), Mobil, Texaco, Pan Ocean) except Shell, of which it acquired 80 per cent with the nationalisation of BP in 1979. The state later reduced its interest in BP to about 55 per cent, surrendering the remainder to Elf (10 percent), Agip (5 per cent) and Shell (30 per cent). These joint ventures have continued to account for the bulk of Nigeria's oil production and export. In the downstream sector, the state took over some oil marketing companies: Unipetrol (Esso), AP (BP), and National (the marketing arm of Shell). But this was not enough to displace the foreign giants of the domestic market (Mobil, Total, Agip, and Texaco).

The "arm" of state capitalism in the Nigerian oil industry, the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC, established in 1977), could not match the sophistication and monopoly of oil technology, as well as knowledge of global oil markets of the oil multinationals. Inevitably, therefore, the Nigerian state became dependent on the oil multinationals – its joint venture partners. This powerlessness was further compounded by intra-elite squabbles for access to oil wealth.

### *Post-State Capitalism, Market led Era (1986 – Present)*

Despite the efforts of adjustment to "roll back the state", diversify the oil industry from the export of crude oil, and commercialise the NNPC, the structure of the oil industry has not changed from its extractive, dependent, and foreign dominated structure (Obi, 1997). The removal of "oil subsidies", rather than freeing resources for development, fed into corruption, inflation, immense social misery and widespread poverty. The industry itself deteriorated, as the state reinforced, rather than loosened its grip on the oil in the face of shrinking oil revenues. Its offer of



Memoranda of Understanding (MOU) to oil multinationals in 1986 and 1991, attracted fresh investments in the industry, but by 1997 the state was in arrears in the payment of its share under the joint venture agreements to the tune of hundreds of millions of naira. At the same time the NNPC lacked the will or means to "regulate, participate or compete" in the oil industry. The 1990s have been a period of unprecedented state dependence on oil multinationals to increase oil exploitation and provide more revenue for resolving the national crisis.

As pointed out below, the state's total dependence on a commodity (oil) it did not control, its vulnerability to the oil multinationals (particularly Shell, which produced roughly half of Nigeria's oil), and the volatile global oil market were to have dire implications for the environmental conflicts that swept across the oil producing communities of the Niger Delta in the 1980s and 1990s.

### **The State – Oil Nexus**

The linkage between oil and the Nigerian state has received considerable scholarly attention (Ihonybere and Shaw, 1988; Graf, 1988, Obi, 1997d: 11-14). A lot of emphasis has been placed on the rentier context of this linkage in which the state, excluded from production, is reduced to a mere collector of rent from the oil multinationals. This formulation captures just the form of the state-oil linkage; it fails to address its content. While states are important as "primary mechanisms for securing specific social, economic and political orders in particular geographic domains, ... (they) are best seen as a site of conflict between these conflicting social forces, rather than the coherent and homogenous representative of nations as collective entities". (Wilkin, 1996: 231) The starting point of any fruitful analysis of the state-oil nexus should therefore regard the state as a source of class struggle, as well as a mediator of class struggle. While the state-oil nexus captures the dependence of the Nigerian state on the oil surplus (and its integration into global oil relations), it recognises that its role of mediation is not linear, but rather reflects the divisions within the ranks of the domestic ruling class and the balance of social forces in society generally (Obi, 1997b: 141). It is this heterogeneous national ruling class (Lubeck and Watts, 1995: 210), and its global partners, that have privatised the Nigerian "oil-rich" state.

