Global Linkages and the Emergence of Indigenous Collective Action

in Nigeria's Niger River Delta

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Abstract

In recent research, scholars of social movements have transferred the dominant political process theory from its home turf, domestic society, to the international realm. Yet few studies of transnational movements have thus far grappled with several key issues: the articulation between domestic and international opportunity structures; the relative weight of domestic and international opportunities in internal mobilization and external framing; and the effect of international factors on movement outcomes. To explore these issues, this article compares several movements from Nigeria's Niger River Delta. These movements, similar in many respects, won very different levels of transnational support with important effects on movement development. Key to explaining these differences is a tight dialectic between the transnational and domestic realms. The most successful movement, among the Ogoni people, portrayed modest initial support as indicative of strong international receptivity to the movement, fueling domestic mass mobilization. In turn, new Ogoni mobilizations in Nigeria, framed with distant audiences in mind, attracted far broader international backing.

Since the late 1980s, Nigeria's Niger River Delta has been the site of mobilization and protest by ethnic minorities demanding increased political power, economic justice, and greater control over natural resources. These groups, ranging in size from a few hundred thousand to several million, together constitute about 15% of Nigeria's total population of 113 million. The minorities, weak and isolated in a Nigerian political system dominated by three far larger ethnic groups, sought for much of the 1990s to internationalize their struggles. Out of this cauldron of minority protest, a single movement, among the 300-500,000 Ogoni people, mounted sustained mass mobilizations and built a robust international support network. The Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) organized the Ogoni people to demand "political autonomy within Nigeria" and brought world attention to the group's conflict with the Nigerian state and Shell Oil Company. International non-governmental organizations (NGOs) including Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Greenpeace, and Friends of the Earth provided substantial support (Friends of the Earth-Netherlands 1993; Human Rights Watch 1993; Greenpeace International 1994). In 1995 when the Nigerian state executed MOSOP's leader Ken Saro-Wiwa and smashed the Ogoni movement domestically, the international community turned Nigeria into a pariah regime. In three ensuing years of harsh repression on the Delta, the Ogoni movement continued its activities outside Nigeria. Meanwhile, similar struggles by other Niger Delta minorities remained unknown internationally and weak domestically, with only sporadic and uncoordinated protest activity.

The Ogoni movement's mobilization at home and abroad -- and the failures of the other Niger Delta groups -- might be analyzed using current theory developed to explain national social movements. In recent work on transnational movements, scholars have deployed the dominant "political process model" to movements whose structures, ideologies, and support networks cross national boundaries (Schulz 1998; Rothman and Oliver 1999; Smith, Chatfield and Pagnucco 1997). Extension of the theory, however, has occurred with little consideration of differences between domestic and international contexts. This article uses the success and failure of the various Niger Delta movements to explore issues so far neglected by those who study transnational movements: the articulation between domestic and international opportunity structures; the relative weight of domestic and international opportunities in movements' internal mobilization and external framing; and the effect of international factors on movement outcomes. To reach these issues, I use primary documents from the Niger Delta movements and their transnational supporters as well as interviews with principals in both sets of entities. These sources indicate that there was a tight dialectic between the transnational and domestic realms. MOSOP, the most successful of the Niger Delta movements, mobilized its mass constituency only after receiving modest but important support from international actors, support that the leadership framed for its own, previously-reluctant constituency as highly favorable to the movement's prospects. In turn, Ogoni mobilizations in Nigeria, framed using tactics and rhetoric appealing to international audiences, attracted broader international backing. Other Niger Delta minorities, unable to establish initial international contacts or to frame them effectively for their own constituencies, remained weak and isolated.

The article begins by providing historical context for the contemporary Niger Delta mobilizations. I then discuss central concepts of political process theory in international context. With this theory in mind, I examine the Niger Delta movements in two periods, 1988-93 when Nigerian and international political opportunities both expanded, and 1993-98 when domestic opportunities dropped sharply while international ones improved. On this basis, I analyze the role of international factors in the varying courses of the Niger Delta movements and conclude by examining implications for use of political process theory in transnational arenas.

Political Marginalization on the Niger Delta

The Niger Delta minorities have for decades considered themselves politically, economically, and culturally marginalized by the Nigerian state. During the colonial period, the minorities sought greater political power at the federal and regional levels. In the last years of British colonialism, the minorities demanded but did not receive their own states to better secure their interests in Nigeria (Colonial Office 1957). Since independence in 1960, the creation of ethnically-based governmental units at the state or substate level has remained an important but unmet minority demand (Osaghae 1995; Ihonvbere and Shaw 1998). Increasingly as well cultural issues have become prominent, with minority groups complaining that their distinctive customs and languages are threatened by a Nigerian federation dominated by three far larger groups (MOSOP 1990; MOSIEND 1992; Osaghae 1998).

Since 1958, with the discovery of major petroleum deposits in the Niger Delta region, the minorities have coupled their political and cultural demands with grievances over allocation of revenues from oil production. For much of the post-colonial period, oil, currently pumped at about two million barrels per day, has dominated Nigeria's foreign exchange earnings. Yet the "oil minorities" have received few of its benefits (Onishi 2000; Osaghae 1998). Rather the central government has distributed these earnings to more politically powerful regions particularly in the North, leaving the Delta one of the poorest and most backward regions despite its being the primary source of Nigeria's wealth (Ihonvbere and Falola

1991). The Delta minorities have also complained of the human and environmental impacts of oil production. Oil spills and constant natural gas flaring have fouled the environment and caused injuries and deaths (World Bank 1995; Human Rights Watch 1999). Many of the Niger Delta communities also blame oil companies for their poverty, arguing that the companies have failed to provide roads and schools in the region and have favored non-indigenes in oil field employment (World Bank 1995; Human Rights Watch 1999).

