Abstract

This essay assesses the impact that the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) has had on the resource exploitation by international oil companies and the subsequent environmental destruction that has been occurring in the Niger Delta since the 1950s. The author reviews the theoretical characteristics used to define MOSOP as an ‘environmental social movement’, and highlights the limitations of making a definite judgement of a social movement’s ultimate success or failure. She uses examples of MOSOP activities which can be viewed as both achievements and pitfalls of the Ogoni struggle, to conclude that there is a strong case for refusing to view MOSOP as a failure, and that it remains a key player in the the fight for human and environmental rights in the Niger Delta.
“I have no doubt at all about the ultimate success of my cause. Nor imprisonment or death can stop our ultimate victory.” – Ken Saro-Wiwa, MOSOP

On the 10th of November 1995 Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other Ogoni activists were executed by the Nigerian military regime after being charged with the murder of four Ogoni chiefs. Although the Nigerian government and multinational oil companies attempted to present the trial as a case of civil and intra-tribal conflict, the trial can only be contextualised within a forty year struggle by the Ogoni (and other local tribes) to preserve and protect their natural environment and socioeconomic livelihoods from the harmful effects of resource exploitation in the oil rich Niger Delta region. Despite a long history of challenges, activism and mobilisation by the Ogoni people since the start of environmental damage and financial inequality resulting from oil extraction, from the early 1990s a group called the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) has ‘brought world attention to the group’s conflict with the Nigerian state and [the] Royal Dutch Shell oil company’. Their grievance was the degradation of agricultural, domestic and fishing areas of Ogoniland that has resulted from decades of oil extraction, with pipeline leakages and gas flaring. The Ogoni and their supporters argue that this pollution has seriously harmed both the inhabitant’s health and the community’s ability to produce food for survival. They also protest that the people of the Niger Delta are not adequately compensated to recover from these hardships, and that the federal system of the Nigerian state facilitates the flight of oil

revenues from Ogoniland to more politically valued non-oil producing states in the north. Demands resulting from these grievances include the emancipation of the Ogoni people to have full control over the oil reserves under Ogoniland, and adequate reparations from both the Shell Petroleum Development Company of Nigeria (SPDC) and the federal state government to compensate for past and present environmental degradation and alleged human rights abuses by both actors.

In this essay I will assess whether MOSOP have been successful in fulfilling these demands and addressing the problems of Ogoniland effectively enough to have had a real effect and/or radical social change. I will do this by using the analytical approaches of social movement theorists to examine the actions of MOSOP and the effects that their methods had at different levels of governance throughout the history of the movement. I will conclude that despite the failure to prevent widespread pollution or to achieve adequate state and corporate responses, the fact that MOSOP as a movement still exists after years of state repression is a testament to the strength of the Ogoni people, and provides optimism for the future of activism in the Niger Delta.

In order to assess whether MOSOP as a social movement has been successful (and in what manner this success has occurred), it is first necessary to establish what a social movement is, and how MOSOP qualifies to be categorized as an ‘environmental’ social movement.

The basic and concise ideas of social movements often familiarise them as being centred on a campaign which ‘extends beyond any single event’ over a prolonged period of time and is conducted by a ‘single unitary actor’. However, a more advanced definition of a ‘social movement’ is presented by Doherty and Doyle, who make the point that it is an ‘analytical construct, not a description of a given empirical phenomenon.’ Although they give four key criterions by which a political organisation or series of actions could be defined as a

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'social movement' (collective action, external interaction, public protest and radical post-policy ‘social and political change), the fluidity of the construct makes the judgement of success more complicated than a win or lose analysis. Indeed, McAdam and Snow suggest that the variety of complicated political processes which surround and influence contentious political exchanges means that a judgement of success can be clouded by what he describes as a ‘spurious relationship’, where general social trends are the main cause of changes which are inaccurately attributed solely to a movement’s coincidental actions. Tarrow recognises these limitations within social movement analysis, and argues that when studying contentious politics, one should aim ‘to transcend the static nature of the domestic social movement paradigm and to specify a number of links among dynamic mechanisms that we see as crucial to the mobilization process.’ He also warns of using a short term approach, where the effects of a social movement are only considered within a short or immediate timeframe following actions, and instead suggests that ‘we need to look well past the end of cycles of contention to observe their effects.’ In the case of MOSOP, this means assessing successes and failures that go beyond the early 1990s and the deaths of the Ogoni Nine in 1995 to the activities of MOSOP which continue today.