For example, within the national ruling class are factions from the oil minorities who find themselves always marginalised by the factions from the larger ethnic groups. They are often co-opted into the power and patronage networks of the ruling class but in general they are excluded from the direct exercise of power, as well as control of and access to the oil wealth. The factions from the oil minorities divide into two main groups: those who are willing to continue in their traditional "place" as appendages of the ruling class in exchange for a share of the "oil pie"; and those who seek a radical re-negotiation of this role on the ground that the rich oil resources of Nigeria are located in their home "territory". It is the second faction

that has successfully mobilized and transformed the social forces in the Niger Delta into a potent weapon for challenging the social relations that have formed in the oil economy. It is in this sense that we would define the Nigerian state as contested terrain – “the sum total of relations arising from the global character of oil production, a site of constant struggles for access to power and primitive accumulation”(Obi, 1997b: 142). The “unity” (which is formal) and the reproduction of this state depends, to a large extent, on the oil multinationals (especially, Shell which accounts for 51 per cent of Nigeria’s total oil production) that produce oil – the very life-blood of the state and one of the critical sinews in global capital accumulation.

An important point to note is that the centralisation of oil power has itself become a contested issue. On the one hand, it has become a contentious issue between those who seek to maintain the status quo and those who seek its decentralisation in order to address issues of equity and social justice. On other hand, it is an issue between the pressure to maintain the status quo and the social forces which seek a larger share of federal (oil) revenues on the basis of derivation (Soremekun and Obi, 1993: 209-231; Obi, 1998). The challenge to “distributive inequities” thus constitutes a critical element in the struggles of the oil minorities who seek greater access to a larger share of the oil wealth..

### *The Global Interface*

The Nigerian oil industry is dominated by oil multinationals in what is a classic case of an unequal partnership. Three multinationals account for more than 65 per cent of Nigeria’s oil production: Shell (Anglo-Dutch), Chevron (American), and Mobil (American). And they have taken full advantage of the unequal partnership. Shell, which alone accounts for 51 percent of Nigeria’s oil production and provides Shell International with about 14 percent of its oil, is not only a big global player but also a strategic domestic player in Nigeria. The situation of Nigeria’s dependency (and desperation) becomes clearer if one considers its huge external debt (estimated at \$32 billion) in the face of the absence of any real growth in the non-oil sectors, and the crisis in which the oil industry in Nigeria itself is immersed. This desperation of the state has many adverse implications for “balance of power” between it and the oil multinationals.

The industrialised world also needs oil because it is the most viable and cheapest source of energy, a strategic commodity in global capitalist production. This makes the oil monopolies central to the fortunes of global capitalist accumulation. In accordance with the logic of capitalist accumulation therefore production relations in the oil industry are based on a division of labour that ensures maximum profit to capital. In spite of the serious contradictions inherent in those production relations, the oil multinationals have embarked on a policy of expanding their control over the world’s oil and gas reserves through the use of more efficient and

cost-effective technologies in the entire process of oil production. Apart from new "oil treasures" being pried open, old finds are optimally exploited, while an increasing share of the global oil market is being regained in the face of the waning OPEC clout, and the opening up of the oil reserves of the former Soviet Union and the Pacific Rim to the global oil market. In the case of Nigeria, Shell has recently announced a colossal investment and expansion programme. It plans to develop four big offshore oil fields as part of an US\$8.5 billion investment to raise Nigeria's oil and gas reserves. It will also construct a third liquefied natural gas train at Bonny Island worth US\$4 billion. Shell expects 70 percent of the funding from private oil companies and 30 percent from the Nigerian government. The three parties involved in this huge investment programme are: (i) Shell Petroleum Development Company (comprising Shell – 30%, Agip – 5%, Elf – 10% and the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation – 55%); (ii) The Nigerian Liquefied Natural Gas Company (which comprises Shell Gas – 25.6%, Elf – 15%, Agip – 10.4%, NNPC – 49%; and (iii) Shell Nigeria Exploration and Production Company (SNEPCO). [EIU CRN, 1999: 30] The result is that the oil multinationals have increased their command over the economic resources and power with which to deal with their "partners" in the crisis-ridden, dependent oil exporting economies such as Nigeria. They are at the same time asserting greater control and domination of the environment. From this position of total dominance, they are able to pursue a policy of exploration, extraction, processing and distribution regardless of the effects on the environment and the rights and interests of the oil communities.

