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# “Green” or “Red”? Reframing the Environmental Discourse in Nigeria

Akin Iwilade

**Abstract:** This paper investigates the role of environmental social movements and NGOs in the struggle for democracy in Nigeria. In particular, it examines how environmental issues, specifically in the oil-rich Niger Delta, have come to symbolise the Niger Delta communities’ craving for greater inclusion in the political process. The paper argues that because of linkages to the nature of economic production, environmental crises have been particularly useful in driving the democracy discourse in Nigeria. By linking environmental crisis to democratisation and the interactions of power within the Nigerian federation, NGOs and social movements have been able to gain support for environmental causes. This may, however, have dire implications for the environmental movement in Nigeria. Because ownership, not necessarily sustainability, is the central theme of such discourse on resource extraction, social movements may not be framing the environmental discourse in a way that highlights its unique relevance. The paper concludes by making a case for alternative methods of framing the environmental discourse in a developing-world context like that of Nigeria.

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This paper enquires into the internal logic of the environmental movement in Nigeria within the particular contexts of resource scarcity, resource rights, economic crisis and political exclusion. It examines the appropriation of environmental discourses by civil society movements involved in what are, fundamentally, struggles for democratic incorporation within the highly volatile and resource-rich Niger Delta region. This enquiry is particularly important because it draws attention to the implications of a growing hyper-connectivity of the various discourses, mutually reinforcing as they may sometimes be, for the continued public awareness of the environmental crisis in the Niger Delta.

The paper addresses this in three interconnected sections: The first attempts to deconstruct the intersections between environment (crisis and governance), resources and democracy. This section provides a framework within which the analysis of the environmental movement and the Niger Delta struggle can be understood. The second section examines the nature of social groups involved in the environmental movement in Nigeria and raises the question of their specific colouration: Are they fundamentally “green” or “red”? “Green” is taken to mean “environmentally focused”, while “red” refers to “resource focused”. The concluding section suggests ways of reframing the environmental discourse to redirect its focus toward ecological and sustainability issues rather than merely serving as a convenient front for resource control and accumulation battles.

## Environment, Resource and Democracy: Deconstructing the Intersections

In relation to the on-going struggle in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, it is possible to discern the intersections between environmental crisis and the democratic struggles for incorporation and for access to the revenue that accrues from the exploitation of oil. We can also recognise the appropriation of environmental rhetoric by organisations whose prime purpose is to defend resource rights and secure access to state patronage and resources rather than to promote sustainability.

To start with, it should be noted that the increasing liberalisation of the political space in Africa since the early 1990s has unleashed a flood of Afro-optimism. The literature is replete with notions of the growing institutionalisation of political power (Posner and Young 2007), of a supposed democratic rebirth (Halperin, Siegle and Weinstein 2010), and of the ability of civil society to extract democratic accountability from the state and thus deepen democracy (Bratton and van de Walle 1997; Warren 2001). This tendency to view changes in the political space – which incidentally often amount to

“incomplete and tenuous shifts toward more representative government” (Walker: 1999: 260) – as progress is an articulation of the liberal triumphalism that seized the world at the end of the Cold War. The problem, however, is that these marginal changes provide few to no answers to many of the questions that still plague Africa’s democracies. In fact, much of the literature that celebrates these political transitions as “change” offers little insight into the actual depth of Africa’s democratic experiences. These studies also do not adequately take into account the specific nature of Africa’s democracy, so brilliantly described by Ake (1993).

Perceiving democracy, at least its liberal variant, as a cure for Africa’s problems supports the tendency to see a link between democratic governance and the environment. But the specific details of the relationship between democracy and qualitative environmental governance are rarely discussed, and the contradictions between the neoliberal logic of resource extraction that underpins the liberalisation projects in many African states and the issue of ecological sustainability have also generally been neglected. The link between democracy and the environment, according to Walker (1999), has four key components:

- The first is an erroneous assumption that democratisation constitutes democracy. As Walker (1999: 264) rightly points out, there are of course theoretical grounds to argue for a correlation between democracy and sound environmental management. Democratisation, however, is a different ball game. A democratic state will have effectively institutionalised accountability (social, political and economic) and participation beyond elections. This is clearly not the case with most African states, as many scholars have pointed out (Adejumobi 2000; Momoh 2006). Democratisation, on the other hand, is rooted in contradictions and serious inconsistencies. For most African states, democratisation remains an arena of competition between forces of the *ancien regime* – who seek to maintain the autocratic status quo – and those with democratic ambitions. These battles allow for practices that ignore environmental rights and the sustainability imperative.
- The second component is the perception that in countries where citizens can hold leaders accountable, they are in a better position to insist on environmental policies and practices. This line of thinking suggests that a democratic – or democratising – state will provide opportunities for local communities to resist unsustainable environmental practices and to also encourage the state to seek its citizens’ cooperation in determining what qualifies as acceptable practice.

- The third component is a corollary to this and it relates to the extent to which democracy promotes greater responsiveness of political leaders to the needs of their constituencies. The logic is that since democracy guarantees this sort of accountability, political leaders will discern the natural desire for environmental sustainability and thus design governance responses that guarantee it.
- Fourth, it is assumed by many scholars and policymakers that democracy can be linked to the environment because this kind of governmental system is most likely to allow greater local participation in environmental decision-making and management.

The broad outlines of this democracy–environment linkage appear strong theoretically. However, an examination of evidence on the ground in areas like the Niger Delta tells a completely different story. Since the return to active democratisation in 1999, little has changed in the way the environment is treated by the coalition of the state and multinational corporations that exploits oil in the region. The local communities have not experienced significantly higher levels of participation in environmental management, nor have their livelihoods ceased to be undermined by oil exploration and exploitation. In spite of the return to civilian rule in 1999, scholars have been pointing to the fact that the area has not fared any better since then (Obi 2001; Okonta 2008). This raises questions about the validity of democracy’s perceived positive correlation with sound environmental management.

One may even go beyond the available empirical evidence to raise valid theoretical questions about the perceived positive correlation of democratisation to environmental sustainability. For instance, at the core of the neoliberal project that drives the on-going democracy movement in Nigeria is the privileging of multinational capital. In this setting, the accumulation of capital and the maximisation of profits are by far the most important elements of investment. Thus, it is hard to imagine the multinational oil companies deliberately engaging routinely in sustainability practices that would greatly reduce their profits. A positive intersection between the environment, resources and democracy thus cannot be taken at face value. To justify such assumptions, a lot more empirical evidence will have to be generated.

## NGOs, Social Movements and the Environmental Movement in Nigeria: Green or Red?

One of the most well-known environmental groups in Nigeria is the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP). Its leader, Ken Saro Wiwa, was murdered in 1995 by the Sani Abacha-led military junta. Saro

Wiwa was the winner of many prestigious environmental prizes, including the Right Livelihood Award, the Goldman Award and the Hellman/Hammett Award. MOSOP was not the first social movement to challenge the Nigerian state and the multinational oil companies operating in the Niger Delta. However, the Ogoni case, as MOSOP framed it, is significant because it generated immense international interest and effectively placed the crisis in the region at the centre of the environmental discourse. Even though Saro Wiwa is best remembered as an environmental rights activist, he noted the politicisation of the environmental message of MOSOP. In an interview with Chris McGreal, Saro Wiwa noted the implications of this change:

We have been fighting for the environment for a long time, nobody listened because the environment was not a serious issue with anybody except for those of us who were suffering. But when we made a political case, then that began to draw some attention (*The Guardian* 1993: 8).

This does not, however, capture the complete picture. The order of his comments about the role of politics and environment in the Ogoni struggle should have been reversed. For instance, the Ogoni Bill of Rights, which predates the statement quoted above and is arguably the most important document clearly stating the aims of the Ogoni in their struggles against the state and the multinational oil companies, did not mention the environment until Article 16 (OBR 1990). In its demands, environmental issues were also mentioned last. Issues like language, inclusion in the political process, and economic development clearly ranked higher on the Ogoni list of priorities. This is rather curious for an organisation that has been touted as “environmental”.

