
[Women taking the lead in reversing climate change](#)

A thorough report by Leigh Brownhill and Terisa E. Turner (“Climate Change and Nigerian Women’s Gift to Humanity”) traces Nigerian resistance to massive oil exploitation --which has not rendered any good for the country’s people (see WRM Bulletin N° 56) -- and highlights women’s leading role in that struggle.

The Nigerian organization Environmental Rights Action stated in 2005 that “More gas is flared in Nigeria than anywhere else in the world. Estimates are notoriously unreliable, but roughly 2.5 billion cubic feet of gas associated with crude oil is wasted in this way everyday. This is equal to 40% of all Africa’s natural gas consumption in 2001, while the annual financial loss to Nigeria is about US \$2.5 billion. The flares have contributed more greenhouse gases than all of sub-Saharan Africa combined. And the flares contain a cocktail of toxins that affect the health and livelihood of local communities, exposing Niger Delta residents to an increased risk of premature deaths, child respiratory illnesses, asthma and cancer.”

In WRM Bulletin N° 100 we have also depicted how vast tracts of mangrove forests are slowly suffocated by the numerous oil spills, which permeate the coastal waters and streams, and coat the exposed, air breathing roots of the mangroves.

However, Nigerian people have not been witnessing such a massive destruction without resistance. Environmentalists in Nigeria, notably from among the Ogoni, Ijaw and other ethnic groups in the oil-rich Niger Delta, including the MOSOP (Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People), have persistently tried to shut down Shell’s gas flaring. As a response, on November 10, 1995 Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other members of the MOSOP were hanged by Nigeria’s military dictatorship (see WRM Bulletin N° 27).

On 11 December, 1998 the newly formed Ijaw Youth Council, acting as part of the multi-ethnic, pan-Delta Chikoko movement issued the Kaiama Declaration, which stated that all land and natural resources belonged to the communities and demanded “that all oil companies stop all exploration and exploitation activities in the Ijaw area. We are tired of gas flaring, oil spillages, blowouts and being labelled saboteurs and terrorists.”

On 1 January 1999 activists in the Niger Delta launched ‘Operation Climate Change,’ to shut down oil flow stations and gas flares in the Delta. What was conceived as a ten-day program of non-violent civil disobedience, with occupation of flow stations and attempts made to shut down the flares, finally lasted for several weeks. The Operation Climate Change seriously affected five oil companies - Agip, Chevron, Mobil, Shell, Texaco -. The Shell-backed military administration responded with a state of emergency. Two warships and up to 15,000 troops were deployed. Many women were raped by soldiers. Soldiers using a helicopter and boats owned by Chevron, attacked environmentalists who were occupying a drilling rig, killing over fifty people and destroying dozens of homes.

Dozens of women’s groups from across the Delta, mobilized in a multi-ethnic umbrella organization called Niger Delta Women for Justice, took to the streets in Port Harcourt. Nigerian peasant women

asked for solidarity from women and other international activists in a joint campaign to protect life by putting a stop to the depredations of Big Oil. Environmentalists in Nigeria and the UK described their Operation to shut down Shell gas flares as a “gift to humanity” because it sought to cut carbon emissions that threaten humanity as a whole.

The aftermath for those engaged in the “gift to humanity” campaign unfolded over the subsequent eight years along three axes: first, the deepening of militancy within the Niger Delta around the demand for democratic ‘resource control;’ second, the achievement of significant success in expelling oil companies from the Niger Delta; and third, the experience of violent counter-insurgency at the behest of the Nigerian state and foreign oil companies. This third dimension of the aftermath exposed the empirical power relations between women who try to interdict perpetrators of ecocide and those men who profit from expanded oil production with its escalating deadly emissions.

In 2005 the Nigerian women’s groups, including Niger Delta Women for Justice that had contributed to a moratorium on gas flaring were labeled “terrorist” by the government which was being drawn ever more deeply into the U.S. global ‘war on terror.’

The Nigerian women’s “gift to humanity” provoked a leap in global consciousness about the dire common fate of all humanity if specific polluters amongst the world’s tiny clique of 400+ billionaires are allowed to run rampant outside democratic control as well as provoked and accelerated an international groundswell of coordinated mobilization (see more info in the report).

In January 2006 Nigerian courts ordered Shell to stop the flaring of natural gas. Shell has appealed the ruling. The oil giant has also been unable to return to Ogoniland since 1993. In a 23 September 2006 interview, Owens Wiwa stated that “It was Ogoni women who were most instrumental in preventing Shell from operating in Ogoniland over the past decade. This is a major success because not only have we driven Shell out non-violently, but we have set a precedent for all Nigeria and indeed the whole world: without local people’s agreement, no oil company can go in. A tremendous price has been paid in loss of life. But government’s revocation of Shell’s operating licence is a tremendous victory and it is due largely to the commitment of ordinary village women, mostly organized through the Federation of Ogoni Women’s Associations.”

The shut-down of all Shell operations in Ogoniland means less gas flaring, less carbon emissions and less global warming. The shut-down is not limited to Ogoniland. Across the Delta, some 600,000 barrels a day, or about a quarter of Nigeria’s total production, was shut-in throughout 2006. This entails a massive cut in greenhouse gas emissions.

Nigerian women led a remarkable global initiative to cut greenhouse gas emissions. The coordinated, international action and its aftermath suggest tactics that, if adopted more generally today, promise to deliver success in the complex struggle to reverse climate change.

Extracted and adapted from: “Climate Change and Nigerian Women’s Gift to Humanity”, by Leigh Brownhill and Terisa E. Turner, Centre for Civil Society, <http://www.ukzn.ac.za/ccs/default.asp?2,40,5,1153>