### **Globalisation and Environmental Conflict in the Niger Delta**

The environmental conflicts in the oil-rich Niger Delta find expression at various levels: the struggles for "scarce land", those for profitable returns on investments and revenues for economic development and those for environmental and human rights. They take the form of the push and pull of social movements intent on blocking continued oil extraction (and degradation/pollution) and impoverishment of the environment, and those seeking to demobilize and suppress the forces of local resistance in order to ensure the uninterrupted exploitation of oil. As such wanton exploitation of the environment continues, backed by state repression, the conflict over oil resources and the land, (and waters) from which oil is mined is exacerbated and transformed into a struggle for power over oil production and the distribution of the benefits accruing from it.

#### *The Struggle For Land*

The Niger Delta area has one of the world's largest wetlands, supporting a wide ranging bio-diversity, including salt-water and fresh-water mangrove, and forest vegetation. For the communities in the Niger Delta area, land is therefore very scarce; and the little that is arable or can be exploited for their livelihood is

treasured. It forms the very basis – spiritual and material – of life in the peasant communities of the Niger Delta. Yet, land is scarce. In an account to the UNCED 1992 meeting, a delegation of chiefs from the Rivers State described the delta area thus:

The Niger Delta is in Southern Nigeria and has a catchment area of over 20 river systems. Six million people depend on the Niger Delta's fertile fishing grounds and agricultural land. As only 30 per cent of the delta is unaffected by heavy flooding, the remaining land has to support a concentrated population. There is heavy competition for land in the Niger Delta that, unfortunately for the local community is rich in oil.

The scarcity of land is due partly to the high population density of the area. More especially, it is the direct result of the uncontrolled appropriation of land by the oil companies worsened by the continued degradation of existing land by the same oil multinationals. At the moment six oil fields, two large refineries, a huge fertiliser complex, an ocean port, a petrochemical complex and numerous pipelines criss-crossing farmlands and homes have been established in the delta area which symbolize the threat posed to the livelihoods of the local population. The gravity of the situation is underscored by the fact that the land and waters, as well as the plant and fauna of the Niger Delta are exposed to toxic waste and other harmful substances discharged by the oil industry. In fact, there is abundant empirical evidence to this effect even though Shell has continued to deny responsibility; its denials fly in the face of the facts. According to Rowell (1994: 12), about 40 percent of Shell's spills world-wide were concentrated in the delta. While Shell has blamed the high incidence on sabotage by aggrieved villagers (Obi, 1997a: 14), a study by the Nigerian Ministry of Petroleum Resources puts "the largest cause of spill as equipment malfunction" (38 percent), and "corrosion of equipment" (21 per cent) (Oyekan, 1991). According to a World Bank Study – *Defining an Environmental Development Strategy For the Niger Delta*, "concentrations of dissolved petroleum hydrocarbons in bodies of water near oil terminals and refineries have been measured at levels ranging from 11.2 to 53.9 mg/litre. These concentrations are up to fifty times greater than European and US standards for safe drinking/domestic water". The report further observes that "as much as 76 per cent of all the natural gas from petroleum production in Nigeria is flared compared to 0.6 in the United States, 4.3 in the UK, 21 percent in Libya. The flaring is a serious hazard. At temperatures of 1,300 to 1,400 degrees centigrade, the multitude of flares heat up every thing, causing noise pollution, and producing CO<sub>2</sub>, VOC, CO, NO<sub>x</sub> and particulates around the clock. The emission of CO<sub>2</sub> from gas flaring in Nigeria releases 35 million tons of CO<sub>2</sub> a year and 12 million tons of methane, which means that Nigerian oil fields contribute more to global warming than the rest of the world put together" (World Bank Industry and Energy Operations,

1995). For the Ogoni, with a population of 500,000 squeezed into 404 square miles, and an estimated population density of 1,250 persons per square mile, issues of control of and access to land become very sensitive issues. These as well as environmental degradation are therefore at the very heart of the struggle of the oil producing communities in this area.