There is no doubt that the Ogoni struggle brought the environmental crisis in the Niger Delta to a global audience and forced many countries to re-examine their political relationship with Nigeria in the 1990s. However, its effectiveness in linking the environmental question to the issues of political marginalisation and economic development (particularly resource rights and control) effectively elevated the political and economic dimension of the governance crisis way above the ecological. Eventually, the lesson that successor organisations of the Niger Delta struggle learnt from MOSOP was “resource control” and not management or sustainability. The Ogoni example is instructive because of the demonstrative effect it had on other similar movements that emerged with the return to civil rule in 1999.

It should be noted that at the end of the “Ogoni decade” in the Niger Delta conflict, a decisive shift away from the ecological questions in the region occurred. Organisations that succeeded MOSOP at the frontlines of the oil communities’ battles against the state–multinational coalition have pushed environmental debates to the side. Groups like the Movement for

the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF) and the Ijaw Youth Congress (IYC) have all but ended the oil communities' romance with the green movement and appear to now increasingly focus on the central questions of resource control rather than resource sustainability – they seek to achieve a greater share of oil resources rather than a protected environment. In an interview in 2004, Asari Dokubo, leader of the NDPVF, was asked what exactly they were fighting for. His answer leaves little doubt as to the centrality of the red rather than the green questions of the Niger Delta crisis. He stated that the struggle, among other things,

has something to do with our Ijawness. The Nigerian state is stealing from us, we say no more stealing of our resources. Give it back to us. Our language and our culture which the Nigerian constitution has dubiously eliminated and said that it is Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba [...] that will be taught our children, we say no, we want to speak our Ijaw language, exhibit our culture (*Newswatch* 2004: 13).

Throughout the interview, Asari Dokubo made no reference whatsoever to the environmental crisis in the Niger Delta. While this trend cannot, of course, be solely linked to the impact of MOSOP's creative use of issue linkages in its challenge of state authority, it is reasonable to suspect that the opening up of the political space has induced the Niger Delta communities to more boldly place the real drivers of their protests (economic crisis and political exclusion) at the forefront of the discourse. A content analysis of other interviews by leaders of the various movements involved in the Niger Delta struggle reflects similar sentiments. A few examples will suffice to illustrate this point:

I know that my group, the NDPVF, is not a militant organisation. It is a broad-based Ijaw and Niger Delta organisation fighting for the actualisation of the sovereignty and the right of the people to their sovereignty (Asari Dokubo, *Newswatch* 2007: 29).

There is a consensus that the crisis in the Niger Delta is a cumulative consequence of five major factors. These are the challenge of minority rights in a multi-ethnic country; history of poor or bad government; the lure of crude-oil-stealing; the challenge of a principle-based nation-building with regard to fiscal federalism; and the criminalisation of politics (David Dafinone, *The Week* 2008: 6).

All foreign multinationals who have been involved in the criminal exploitation of the Niger Delta protected territory in collaboration with imperialist Britain and the dubious Nigerian state [...] immediately compute the equivalent of the resources illegally exploited and stolen

from the Niger Delta [...] in dollars, euros and other international currencies (Cynthia Whyte of Martyrs Brigade (MEND), *Newswatch* 2006: 14).

The above statements were made by stakeholders in the Niger Delta struggle between 2000 and 2009. They generally reflect the peculiar priorities of the organisations involved in the battle against the state–multinational oil coalition in the region. The implication is that ecological issues are generally no longer referred to in their own right within the discourse on the crisis in the Niger Delta except to the extent that they relate to the broader questions of governance, economy, democratisation and security.