In the decades following Nigerian independence, the oil minorities' grievances festered in a tumultuous political context marked by short-lived democratic governments, the Biafran civil war, and years of often harsh military dictatorship. Political leaders on the Delta made various accommodations with the dominant civilian or military leaders but failed to alleviate the minorities' political, economic, and environmental problems (Osaghae 1995). In August 1985 General Ibrahim Babangida seized power in Nigeria and began a lengthy period of military rule. By the late 1980s, the initial harshness of Babangida's military rule receded and a democratic transition began to look possible (Diamond, Kirk-Greene and Oyediran 1997). As detailed below, this opening spurred new forms of contention throughout the Niger Delta in the 1990s. Before charting these mobilizations, however, I discuss some key concepts in political process theory and their application to the transnational realm.

Process Theory in Domestic and International Contexts

Researchers developed the political process model to explain social mobilization within states. Although international context was not wholly ignored (McAdam 1982), transnational movements became an important research focus only in the 1990s. What constitutes a "transnational movement?" Tarrow (1996) distinguishes four types of

transnational collective action according to duration and cross-border integration of social networks. Movement "diffusion" involves temporary transnational interactions producing a parallel movement in a different state, while "transnational issue networks" are sustained interactions primarily involving information exchange between elite activists. "Political exchange" entails broad but brief integration of social networks in multiple societies, while "transnational social movements" involve integrated and sustained interactions between groups having shared goals. By Tarrow's definition and examples, we have few true "transnational movements," with the international labor and communist movements, the transnational disarmament movement, and Islamic fundamentalism constituting major examples. Yet in much of the literature, the term is used more loosely to encompass what purists might term simple exchange (Smith, Chatfield and Pagnucco 1997). Part of the reason for this blurring of categories is that while Tarrow's typology is conceptually clear, there is substantial practical overlap between his last two categories of integrated cross-national mobilizations. For example, transnational activism around the Tibetan autonomy movement -- what Tarrow would term political exchange --remains robust after many years. Moreover, because of rapid economic globalization, many domestic movements are embedded in both global and local authority structures. As a result, movements combat national as well as transnational actors—and third party support often entails coordinated international mobilization against both sets of actors.

The Niger Delta movements exemplify this overlap of Tarrow's categories and I will accordingly use the term transnational movement to describe them. The minority groups have grievances against both the Nigerian state and multinational oil companies

that have exploited resources in the Delta. They have pursued support from the media, NGOs, international organizations and foreign states, with the Ogoni having the greatest success. While the Ogoni and their transnational supporters have distinct goals, in actual mobilizations they often overlap to a considerable degree.

Can political process theory as developed in national contexts account for the success and failure of the various Niger Delta minority movements? In what ways should the theory be modified to account for key political, social and cultural differences between national and transnational environments? Three concepts are central to the theory: internal movement configuration and dynamics (often referred to as "mobilizational structures"); external environment, including both opportunities and threats (the "political opportunity structure"); and relationship to the environment, including both the movement's externally-directed actions and the rhetoric used to "frame" them. For each of these concepts, international context creates issues different from those that arise in domestic arenas.

Process theory uses the *mobilizational structures* concept in two ways. First, as a matter of comparative statics, the presence (or not) of "indigenous organizations" -- organizations present in an aggrieved community before the movement arises and having goals independent of the movement's -- helps explain differing degrees of mobilization in otherwise similar aggrieved communities (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 1996). These organizations help overcome collective action problems, providing reservoirs from which large constituencies can quickly be mobilized for the movement. Second, as a matter of political dynamics, the process theory posits that social movement organizations galvanize indigenous organizations into the movement through a process of "collective

meaning making" that changes how these populations conceive of their interests, grievances, and possibilities (McAdam 1999). Research on transnational movements has so far failed to take these issues into account. Instead it has focused on the infusion of material resources from "transnational advocacy networks" to already existing movements (Keck and Sikkink 1998), rather than on the ways in which the broad international setting might affect indigenous organizations' potential for mobilization. Critical here is that an aggrieved population perceive its situation as unjust but also remediable given its social and political context. Where movement organizations frame the situation of their constituents in this way, the population may undergo "cognitive liberation" paving the way for mobilization (McAdam 1982). Where the domestic opportunity structure is repressive or indifferent, are ideological and institutional changes abroad important to this liberation? When and how? And what is the relative weight of domestic and international opportunity structures in movement mobilization?

Changes in the *political opportunity structure* affect mobilization by aggrieved populations. In national arenas these elements include: openness/closure of the institutionalized political system; stability/instability of elite alignments; presence/absence of elite allies; and the state's use or not of repression. (Schock 1999; McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly 1996; Tarrow 1988). Scholars of transnational movements have supplemented these elements with international and transgovernmental ones, but most have closely followed the foregoing conception of domestic opportunities (Smith, Chatfield and Pagnucco 1997: 67-8). Simply adding international to domestic factors, however, overlooks several key issues.

First, what is the relationship between opportunities at the national and international levels? Much of the domestic movements literature assumes that these elements co-vary, creating either a general "thaw" or "freeze in the political climate for movements (Lipsky 1969). But McAdam's (1982) description of the "critical dynamic" in the Civil Rights movement, whereby harsh local repression of nonviolent protesters elicited a burst of support from national bystander groups, indicates that reduction at one opportunity level may lead to increase at another. Does a similar dynamic operate transnationally, with harsh state repression leading to increased international interest in a particular conflict? Reciprocally, do changes in international opportunities propel changes in domestic opportunities?