Yet the people appeared weak and helpless in the face of the overwhelming power of the oil companies supported by the state. They were either ignorant of the procedure for reclaiming their rights, or they could not afford the prohibitive cost of litigation against the oil companies (Adewale, 1989; Hutchful, 1985: 121). This is why they opted for environmental activism as a way of drawing attention to their plight and resorted to radical protests and the disruption of oil operations in their communities when their demands were not met. In most cases, the state has met such protests with repression (Crow, 1995; Robinson, 1996; Ibeanu, 1997: 14-21) as in the case of Umuechem (1990) and the Ogoni (1993) where life and property were lost. But such brutalities have not stemmed the tide of protest and resistance by the communities in the Niger Delta (Obi, 1998).

### *Struggles for Environmental and Human Rights: The Ogoni v Global Oil Capital*

The resistance of the Ogoni (MOSOP) to the forces of global oil capital is one of the most creative efforts by ordinary people to secure their rights against one of the worlds' most powerful multinationals – Shell. For the Ogoni, advancing the environmental and human rights agenda is a continuation of a long standing struggle for self-determination in the context of Nigerian federalism. It is also an example of the universalisation and legitimation of the global rights agenda in the post-cold war era (the struggle for democracy, civil rights, minority rights and environmental rights generally) and the de-legitimation of military rule on a global scale. These struggles hit their peak in the 1990s as a result of the conjuncture of domestic struggles for democracy against the background of military authoritarianism and economic crisis, and the resurgence of civil societies worldwide which promote and defend fundamental human rights. The Ogoni succeeded because their leadership was able to insert the Ogoni movement into the global rights discourse on the universality of human rights and freedom, and thereby won the attention and support of significant sections of global civil society to the cause of local resistance. But also, they succeeded because their movement was a solid project of local popular empowerment and mass mobilisation under a highly conscious leadership. What then were the strategies of popular empowerment used in the Ogoni movement?

### *The Strategies of Local Empowerment*

MOSOP was the culmination of the historical struggles of the Ogoni, one of the

smallest ethnic groups in a region of ethnic minorities. Through its strategies of local empowerment it was able to transcend the limitations of size and grab global attention. Initially, MOSOP in drawing up the Ogoni Bill of Rights (OBR) in 1990 had gone through extensive grassroots and elite consultations and defined the moral "correctness" and justness of the Ogoni people's struggle. The Bill was translated into the local dialects and given wide publicity in Ogoniland. It was later presented to the Nigerian government and circulated both locally and among the international community. At the local level, it was endorsed by most of the traditional leaders and clan heads, and was instilled in the popular consciousness as the creed of resistance and Ogoni freedom.

Mass support was cultivated and tested in rallies, demonstrations against Shell and the state were held, and structures of mass participation that included all sections of Ogoni society (Professionals, Women, Peasants, Youth, Traditional Rulers, Students, Teachers, and the Church) were devised. This gave MOSOP the legitimacy and power to make demands on Shell and the state, demands that were consistent with the quest of the people for their right to control their land and the oil, and be compensated for bearing the environmental cost of oil production. For example, in 1992 MOSOP gave Shell, Chevron, and the NNPC a list of demands to be met in 30 days, or leave Ogoniland. The success of that mass mobilization project is that ordinary Ogoni citizens agreed to contribute to the MOSOP special one naira Ogoni survival fund (ONESUF) in 1993, accruing a sum of N700,000.00. Later in the year, MOSOP set up the Ogoni relief and rehabilitation fund and agency (ORAREF), to cater for distressed Ogoni who were either victims of military repression, or had been displaced or injured in the wave of communal clashes between the Ogoni and their neighbours in 1993 and 1994 (Ndoni, Okrika and Ndoki).