Of course, there are still NGOs focused on the environmental governance issues facing the region. Organisations like the Environmental Rights Action (ERA) and Friends of the Earth (FoE) are still very much focused on the ecological devastation. These movements can, and do, complement the social movements mentioned above. However, the Niger Delta discourse has become fixated on the economic and political questions facing the region. The response of the Nigerian state has also inevitably been centred around providing oil-producing communities with a greater share of the economic resources accruing from oil. The government has also made efforts to encourage both greater inclusion of oil-producing minorities in the political process at the federal level and the gradual demilitarisation of the region. These responses are illustrated by the amnesty programme launched in 2009, the creation of the Niger Delta Ministry at the federal level, and the approval of increased derivation percentage in the sharing of federal revenue. These are the government's declared goals, not necessarily its accomplishments. What is generally missing, or at least de-emphasised by both government and the oil communities, is a deliberate ecological response. The neoliberal logic that drives governance and resource extraction in the region is fixated primarily on maximisation of profits. The ecological issue threatens this goal, as it demands investment in cleaner technology and requires more effective and expensive clean-up operations as well as stronger regulation. Thus, it is convenient for both the state and the multinationals to pay lip service to the environmental issues and concentrate instead on the incorporation and/or co-optation of elements involved in the resistance. For the people of the Niger Delta, it appears that compensation for ecological damage largely satisfies the grievances. This is also an indication of how red rather than green issues dominate the discourses on the Niger Delta crisis.

The relative calm in the Niger Delta since the 2009 amnesty deal also illustrates the continued triumph of red over green in the region's struggle against the powerful coalition of the state and oil multinationals. Even though little has changed with regard to the environmental crisis in the re-



gion, many of the militant groups have been successfully co-opted by the state and now act as protectors of oil infrastructure (*The Nation* 2012: 19). This new type of cooperation between the state and former militants justifies concerns about the resistance and the way environmental rhetoric has been mobilised to serve not-so-green ends.

## Conclusion: Reframing the Environmental Discourse

What the analysis demonstrates is the continued primacy of perceptions of exclusion in the nature and character of resistance in the Niger Delta. Even though environmental rhetoric was key to the internationalisation of the crisis, environmental issues are, in reality, peripheral to the agitations of Niger Delta social movements for justice.

The environmental movement requires a major overhauling if it is to re-establish ecological issues as central to the Niger Delta crisis. There is of course little sense in suggesting that the economic and governance issues are not important or that they should be de-emphasised. However, the environmental crisis in the Niger Delta has immense implications for global biodiversity and thus deserves to be treated on its own merit rather than only to the extent that it relates to economic, democratic or social issues. The key to accomplishing this is perhaps to encourage grass-roots movements in the region to play a greater role in shaping the discourses about the environment. This will surely prove a difficult task, as oil-producing communities cannot be expected to be focused on the environment if their own economic opportunities are limited. However, it is a task worth embarking on.

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### „Grün“ oder „Rot“? Zur Themenverschiebung im nigerianischen umweltpolitischen Diskurs

**Zusammenfassung:** Dieser Beitrag untersucht die Bedeutung umweltpolitischer Bewegungen und Nichtregierungsorganisationen (NRO) für den Kampf um Demokratie in Nigeria. Insbesondere widmet er sich der Frage, inwiefern Umweltthemen, speziell im ölfreie Nigerdelta, inzwischen das große Bedürfnis der Bevölkerung reflektieren, stärker in den politischen Prozess einbezogen zu werden. Umweltkrisen haben den demokratischen Diskurs in Nigeria ganz besonders vorangebracht, weil sie zu den Grundlagen der ökonomischen Produktion in Beziehung stehen. Indem soziale Bewegungen und NRO die Umweltkrisen mit dem Demokratiedefizit und den Machtstrukturen innerhalb Nigerias in Beziehung setzten, fanden sie auch Unterstützung in Umweltfragen. Dies könnte allerdings negative Folgen für die nigerianische Umweltbewegung haben. Denn das zentrale Thema eines sozialen Diskurses zum Abbau von Ressourcen ist die Eigentumsfrage und nicht notwendigerweise die Nachhaltigkeit; wird der Diskurs von sozialen

Bewegungen bestimmt, wird die einzigartige umweltpolitische Relevanz möglicherweise nicht ausreichend herausgestellt. Der Autor plädiert für eine alternative Themensetzung im umweltpolitischen Diskurs in Entwicklungsländern wie Nigeria.

**Schlagwörter:** Nigeria, Politische Vereinigung/Politische Gruppierung, Ökologische Bewegung