Second, what are the overall impacts of the transnational opportunity structure? Most of the domestic movements literature sees third party support as providing critical resources but also as discouraging mobilization and fostering dependency (McAdam 1982; Jenkins and Eckert 1986; Piven and Cloward 1979). Does third party support have the same double-edged effects in the transnational realm? The literature on transnational movements has not considered this issue, and in some senses hearkens back to the resource mobilization approach which saw third party support as an unmixed blessing for movements (McCarthy and Zald 1977). This omission probably stems from the perception that transnational unlike domestic patrons have few incentives to co-opt movements: In domestic contexts, the negative impacts of third party support occur because societal "members," acting for their long-term interest, may seek to moderate movements; for transnational supporters, there are no analogous incentives. But international third party support might create difficulties for movements in different ways. Movements may be encouraged to riskier and more radical actions to secure the attention and support of distant third parties. Moreover, some degree of third party support may suggest to movement activists that much more is possible—that international actors may be able to "rescue" them if state repression becomes acute. Yet given the power of sovereignty and vitiation of moral responsibility in international arenas, this may be a vain hope.

The final factor analyzed by the political process model is agency, interactions between the movement and its environment, both in the form of *contentious acts and rhetorical framing*. As typically used, the concept refers to framing the movement and its goals to achieve some form of resonance with distant audiences (Snow and Benford 1992; Snow and Benford 1988). In the transnational arena, framing will be more difficult because it must cross greater political, cultural, and social distances (Smith, Chatfield and Pagnucco, 1997). As a result, there may be greater need for frame stretching by movement organizations -- and more room for third parties to develop distorted perceptions of what distant movements represent on the ground.

In addition, these framings must first, and crucially, be noticed by international audiences. Process theorists have paid little attention to the key issue of access -- how distant audiences become aware of a movement and its frame (Wolfsfeld 1997) -- in favor of analyzing the frame's resonance. In national arenas, this omission may be understandable because of the smaller scope of the arena and the consequent fact that third parties have fewer competing issues to focus upon. In the transnational realm, however, this key antecedent issue must be confronted because third party attention for distant conflicts is far less likely than in domestic arenas (Moeller 1999; Wolfsfeld 1997).

Political Process Theory and the Niger Delta Movements

1988-93: Rising Domestic and International Opportunities

From the late 1980s until mid 1993, the slow, uncertain, and halting democratic transition engineered by the Babangida regime presented a context of growing political opportunities for the minority movements as well as other discontented elements in

Nigeria (Osaghae 1995). While inconsistent, the general trend in this period was toward a loosening of state repression and an opening of the political system. In both institutionalized and non-institutionalized forums, the period saw a swirl of political alignments and realignments among Nigeria's civilian political elite, a group that retained significant power despite military (Ihonvbere & Shaw 1998). For the most part, this involved the major ethnic groups, but the uncertainty also presented opportunities for minority groups to gain new elite allies within Nigerian politics (Osaghae 1995). Mobilization centered around democratization, but its meaning differed sharply between the minority and majority ethnic groups. For members of the majority groups, transition meant an end to military rule, free elections, and a new democratic Constitution. For the minorities, transition meant a rethinking of Nigerian nationhood and the place of minorities within it, goals anathema to the majority groups because of the threat posed to their political power and key revenue source (Esajere 1992; Ishaka 1992).

At the international level as well, opportunities widened in this period. As a long-term matter, the 1980s saw the rise of human rights consciousness, increasing prominence of ethnic and cultural issues in an emerging post-Cold War environment, and the spread of technologies that integrated and globalized the world (Smith, Chatfield, and Pagnucco 1997). In more concrete terms, during this period there was also a steady increase in the number of NGOs and transnational networks interested in human rights and environmental issues in the developing world (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Smith, Pagnucco and Lopez 1998). Among environmental networks, Nigeria was not a major country of concern, but the social and environmental impact of international oil exploitation elsewhere in the world was (Greenpeace International 1992). By contrast, among human rights networks, Nigeria had become a focus of significant international activism by the late 1980s and early 1990s (U.S. Department of State 1990; Human Rights Watch/Africa 1993). Here too, however, the opportunities were not directly relevant to the Niger Delta

minorities. International pressure focused on the transition from military to democratic rule, while the issue of minority rights in a democratic Nigeria was largely overlooked.

The Niger Delta minorities responded to these rising opportunities in several ways. Scattered ad hoc protests erupted among many groups at the grassroots. Such actions often involved destruction of oil industry infrastructure or confrontation with multinational personnel (Wimborne 1990; Oil Daily 1991). Some also involved organized marches against oil facilities in the region. In one 1991 incident, for instance, members of the Etche ethnic group protested in the town of Umuechem, Rivers State, shutting oil facilities owned by Shell. When Shell requested police action, local paramilitaries attacked the protesters killing about 80 (Rivers State of Nigeria 1991). Such protests had a long history among poor Delta communities with little power to influence a remote and unresponsive federal government (Osaghae 1995; Saro-Wiwa 1992). While often directing their activism at seemingly more accessible and pliant transnational opponents, however, these local-level protesters made no attempt to take their actions beyond the region. Protest issues centered on compensation claims for oil spills as well as demands for more infrastructure development and indigenous employment in the oil industry. There were no efforts to contact international NGOs or to exert pressure on transnational oil companies at their home bases in the developed world.

This period also saw an increase in minority political activity at the elite level. Leaders of minority communities met, formed coalitions, and lobbied the government for such goals as a sovereign national convention, their own minority-dominated states, and a greater share of oil revenues to be distributed at the local level (Esajere 1992; Ishaka

1992). These activities attracted some media coverage in Nigeria, but the federal authorities responded with largely symbolic gestures.