### *Strategies For Connecting the "Global"*

With such solid local support and the non-response of Shell and the state to the Ogoni Bill of Rights (OBR), MOSOP took its struggle to the "global" level as a strategy of exposing Shell in its own "home", Europe, as a violator of human rights, especially of a minority group. Shell was picked because of its vulnerability as the largest and most visible operator in the delta area, its strategic role as "provider" for the state, and the likely domino effect its capitulation would have on the other operators. The first port of call was the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organisation (UNPO) in The Hague, Netherlands, a second home of the Royal-Dutch Group. UNPO afforded the Ogoni leadership the opportunity to network with other groups from different parts of the world involved in struggles for the rights of indigenous peoples, to establish strong contacts with the INGO rights community (Saro-Wiwa, 1995). The UNPO was a first step in giving global legitimacy to the Ogoni struggle, and immersing it in the discourse of the global rights movement. In 1992, another opportunity came for the Ogoni to present their

case to the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Peoples. This was quickly followed up by a television documentary (*Heat of the Moment*) on the devastation of the Ogoni environment by Shell and the repression of the Ogoni to shocked audiences in the UK (the other home of Shell), Europe, and other parts of the western world. This was followed by lecture tours, seminars, more films (*Megaforce*), invitations to INGO's and others to witness the "genocide of an indigenous people – the Ogoni", The picture of the Ogoni as the victim, a tiny ethnic group discriminated against, and confronted by the combined might of Shell and the state, empowered MOSOP's appeals and complaints to the international community. It also formed the basis for networking with "global" rights movements based in the west, who adopted the Ogoni struggle, connecting the global to the local, and thereby globalising the local Ogoni resistance.

While Shell was initially able to deny responsibility by arguing that the rights question was not part of its business of "searching for, and winning oil" .and that after paying its taxes to the state it was not its lot to interfere in governments' business, MOSOP's sustained exposure of Shell's culpability in Ogoniland, at numerous global forums caused considerable discomfort within this global conglomerate. MOSOP's case was well packaged for global impact with the help of international human and environmental rights NGO's, including: Amnesty International, FIAN International, Human Rights Watch Africa, Article 19, InterRights, the Body Shop, Greenpeace, and the Friends of the Earth (Skogly, 1997: 51). Others include the Sierra Club, Rainforest Action Network, Project Underground, Delta, Trocaire, World Council of Churches, Book Aid International, and the Netherlands Committee of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (Obi: 1998a: 14). Furthermore, the Ogoni Campaign was promoted through widely circulated reports, and through television documentaries which beamed the "ecological terror" against the Ogoni to shocked audiences across the world. In one of such programmes "World in Action" shown on Granada Television, on May, 13, 1996, Bop van Dessel, Shell's former head of Environmental Studies in Nigeria, confirmed that the oil industry was damaging the environment, and that Shell had ignored warnings and denied mistakes: "they were not meeting their own standards, they were not meeting international standards. Any Shell site I saw was polluted. Any terminal that I saw was polluted. It is clear to me that Shell was devastating the area" (Clothier and O'Conner, 1996).

The Internet, fax machines, lectures, lobbying, personal contacts, institutional affiliation, visits to Ogoniland by researchers and western activists, and interviews with strategic actors, picketing of Shell offices and stations, and boycotts were used to facilitate the globalisation of the Ogoni campaign against Shell and the Nigerian state. These struggles peaked after the execution of the "Ogoni Nine", an act widely condemned across the world for falling far below internationally recognised standards for a fair trial (Birnbaum, 1995; CLO, 1996; Skogley, 1997).

With such support at home and abroad, MOSOP was able to stop Shell operations in Ogoniland in 1993. It put Shell and the state in the global dock, contributing to the isolation of Nigeria under the Abacha military regime on the ground of its poor human rights record. Other groups in the delta, particularly Chicoco, ERA and Niger-Delta Human and Environmental Rescue Organization (ND-HERO), have emerged to join MOSOP in waging the struggle locally and in the global arena.