In addition to the complexity of social movements in contentious exchanges, it is also important to be wary (as with any political term or construct) of how the label ‘social movement’ is used or applied, by whom and for what purpose. Throughout this essay the term ‘social movement’ will be used as a self-descriptive term by MOSOP, who call themselves a movement of the Ogoni people, rather than any descriptions of MOSOP by the Nigerian government or SPDC. However, the inclusion of the term ‘environmental’ raises the need for more clarification, as it is also not a straightforward concrete description, and the use of the word in relation to the Ogoni struggle is in fact a critical factor to the development and potential success of MOSOP. The term of ‘environmental’ in reference to

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a social movement can be viewed as what Touraine described as a paradigm which ‘is not only an instrument in the hands of the dominant: it is just as much the construction of defences, critiques, movements of liberation.’\textsuperscript{17} The construction of MOSOP’s fight within the paradigm of environmentalism against globalisation can be described as an instrument which Ken Saro-Wiwa utilised to frame their suffering, as prior to 1992 the cause was presented as ‘an ethnically based conflict between a powerless minority’\textsuperscript{18} and a dominant indigenous-colonialist state. This framework is what Doherty describes as a post-colonial narrative of environmentalism, ‘along structuralist lines of the haves and the have-nots’\textsuperscript{19} (such as the Ogoni as a minority culture versus more affluent and influential Northern tribes), whilst the Ogoni struggle can also be viewed through a ‘post-industrialist lens’ which ‘challenges the rights of corporations to pollute and degrade.’\textsuperscript{20}

The importance of the narratives and paradigms which MOSOP as an organisation has both used and embodied cannot be underestimated in the assessment of its successes and failures, and we will now begin the analysis of MOSOPs successes (within a variety of political, geographical levels, and from MOSOP’s inception to the present day) by exploring the construction of this framework in more detail.

As stated earlier, prior to 1992, the way that MOSOP had attempted to raise awareness of the Ogoni’s plight and global attention (with the aim of soliciting external support from international non-governmental organisations (INGOs)) had been to accuse the Nigerian government (through its allowance of Shell’s polluting activities) of genocide.\textsuperscript{21} The motivation for this framework came from Saro-Wiwa’s assessment of the geo-political and cultural shifts at the end of the twentieth century, with which he thought that the persecution of minorities to accumulate wealth would be a strong enough case to gain

\textsuperscript{18} Bob, ‘Political Process Theory’, p. 405.
\textsuperscript{19} Doherty & Doyle, ‘Beyond Borders’, p.707.
\textsuperscript{20} Doherty & Doyle, ‘Beyond Borders’, p.707.
\textsuperscript{21} Leton, G.B. ‘Statement’ in \textit{Appeal to the International Community} (Port Harcourt, Nigeria: Saros International, 1992) p. 3.
attention and concern. However, it appeared that he was more accurate in 1993 when he stated that, ‘The West worries about elephants. They stop the export of rhino horns and things like that. And then they cannot worry about human beings dying’, as after persuading environmentally concerned INGOs such as Green Peace International and Rain Forest Action Network that MOSOP was relevant and worthy of their support (and timing this approach to coincide with the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development), it gained the global attention that it had been struggling to attain.

According to McAdam and Snow, ‘gaining recognition’ and ‘international backing’ are crucial factors for social movement success, which throughout the 1990s (both before and after the death of Ken Saro-Wiwa) MOSOP had certainly achieved. This increased international recognition and backing can also be viewed as MOSOP successfully entering what Keck and Sikkink call ‘transnational advocacy networks’, which are structured interactions between various non-state actors, whose shared beliefs join them in networks that attempt to influence policy or change aspects of the global system to accommodate those beliefs. Effective use of these networks is considered beneficial to a social movement such as MOSOP, as it can improve access to resources and influential institutions of the international system, and MOSOP’s framing of their struggle as both an ecological and anthropocentric struggle meant that they became a part of both the human rights and environmental transnational advocacy networks.

One of the factors which contributed to the successful gaining of international attention and support was the ability of Ken Saro-Wiwa to achieve local mass mobilization. Whilst the environmental narrative was propagated internationally, at the national and local levels of politics MOSOP improved on decades of previous organisation to use the Ogoni identity as a

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25 McAdam and Snow, Social Movements, p. 409.
27 Keck and Sikkink, Activists, p. 1
resource{28} which Taylor and Whittier argue can be used by a community to ‘transform their members into political actors’{29}. The successful mobilization of 300,000 Ogonis on the 4{superscript}th of January 1993{30}, for the Ogoni Day March (which was orchestrated when MOSOP received an inadequate response to the demands notice that they had issued in December to several oil companies (including the SDPC){31} demonstrated that the leadership was capable of uniting the community (to a certain extent) and that Ogonis were not willing to accept any more decades of environmental exploitation.