In addition to this domestic activism, some of the Delta ethnic groups sought to contact potential supporters among international third parties. These were elite-led endeavors, involving leaders of various ethnic or pan-ethnic movements with little mass involvement. The Southern Minorities Movement and the Rivers Chiefs, groups of intellectuals and elites from the Niger Delta, attended the alternative "Earth Summit" in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992 and presented a lengthy document critiquing the Nigerian government's report to the U.N. Conference on the Environment and Development. Arguing that the "perpetually neglected" minorities of the Niger Delta were threatened with "extinction," the document urges international pressure to force Nigeria to change its oil revenue allocation formula to favor the minorities (Southern Minorities Movement 1992: 1-5; Rivers Chiefs 1992). This presentation, however, generated little international interest. Even among highly sensitized international environmental audiences, knowledge of the Niger Delta situation remained minimal after Rio.

Similarly, the large Ijaw minority sought international support in the early 1990s, making contact with transnational NGOs such as London-based Survival International and probing means of promoting the group's economic and political goals (Eguruze 1996). As in the case of the Southern Minorities Movement, however, little has come of these attempts to internationalize the Ijaw cause (Interview July 1996; Eguruze 1996).

The Etche, victims of the Umuechem massacre in 1990, present a particularly striking case of inability to use international contacts to leverage domestic mobilization. Months after the killings, the Etche were presented with a good opportunity to internationalize their plight—the presence of a camera crew for the British national

television network Channel Four sent to document alleged crimes by multinational oil corporations operating in the region (Author's interview, June 1996). As discussed more fully below, however, it was the Ogoni, rather than the Etche who managed to take advantage of this opportunity both for purposes of domestic mobilization and international support building.

Like these other Niger Delta minority groups, the Ogoni turned to the international realm for support. But unlike these other groups, MOSOP used initially meager and largely accidental international contacts – contacts much like those established by the other groups -- to build mass mobilization at home and then much more extensive support abroad. MOSOP was founded in 1990 by Ken Saro-Wiwa, a well-known Nigerian journalist, television producer, and politician. In 1989-90, Saro-Wiwa and his close followers convinced established Ogoni elites, many with long-standing connections to the Nigerian state, that MOSOP could be a vehicle for increasing Ogoni power in Nigeria (Saro-Wiwa 1995; Welch and Sills 1996).

Initially, the movement concentrated on elite-level activism. In 1990, MOSOP issued the *Ogoni Bill of Rights* calling for Ogoni "political autonomy within Nigeria" (MOSOP 1990). It followed this up with press releases and lobbying activities in Nigeria but did not mobilize the Ogoni masses to press the demand. In 1992, frustrated by months of state inaction, MOSOP began a formal campaign to interest international actors in the Ogoni cause. The movement issued an appeal to the international community in the form of an Addendum to the *Bill of Rights* and began a sustained effort to gain transnational NGO support (Saro-Wiwa 1995; MOSOP 1991). By late 1992, however, most of MOSOP's appeals had proven futile. Major NGOs including Amnesty International, Greenpeace International, and Friends of the Earth had rejected Saro-Wiwa's personal pleas for support (Saro-Wiwa 1995; author's interviews 1996). These failures related to two issues. First, MOSOP's framing of the Ogoni problem as one involving minority rights issues fell outside the scope of conventional human rights and environmental problems on which these NGOs focused. Second, the MOSOP leadership, lobbying in Western European capitals, could not show that the organization represented a constituency in Nigeria (Saro-Wiwa 1995; Interviews June-July 1996). NGO staff had never heard of the Ogoni, and MOSOP's leaders had no press reports or

documentary evidence to back up their claims to represent a large and disaffected constituency – because, until 1993, MOSOP's mass activism had been minimal.

That summer Saro-Wiwa attended the U.N. Working Group on Indigenous People (UNWGIP) meeting in Geneva, Switzerland. The UNWGIP is a low-level UN body within the U.N.'s Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). Saro-Wiwa presented the Ogoni case before the UNWGIP and distributed copies of his self-published book *Genocide in Nigeria: The Ogoni Tragedy* (1992). This speech aroused some media interest both internationally and in Nigeria (Evans 1992). At the UNWGIP conference, Saro-Wiwa also met a representative of the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO). Founded in 1991 and based in The Hague, UNPO is a small organization promoting the interests of minority groups who believe themselves unrepresented in national or international political forums. MOSOP's core issues of minority rights fit well with UNPO's goals, and UNPO leaders rapidly accepted MOSOP into the organization. UNPO was also instrumental in placing MOSOP in contact with the progressive corporation, The Body Shop, which helped fund MOSOP activities by underwriting the costs of a London office (Interviews, July 1996; Roddick 1992).

Several months later, MOSOP won media coverage from the British national television network Channel Four. In early 1992, Channel Four had sent a small production and reporting team to the Niger Delta when word of the Umuechem massacre reached Europe, months after the event. Saro-Wiwa, with his excellent command of English, knowledge of the media, and eagerness to attract international support, was given a prominent role in the documentary which was broadcast nationally in Britain in October 1992 (Interview June 1996; Ellis and Bishop 1992). The broadcast resulted in an article in a British national newspaper, the liberal *Guardian* (Brown 1992), that incorrectly named the Ogoni as victims of the Umuechem massacre. *The Heat of the Moment* also attracted the interest of a small group of environmental activists friendly with the show's producer and associated with such groups as the London Rainforest Action Group, the Oxford Rainforest Network, Earth First!, and Reclaim the Streets. A handful of these activists, many involved in the past with issues of corporate responsibility for environmental pollution, protested at Shell's London headquarters on November 24, 1992 (Braithwaite 1992; Interview July 1996).