### *The Global-State Backlash*

In response to the challenge posed by the "globalisation" of local resistance in the Niger Delta, the state militarised the conflict. As in the case of Umuechem in 1990, when a demonstration against Shell by an aggrieved oil community was violently put down with considerable human casualties (80 dead, 485 houses destroyed), the Ogoni paid a heavy price through military occupation and reprisals by the Internal Security Task Force (Robinson, 1997: 58-80). According to Robinson, state repression of Ogoni resistance went through five phases: harassment and "justified" violence; covert operations; overt military operations; crushing the spirit; crisis management and the repression of the church and church leaders. Many Ogoni villages were attacked, thousands of Ogoni were killed or internally displaced, and some were forced into exile between 1993 and 1996.

The militant youth of the Ogoni were clearly no match for these forces, which also wanted to set up the Ogoni as an "example" to deter other oil communities from following the "Ogoni separatist path" or threatening global and state access to oil. In fact, MOSOP's activities were seen as subversive of state security as they struck at the heart of oil economy and threatened Shell, the "breadwinner" of the Nigerian state. To stop such popular resistance from becoming widespread, the federal government of Nigeria enacted the Treason and Treasonable Offences Decree in May, 1993. This decree made minority agitation for self-determination an offence punishable by death. The primary target was the Ogoni who are noted for a history of separatist agitation. The state hit hard at what, in some sections, was interpreted as the early stages of a secessionist movement in the heart of the country's gold-mine.

Clearly, this has been one of the most bitter environmental conflicts fought between a state and a group of its citizens in contemporary Sub-Saharan Africa. The state deployed the fullest complement of its coercive apparatus and its connections with traditional authority structures, as well as factions of the elite to frustrate the MOSOP and similar struggles in the delta. In 1992, it set up the Oil Mineral Producing Areas Development Council (OMPADEC) to develop the communities of the delta with the new 3 percent oil derivation fund. The Ogoni were visited by government delegations and the leadership was invited to Abuja for discussions with officials at the highest levels of government. When OMPADEC



got consumed in its own internal contradictions and the state could not co-opt the MOSOP leadership, subversion and deconstruction were considered the next option. How this was achieved can be gleaned from the factional politics that ravaged MOSOP before and after the 1993 Presidential elections, and the communal clashes between the Ogoni and the neighbouring Ndoki, Okrika and Andoni between 1993 and 1994, which led to the death and displacement of many Ogoni people (Crow, 1995: 12; Boele, 1995: 24-26; Ake, 1994: 6). At the international level, the Nigerian state felt betrayed by the West. To repair the damage and redeem its image, the government spent a lot of money in explaining how the Ogoni resistance had threatened national security, and western interests (FMIC, 1996) as a mode of image polishing, and diplomatic "damage control". Shell had taken the need for a positive public image and friendly environmental practices more seriously, even if the former is to cover up the poor state of the latter. Through press conferences, the release of Briefing Notes, the use of sophisticated public relations consultants, and the sponsoring of trips for sympathetic interests and journalists to the Niger Delta, it has continued to deny responsibility for, and been insensitive to the poor ecological and human rights situation in the delta, except in ways that doing better can help polish its battered image. Public relations had become its greatest refuge and tool for placing profits before the interests and rights of the Ogoni (Ake, 1995, 1996). It had also penetrated local classes, and strengthened alliances across classes including local chiefs, the elite, youth and professional groups, the media and civil society organizations.

After the 1995 hangings, Shell announced in 1996, that it was going ahead with the joint venture \$3.8 billion Nigeria Liquefied Gas Project (NLNG). This was after the Chairman of Royal Dutch Shell, Cor Herkstroeter, was reported to have said that Shell improved on its profits record in spite of the undue media attention, following the execution of the "Ogoni Nine" (Europe Information Service, 1996). Some evidence of Shell's logistical and material support to the Nigerian state, and the state's protection of Shell's interests, has been produced (Kretzman, 1995; Ghazi and Doudu, 1996; Rowell, 1996a, 1996b; Robinson, 1997), the reason for this is not far to seek. It lies in the symbiotic relationship between the state and Shell; between the gatekeeper and the benefactor. What is also important is how the political economy of the oil industry has rigidly defined as domestic the boundaries of issues of security and human rights in a context where the local clearly overlaps with the global. This probably accounts for the ambivalent attitude of certain western nations who claim to be champions of rights within the ambience of post cold war liberalism on the one hand, and recoil into inertia or indifference when this consideration collides with their national interest in securing access to sources of cheap oil, and huge profits for their investments. This perhaps explains the refusal of Britain and the Netherlands (the joint owners of Shell), and the United States of America (which imports half of Nigeria's oil), to support the international

campaign for the imposition of comprehensive oil sanctions on Nigeria in order to force the military regime to respect human rights and demands for democracy.