This internal community success at coordinating a series of protests and actions against Shell and the state was an integral cause of what could be considered as the most critical achievement of MOSOP, which was the withdrawal of SPDC activities from Ogoniland in 1993, who stated that in the face of the heightened political and social unrest, they ‘could no longer guarantee the safety of its staff.’{32} As stemming ‘the further production of environmental degradation and the expropriation of the oil-rich Ogoni ecology’{33} was a key goal of MOSOP, the cessation of oil extraction by SPDC can be viewed as this goal having been partially achieved, especially as in 1998 Shell stated that it ‘will not return to produce oil from Ogoniland until it has the consent of the communities to do so.’{34} However, to avoid static assessment of social movements, it is important to note that this success was for a limited time period only, and this will be examined in full detail later on in the essay.

Following the execution of MOSOP’s most prominent leader alongside other key Ogoni activists by the state in 1996, measurable successes are both the continued existence of MOSOP post-Saro-Wiwa, and the resulting spread of anti-oil activism and organisation by other tribes and communities in the Niger Delta, who have suffered similar exploitation as the Ogoni. Mobilisation of Ijaw, Ekwerre and Ogbia communities to ‘pressure local and state

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authorities for expanded resources and political autonomy\textsuperscript{35} has been directly attributed to the survival of Ken Saro-Wiwa’s ideas and the non-violent methods he used to gain international attention and local action\textsuperscript{36}. This continuation of the struggle in other areas of the Niger Delta places MOSOP’s influence within a wider anti-oil movement, beyond both local and national borders.

Finally, a more recent success of individuals involved with MOSOP has been the financial settlement from a number of court cases brought against SDPC in the United Kingdom and the United States for their alleged role in the death of the Ogoni Nine and other human rights abuses to suppress Ogoni anti-oil activism\textsuperscript{37}. The plaintiffs described the case as representing ‘one more step towards holding corporations accountable for complicity in human rights violations, wherever they may be committed’\textsuperscript{38} and some of the $15.5 million settlement will be used for community development in Ogoniland.

However, many of the above successes have been limited in their scope or longevity. In the final part of this essay I will examine these limitations to assess how successful MOSOP really has been, and whether the failures of the movement have a critical effect on MOSOP’s overall success as an environmental social movement.

The first limited success that I will examine is the response of the Nigerian state to MOSOP’s actions. It can be argued that the violent repression of Ogoni activities and citizens in the wake of widespread peaceful mobilization strengthened MOSOP’s case against the state\textsuperscript{39} and contributed to mobilisation by breeding resistance (described as the “paradox of repression”)\textsuperscript{40}, but ultimately the repression resulted in the death and injury of hundreds of

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{Watts} Watts, ‘Petro-Violence’, p. 199.
\bibitem{Oha} Oha, ‘Introduction’, p.xii.
\bibitem{Bob} Bob, ‘Political Process Theory’ p. 408.
\end{thebibliography}
Ogonis, including the executions of the Ogoni Nine.\textsuperscript{41} Although international awareness and outrage over the casualties caused substantial damage to both Royal Dutch Shell and Nigeria’s international reputations\textsuperscript{42}, and in 2008 the SPDC paid an out of court settlement to Ogoni individuals, the company did not admit any liability or responsibility for damage to the Ogoni inhabitants or environment.\textsuperscript{43} It must therefore be questioned whether a $15.5 million reparation is a significant figure from a company which in 1996 was ‘netting roughly $200 million profit from Nigeria each year.’\textsuperscript{44}

This leads onto the next point, which questions the value of concessions which MOSOP has actually won from SPDC and the Nigerian state, such as community development projects, investment and government concessions to counteract environmental degradation and constitutional marginalisation. For example, in 1992 Shell ‘provided a water project of 5,000 gallons capacity for a constituency of 100,000\textsuperscript{45}, whilst there are widespread allegations of misappropriation of funds allocated for community projects\textsuperscript{46}. Shell states that ‘between 1987 and 1992...the company spent more than $2 million on community projects in the Ogoni area’\textsuperscript{47}, and yet it could be argued that although without decades of Ogoni action these gestures were unlikely to have been considered, the inadequacy of the provisions since 1992 in relation to such widespread environmental exploitation supports the claims that SPDCs humanitarian activities in Ogoniland are merely ‘token gestures’\textsuperscript{48} as part of a public relations exercise to rebuild the company’s image on both local and international stages.\textsuperscript{49}

Meanwhile the relationship between the Ogoni and the Nigerian federal government has only marginally changed following Saro-Wiwa’s death, and the end of military rule after 1999. According to Ibeanu, under the ‘civilian government, a new strategy has been to introduce a Niger Delta Development Co-operation bill to send resources back to