In the days after the Channel Four production and its fallout in Britain, MOSOP moved quickly to build on these small but significant international successes (Saro-Wiwa

1995). Its aim was both to mobilize its base and to build its international profile. First, it sought to publicize this newfound if modest international prominence within Ogoniland through speeches and press releases. Second, it sought to up the ante. On November 30, 1992, MOSOP issued an ultimatum to Shell demanding that it pay $10 billion in reparations within 30 days or cease operations in Ogoniland on December 31 (MOSOP 1992). Anticipating Shell's refusal to respond, MOSOP began planning a mass demonstration for January 4, 1994, the day of the UN's inaugurating the International Year of Indigenous Peoples. The demand against Shell resonated well with an impoverished Ogoni population that had long resented the company's operations and that anticipated little from the Nigerian state. In planning the march, MOSOP took several steps, most importantly sending Saro-Wiwa on a personal tour of Ogoniland where he drummed up enthusiasm for the march. On the international front, MOSOP also lobbied hard to draw observers to the Delta to document the protest activity and MOSOP's grassroots support. Two NGOs agreed to send observers, a photographer from Greenpeace International and a member of the Oxford Rainforest Network (Saro-Wiwa 1995; Interviews July 1996).

The march proved highly successful with tens and perhaps hundreds of thousands of Ogoni participating, many at MOSOP's instruction carrying twigs to symbolize their environmental concerns and signs proclaiming their goals and opposition to Shell. Videotapes of the march taken by the Greenpeace photographer and a film of the march produced by MOSOP, as well as the eyewitness testimony of the two Europeans all helped prove to wider international audiences that the organization was legitimate. Reciprocally, the rousing reception given the two international observers at the march

indicates that their presence served also to demonstrate the international legitimacy of their cause to the Ogoni masses (Interviews June-July 1996).

After the Ogoni Day March, MOSOP sought to build on the momentum it had gained by holding weekly meetings with key local leaders and organizations in Ogoniland and by organizing a series of mass actions in the first months of 1993 (Interview 1996). These actions included more marches, a candlelight vigil, a universal Ogoni contribution fund for MOSOP, and a boycott of Nigeria's national election in June 1993. Fueled by newfound perceptions of political efficacy at the international level, these mobilizations kept the Ogoni masses actively involved in the movement (Saro-Wiwa 1995). Reciprocally, the protests gave strong proof of grassroots Ogoni support for MOSOP, confirming for international NGOs that the organization was popular on the Delta. For several key environmental NGOs including Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace, these proofs, along with verification of Ogoni claims about environmental damage from oil production, were sufficient to prompt them to support the Ogoni (Interviews, June 1996).

Period II, 1993-98: Diverging Domestic and International Opportunities

The mass mobilization phase of the movement, with its threat to Shell facilities and its potential to spread to other Delta communities, brought the wrath of the state down on the Ogonis. This shift in state attitudes toward the Ogoni—from indifference to hostility—occurred against a backdrop of broader shifts in the political opportunity structure in 1993-98. In this period, domestic and international opportunities which had moved largely in tandem during the previous period began to diverge sharply. The domestic political opportunity structure grew increasingly dim. In May 1993, acting

directly against MOSOP's growing strength and perceived threat to Nigerian unity, the military government announced the "Treason and Treasonable Offences Decree" making it a capital offense for Nigerians to "conspire with groups within or outside the country, and profess ideas that minimise the sovereignty of Nigeria" (Eboh 1993). On June 14, 1993, the Nigerian authorities confiscated Saro-Wiwa's passport as he was about to fly to Vienna to address the U.N. Human Rights Conference. On June 12, 1993, General Babangida annulled the national elections after an apparent victory by M.K. Abiola, and an interim national government handpicked by Babangida was established. Then, on June 20, 1993, the Nigerian authorities detained Saro-Wiwa and two other Ogoni for one month, sparking a wave of international action by a wide variety of transnational actors and making Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni into international *causes célèbres*. Finally, in November 1993 General Sani Abacha took over the country, quickly using intimidation, arrests, and killings to clamp down on free expression and protest. Severe repression lifted only in 1998 with Abacha's sudden death.

In the face of this sharply curtailed domestic political opportunity structure, the international opportunity structure improved. Babangida's annulment of the election and Abacha's coup infuriated much of the international community (Osaghae 1998; Lewis 1999). Simultaneously, international receptivity to Nigeria's prominent democratic opposition improved substantially. This broad opening of international political opportunities, however, was not necessarily helpful to the Delta minorities since their goals went well beyond a return to democracy. More important, most of the Delta minorities were little known outside Nigeria.

In response to these contradictory trends in the domestic and international opportunity structures, the Nigerian pro-democracy movement at first mounted major national protests resulting from rage over Babangida's blatant theft of the election. After months of standoff and mounting state repression, however, the democracy protests collapsed (Osaghae 1998; Ihonvbere & Shaw 1998). On the Delta, minority protests over ongoing political and economic issues also continued during the interim government and the early months of the Abacha regime. However, the military responded to these protests particularly among the Ogoni, with harsh military action, sponsorship of attacks by rival minority groups, and sustained military occupation of Ogoniland (Human Rights Watch 1995). This rapid narrowing of political opportunities led to a general decline of protest on the Delta. Among the Ogoni in particular it led first to an upsurge in fractiousness among Ogoni elites, with those tied more closely to the regime opposing continued mass mobilizations. Soon, the repression also forced the end to mobilizations even among those Ogoni most favoring it. By the end of 1995 remaining MOSOP activists had been killed in state-instigated violence, executed in show trials in the case of Saro-Wiwa and eight other MOSOP leaders, or driven into exile.

As this repression mounted at home, MOSOP leaders increasingly took their activism to the international sphere. Saro-Wiwa made several additional trips to North America and Europe in late 1993 and before his arrest in 1994, seeking to drum up increased international concern about the situation in the Delta. In April 1994, he was arrested, charged with conspiring to kill four Ogoni chiefs and former MOSOP leaders who had broken with him over the group's mass mobilization tactics (Human Rights Watch 1999). After his arrest, as repression became even harsher, MOSOP's activism moved almost exclusively to the transnational sphere. Remaining MOSOP leaders campaigned on the Internet, at international conferences, through international media events, and through protest actions in Europe and North America. In these actions, which included vigils at Nigerian embassies and boycotts of Shell service

stations in North America and Europe, MOSOP was joined by activists from international human rights, indigenous rights, and environmental networks. While a pale reflection of the earlier mass mobilizations in Nigeria, these events kept the Ogoni cause alive and key parts of MOSOP's organizational structure intact.