The sophistication and scale of violence deployed in Ogoniland have served to worsen tensions and protests in the oil producing communities of the Niger Delta. Cases of the spread of local resistance across the delta are well documented. Rowell (1994), captures this in relation to Umuechem, 1990; Ogbia, 1992; Igbide, 1992; Uzere, 1992; Diebu, 1992; Burutu, 1992; Bomadi, 1992 and Irri, 1993. In a more recent Human Rights Watch Africa study, Crow (1995), documents the sacking of four oil producing communities in the Niger Delta: Obagi, Brass, Nembe Creek, and Rumuobiokani by the mobile police force (Ibeanu, 1997: 17). Clearly, neither the militarisation of the conflict nor the globalisation of local resistance have brought outright victory for either side. As it is, the balance of power of social forces is in favour of those operating at the behest of globalisation for now. Yet, the persistence of contradictions in the contested oil-rich environment and the dynamics within the social forces themselves, strongly suggests that these struggles must continue.

## **Conclusion and Prospects**

It is clear that the attempt to suppress the Ogoni resistance by the state and petro-business interests operating in Nigeria has rather spread the culture of resistance in the delta, and led to the globalisation of local resistance movements. Since 1995 other resistance groups have emerged in the delta. These include, Chicoco (Chicoco, 1997), Environmental Rights Action (ERA), and the Niger Delta Human and Environmental Rescue Organisation (NDHERO). There is no doubt that lessons have been learned on the strategies for combining global and local resistance; more perhaps will be learnt in the course of the struggle. But, there is a recognition at the local level of the limitations, as well as merits of adopting global platforms vis a vis the hegemonic designs of the "industrialised democracies" for Nigeria's oil.

In the short to medium term, the prospects suggest that low intensity environmental conflicts will continue in the oil producing communities of the Niger Delta. There are also possibilities for the emergence of pan-delta militant youth groups which will seek to militarise local resistance based on, their frustration with non-violent protest, perceived betrayal of the cause by the older elite and their mastery of the swampy delta terrain, which will pose problems for a conventional military force in case of open warfare.

It would not be possible to disconnect the struggles of the oil minorities from the larger national-democratic project in Nigeria. The reverses suffered by MOSOP partly lay in its isolation, and the lack of inter-communal, inter-regional linkages. Creative modalities need to be exploited to bridge this gap, without draining local resistance of its essential elements. The end must be a people-centred democratic

project.

As long as the processes of globalisation continue to deepen contradictions in the Niger Delta and the oil multinationals continue "with business as usual", depending on a Nigerian state torn by factional politics with its legitimacy fragile as ever, the likelihood of peace and sustainable environmental practices are remote. Peace will have to be built on an emancipating project that must objectively respect the rights of the oil producing communities. The oil multinationals must begin to work out in consultation with the genuine representatives of the oil communities, new local-specific business ethics based on company sensitivity to, and respect for equity and social justice as well as the rights of the local communities, and the fragile ecosystem of the Niger Delta. Hiding behind the screen of state repression, weakness and non-accountability in the oil nexus, might prove too costly in the long run.

At the global level, the INGO's can be more effective if they have a unified campaign with the social movements of the Niger Delta (hopefully they would resolve the leadership crises plaguing them), and develop a firm focus on the struggle for justice and equity. On the part of the oil multinationals, it would be good business to cut their political costs by taking on more of the environmental costs of oil production, and contributing more meaningfully to local empowerment and development.

## Notes

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