\textsuperscript{41} Amunwa, \textit{Counting the Cost}, p. 8.
\textsuperscript{42} Cummins and Beasant, \textit{Shell Shock}, p. 232.
\textsuperscript{43} Amnesty International, ‘Nigeria’, p. 4.
\textsuperscript{44} Watts, ‘Petro-Violence’, p. 198.
\textsuperscript{45} Watts, ‘Petro-Violence’, p. 198.
\textsuperscript{47} Detheridge \& Pepple, ‘A Response to Frynas’, p. 482.
\textsuperscript{48} Oha, O. ‘Introduction’, p. x.
\textsuperscript{49} Frynas, ‘Corporate and State Responses’, p. 44.
communities. Critiques of the bill, and other examples of legislation passed in response to MOSOP’s protest, argue that these are ineffective actions by a government which still represses civic protest, and that the fragile relationship between the state and local communities is exploited by oil companies in an attempt to attribute unrest in the region as inter-tribal ethnic conflict. Other attempts by the state include the creation of the Niger Delta Development Commission and the production of several reports. However, Ledum Mitee, the outgoing president of MOSOP, argues that ‘there is a history of reports, which are supposed to solve critical issues in Nigeria, gathering dust on the shelves.’

Despite the initial resurgence in the numbers of MOSOP supporters in response to violent state repression, and the continued existence of MOSOP as an organisation, many commentators believe that the organisation has never recovered from the internal factionalism between radicals and traditional reformists that led to Saro-Wiwa’s arrest and execution, and the consequent exile of many of the leadership after 1995. Also, whilst the ‘baton of resistance’ has indeed been passed to other Niger Delta communities, in some places the ‘failures of several years of peaceful engagement’ has led to violent resistance, such as the creation of the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), which has launched a militant campaign against oil companies operating in the delta. Given Ken Saro-Wiwa’s insistence on non-violent direct action, the utilisation of violence by another Niger Delta group is not MOSOP’s responsibility, but for those who believe in the power of non-violent movements to cause effective change, MEND’s actions could be a disappointing development in the wider anti-oil struggle.

Finally, if we examine the environmental degradation and the activities of oil companies in Ogoniland today, it is possible to conclude that MOSOP has failed to prevent the pollution of

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51 Frynas, ‘Corporate and State Responses’, p. 35.
55 Shaxson, Poisoned Wells, p. 199.
the land from resource extraction. Despite the continued global attention from environmental and human rights NGOs on both the geographical area and the legal cases against Shell, the efficacy of the company’s responses to pollution (in particular, oil spills) has been woefully inadequate\(^\text{58}\). A recent report by the UNEP identified that pipelines in Ogoniland which are no longer used but are yet to be decommissioned are not maintained effectively, leading to deterioration and spillages\(^\text{59}\), and estimated that over the past five decades, over 546 million gallons of oil have been spilled in Ogoniland.\(^\text{60}\). In addition to the existing pollution from the previous history of oil extraction prior to the cessation of activities in 1993, in 2011 the Ogoni Star announced that the Nigeria Petroleum Development Company (NPDC) plans to ‘commence production from the 30 oil fields belonging to the SPDC in Ogoniland’.\(^\text{61}\) Despite the response from the community of opposition to this planned production, the announcement symbolises that there is a far greater appetite for resource extraction than environmental protection (as it has been possible to move far more swiftly to re-start production in Ogoniland than mobilizing efforts to clean up the existing degradation.) It also demonstrates that the value of Niger Delta oil reserves to the Nigerian state is greater than the value of the Delta people’s livelihoods\(^\text{62}\).

Throughout this essay I have examined the variety of actions, relationships, and dynamics which contribute to social movements’ successes or failures (despite this being, according to social movement theorists, difficult to quantify). I conclude that despite the evident failures of MOSOP to prevent the continued environmental destruction of Ogoniland, and the lack of serious political reform or radical state policies to address minority concerns, overall it is possible to describe MOSOP as being a successful environmental social movement. Rather than being an overly-optimistic view of the inspiration MOSOP has provided to other


movements around the world, this conclusion is based on both the successes that MOSOP had during the major cycle of contention in the early 1990s, and on Tarrow’s assertion that any analysis must look past the major events. As MOSOP is still an active part of a wider struggle against the exploitation of globalization, I therefore conclude that MOSOP has not completely failed, but still has yet to achieve its major goals, and that any future movement has a challenging struggle to fight. As Ken Saro-Wiwa said himself, "Lord take my soul, but the struggle continues."  

63 Tarrow, Power in Movement’ p. 174.

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