At the international level, Ogoni activism was directed increasingly against Shell which by comparison to the aloof and repressive state appeared far more vulnerable. In the wake of the *Channel Four* documentary, the Demand Notice, and MOSOP lobbying on environmental issues, NGOs that had long criticized multinational oil companies saw a new opportunity "to have a go at Shell--attack them" (Interview June 1996). In this view, the Ogonis could serve as a powerful symbol of multinationals' environmental abuses, a symbol useful in ongoing conflicts with Shell and other companies. As these NGOs gave increasing prominence to the Ogoni in their publications and domestic activities, MOSOP responded by making Shell's "devastation" of the Ogoni environment the central focus of its domestic and international campaigns (Saro-Wiwa 1995).

Dialectics of Domestic and International Mobilization

Why were the Ogoni able to mobilize domestically and internationally while the other minorities were not? Close analysis of these issues shows a tight dialectic between achievement of these two goals: The initially modest international support increased Ogoni optimism and led to broader mass mobilizations in early 1993. These mass mobilizations, combined with MOSOP's reframing of the issues in more internationally-appealing terms, in turn convinced broad transnational networks to support the group. How did MOSOP accomplish these two tasks? First, with regard to building domestic mobilization, it should be noted that as of late 1992, MOSOP was a mass movement in name only; in many ways, it was the idea of a small elite group, at times seemingly the brainchild of a single dedicated individual (Saro-Wiwa 1995). While MOSOP had

excited some interest among the Ogoni masses and eliteswith the *Bill of Rights*'

publication in 1990, this faded within weeks.

Using Transnational Success to Mobilize Domestically

There are two possible explanations for why major mass mobilizations occurred among the Ogoni but not the other Niger Delta movements according to political process theory. First, a purely domestic variant of the theory would hold that the Ogoni had a more robust set of indigenous organizations to draw into the movement or that they did a better job of framing the domestic opportunity structure. A theoretical approach that takes account of transnational context on the other hand, would look to MOSOP's ability to mobilize indigenous organizations and inspire the Ogoni masses using international factors.

With regard to the first explanation, it is true that MOSOP followed the classic mobilizational strategy of inducing indigenous community organizations into the movement. It established an umbrella-like structure including both these indigenous groups and newly-established local or functional MOSOP chapters. The MOSOP Constitution (MOSOP 1993) lists some dozen organizations as composing the overall Movement. But comparing the Ogoni to the other Niger Delta cases, there is no evidence that the Ogoni had more or stronger indigenous organizations than the other communities. Such organizations -- local churches, women's organizations, ethnic and language preservation groups, dance troupes -- are common throughout the Delta. Thus all of the nascent Delta movements had the raw materials to organize mass mobilization. Similarly, all of them existed in the same domestic political opportunity structure and had an equal chance to frame this structure as favorable.

But MOSOP was the only one to realize this potential because of the unique way in which it framed the international opportunity structure for its domestic mass

constituency. As MOSOP began its drive for international support beginning in 1992, it received limited but important coverage in the international press and some coverage in the relatively free Nigerian print media (de Bruin 1992). As a result, news of MOSOP's presentation at the U.N. Working Group, its showcasing on British television, and its admission to membership in UNPO quickly became known in Nigeria (Efeni 1992; Lukula 1993). Saro-Wiwa also reported directly to the Ogoni people, highlighting MOSOP's successes among the international media and NGOs (Saro-Wiwa 1994; Saro-Wiwa 1995).

Framed by Saro-Wiwa, MOSOP's initial international contacts in late 1992 helped convince reluctant Ogoni elites and the quiescent Ogoni masses that their cause was legitimate in the eyes of the world, that they were part of a wider struggle (for indigenous rights, human rights and environmental improvement), that their demands had the support of seemingly powerful international allies, and that more international support might be forthcoming (Saro-Wiwa 1995). As Saro-Wiwa wrote, ofr example:

> Perhaps the most important result of my trip to Geneva was that my address to the Working Group . . . got published in Nigerian newspapers. And this, I believe is what may have convinced the Ogoni elite that there was some value in what I was doing. I wasn't told, but there may well have been many skpetics who would have wondered what chance we had prosecuting our case against a powerful company like Shell and a fascist government like Babngida's . . . . (Saro-Wiwa 1995: 99)

International observers also confirmed that their presence on the Delta in early 1993 was met with great excitement and enthusiasm by Ogoni protesters (Interview July 1996).

The domestic feedback from this initially small international support was thus critical to shifting the movement from an elite to a mass phase in early 1993. At least temporarily, it also unified a fractious minority around a movement organization, MOSOP, that had tapped into potentially substantial new resources and opportunities. In effect, international recognition of the Ogoni cause, trumpeted by the MOSOP leadership, helped change the cognitions and calculations of the Ogoni masses and the leaders of their mass indigenous organizations (Efeni 1992). Refracted through the speeches, enthusiasm, and persuasion of the MOSOP leadership, global civil society's recognition contributed strongly to the Ogoni mobilization – and distinguished the Ogoni from other Niger Delta movements.

Using Domestic Mobilization to Organize Transnationally

Simultaneously with its attempt to bolster domestic mobilization, MOSOP changed its external framing of the movement and its goals in an effort to expand its international support. While the early frame around minority and indigenous rights had attracted some support, this had been from small and relatively weak members of the international indigenous rights network. In one sense, this international activism represented a real achievement for the Ogoni, moving the group from international obscurity to modest recognition. At the same time, it bears emphasis that these initial gains were small. UNPO was a year-old organization with little funding or international recognition; the UNWGIP was a low-level United Nations body with few credentialing restrictions; the Oxford Rainforest Network was a fringe environmental group with a handful of active members; and the 15 minute segment of *The Heat of the Moment*, highlighted oil operations in Nigeria in general and focused on the killings of the Etche

not the demands of the Ogoni. Notably as well, large and powerful NGOs such as Amnesty, Greenpeace, and Friends of the Earth had already *rejected* MOSOP. Thus in most ways, these initial international contacts were little different from those of the Southern Minorities Movement, the Ijaw, and the Etche.

How were the Ogoni able to gain substantial and sustained transnational support when the other Niger Delta minorities were not? Two main factors were involved. First, the Ogoni engaged in a systematic and persistent pursuit of transnational support in a wide variety of venues (Saro-Wiwa 1995). This pursuit is undoubtedly more difficulty and time-consuming than within domestic spheres. Thus it is likely that, all else equal, groups with relatively greater resources will be able to carry it out most effectively. In this respect, the Ogoni, with the dedicated leadership of a wealthy, charismatic, and Western-oriented individual, had a clear advantage over the other groups.

Second, the MOSOP leadership was adept at and willing to reframe in terms that made them internationally attractive to potential supporters. In period I, this meant a move away from the Ogonis' core indigenous/ethnic focus to one highlighting the environmental crimes of Shell in Ogoniland. With the cues provided by international responses to *The Heat of the Moment* and its earlier failures with major international environmental NGOs, MOSOP supplemented its original framing with a new focus on Shell and oil-related environmental problems in the Ogoni . In addition, with its new mass mobilization domestically, MOSOP also shifted its framing of itself. Once the marches had occurred – and particularly once videotaped proof of broad Ogoni support for MOSOP had circulated in Europe— MOSOP no longer appeared simply to be an elite movement with questionable claims and constituency. Now it was seen as a mass

movement. This shift in framing brought the Ogoni considerable new support from environmental activists in many parts of the world (author's interview 1996).

Conclusion: Political Process Theory in the Transnational Arena

This analysis of the Niger Delta cases helps illuminate important unexamined issues concerning use of political process theory in the transnational realm. With regard to the key concept of political opportunities, this article throws light on the articulation of domestic and international opportunity structures and their relative weight in mobilization. The article also has implications for understanding the impacts of purely international factors on movement mobilization and outcomes.

Articulation of Domestic and International Opportunity Structures

The international opportunity structure may affect movements in two ways. First, the international environment could alter the national opportunity structure, thereby creating openings for domestic dissent. Second, domestic movements may respond directly to international resources and constraints.

With regard to the first mechanism, research has shown that in the American civil rights movement Cold War pressures from both U.S. allies and enemies helped increase the federal government's receptivity to the movement in the 1950s and 1960s (McAdam 1982; Layton 2000). This study of Nigeria has not directly tackled the analogous issue of whether changes in the international opportunity structure affected the country's domestic opportunity structure. In period I, while domestic and international opportunities both expanded, it is unclear whether the domestic improved in response to international pressures. In period II however, the relationship -- or rather lack of relationship -- is clearer: the Nigerian state, stable and relatively strong thanks to its oil earnings, thumbed its nose at the international community even as the latter increased its rhetorical and diplomatic pressure on the increasingly repressive state. While this single case can be only suggestive, it does indicate that we must be cautious in assessing the impacts of international pressure on rights violating states (Risse, Ropp and Sikkink 1999).

On the other hand, in period II it is clear that changes in the domestic Nigerian opportunity structure had an impact on international opportunities. In a scenario reminiscent of McAdam's "critical dynamic" (1982), as the Nigerian state engaged in high profile human rights violations, international

opportunities for the movements widened. The June 1993 election annulment and Abacha's take-over brought condemnation from major states, the media, and human rights organizations, thereby enhancing opposition movements' potential for international support. Notably, however, as repression deepened, only movements that had previously forged transnational linkages, such as MOSOP or the Nigerian democratization movement benefited from the growing international concern. This suggests an inverse relationship between domestic and international opportunities, with a domestic squeeze raising opportunities internationally as sympathetic, knowledgeable, and previously-linked supporters increase their concern and assistance in response to domestic repression. However, for movements that have not established transnational ties before domestic repression deepened, such as the other Niger Delta minority movements, change in international opportunities may have little impact.

Relative Weight of Domestic and International Opportunities in Mobilization

The Niger Delta cases also shed light on the relative weight of domestic and international opportunity structures in mobilization. Keck and Sikkink (1998) suggest that movements enter international venues when they are frustrated at home: as political opportunities contract domestically, movements shift their mobilization from the less to the more receptive arena. A simple extension of national social movement theory would suggest that this is true as well: If movements respond to political opportunities domestically, it seems logical to assume that they will jump between domestic and international arenas as well, forum-shopping for the most receptive and effective venue for mobilization (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Schattschneider 1961).

The Niger Delta cases suggest that this is too broad a formulation. Throughout the 1990s for most of the movements, the domestic opportunity structure, whether opening or closing, played a dominant role. Only a few of the movements sought to transnationalize in period I when the domestic opportunity structure was relatively permissive. This decision was primarily a function of elites' knowledge of international opportunities, their strategic choice about whether to spend resources seeking to tap them, and in some cases their having the resources to project the movement transnationally. Those most frustrated or repressed at home were not the first to transnationalize. Groups such as the Etche, victims of early massacres, made no effort to gain international attention and appeared unable to capitalize on opportunities presented to them. By contrast, the Ogoni were less repressed than other Niger Delta minorities, at least during the crucial initial period when international contacts were first established. (Aborisade and Mundt 1999; Osaghae 1995) The same could be said for the Southern Minorities

Movement and the Ijaw, two other groups that sought international support less successfully.

In Period II when domestic opportunities closed even while international opportunities strengthened, mobilization across Nigeria first spiked upward in outrage at the brazenly undemocratic actions of Babangida and Abacha. Within months, however, the state's harsh responses weakened the movements despite the growth of international opportunities. Nor were most of the movements able to shift their activity from domestic to transnational venues as Keck and Sikkink might have expected. Rather, the level of domestic repression and the lack of international awareness of the minorities left these groups with few international options.

The success of the Ogoni in mobilizing internationally in Period I and shifting to the international sphere in period II, however, suggests an important caveat. For movements that can break through to international awareness and tap into international support, the international opportunity structure may have as great an impact as the domestic. In period II for instance, the Ogoni were particularly targeted for repression. Yet with allies already in place by mid-1993 and with awareness raised among key media outlets, Ogoni activism was able to continue, albeit at reduced levels and in different forms, in international venues. Domestically, the movement was smashed with relative ease by a ruthless regime. Internationally, however, this well-connected movement continued to operate, composed of newly expatriated Ogoni elites, existing Diaspora communities, and third party supporters in several NGO networks.

How then do movements respond to political opportunities at the two levels, particularly when they are diverging? Opportunities that remain largely diffuse and abstract – for instance broad changes in international economic and political spheres such as the growth of NGOs networks or a rise in human rights consciousness – are likely to assume only secondary importance in movements' mobilization and actions. When, however, international opportunities have solidified into actual support, the movements place greater importance on the international opportunity structure.

Impacts of International Opportunities on Domestic Mobilization

The Niger Delta cases indicate that the international opportunity structure can shape both a movement's internal mobilizational structures and its external action and rhetoric. Based on an initially modest level of international support, MOSOP framed the international context as favorable, leading to mass mobilization. Responding to cues from international actors, MOSOP also framed the movement increasingly in terms appealing to its international target audiences. Notably, both these responses depended on two other factors: First, they hinged primarily on particular manifestations of support, however modest, for the Ogoni themselves, rather than on the general international opportunity structure. Cues from these initial hints of support, rather than the broader growth in international human rights and environmental consciousness, had the most effect on MOSOP. Second, they hinged on the projection of these international cues to domestic audiences primarily through communications by the MOSOP leadership, rather than through some unmediated filtering of information from international to local levels. MOSOP's 1993 shift from an elite-centered association to a mass movement illustrates how even modest international support may shape movement development. Importantly, these effects occurred because of the rhetorical frame adopted by the movement's leadership: MOSOP's domestic promotion of its international contacts gave hope both to an apathetic population and a group of elites outside Saro-Wiwa's inner circle who had "gone to sleep" after issuance of the Ogoni Bill of Rights two years earlier. (Saro-Wiwa 1995:99; Interview July 1996)

In addition to promoting mass mobilization, initial support also served to alter internal movement dynamics. Support funneled through Saro-Wiwa and his followers magnified their power and attraction to the movement as a whole, leading first to unity but then to renewed factionalism. In the period before international support was sought, schisms between the older leadership with ties to the state and the newer more radical leadership had been difficult to bridge. In the initial glow of support in late 1992, even these Ogoni elites had decided to join the movement. But as mass mobilization became an ever greater danger, the traditional elites again differed with Saro-Wiwa's faction.

Finally, MOSOP also "receiv[ed] a much valued education" (Saro-Wiwa 1995: 93) from its initial rejections by major international NGOs. In practical terms, MOSOP's adoption of mass mobilization tactics stemmed in part from UNPO training sessions that "introduced MOSOP to the nature of nonviolent struglle for rights" (Saro-Wiwa 1995:101efforts to prove to major NGOs that MOSOP was more than just a handful of articulate and jet-setting elites. Grassroots Ogoni support gave third parties greater confidence that MOSOP had a real constituency and merited outside support. Rhetorically, this was reflected in MOSOP's move from a minority rights to an environmental framing of the issues, with Shell supplementing the Nigerian state as the target of Ogoni activism. Then as state repression mounted, the broader human rights frame arose, less for strategic purposes than because of the harsh state repression visited on the movement in 1994 and after. Faced with state-instigated violence, MOSOP increasingly voiced its appeals in conventional human rights rhetoric rather than in the more unusual and less clear-cut vocabulary it had used before, of minority political, economic, and cultural rights.

Impact of International Support on Movement Outcomes

MOSOP's shifts in tactics, organization, and rhetoric responded to the international political opportunity structure and were made in part to impress international actors with their ability to mobilize a major constituency. These kinds of change are of course not unusual in domestic contexts when movements are seeking to attract elite patrons. But what is different is their character and effects. In national contexts, patron groups will typically have made accommodations with the state and will have their own power base within the society. To the extent that a movement responds to

these powerful patrons, it will move closer to the needs of the power structure, resulting in co-optation, demobilization, and decline (Jenkins 1986; McAdam 1999; Piven and Cloward 1977). This is not the case with most international patrons. They are not integrated into critical state power structures—and their interests may therefore differ radically from the state's, rather than being tolerated by the domestic powerholders. If a movement bends in their direction, then, it may find itself increasingly marginalized in its home state—perhaps facing increased repression. This appears to be the case with the Ogoni. Whether wittingly or not, the international supporters pursuing a different agenda—in the case of the environmental organizations, confrontation with Shell—encouraged MOSOP activism that brought the full wrath of a powerful and ruthless state down on this nonviolent movement.

When this repression hit the Ogoni, however, MOSOP's international supporters could do little to change the outcome of the conflict. The sort of rhetorical and diplomatic action so important to the cognitive liberation of Ogoni leaders and masses in late 1992 and early 1993 proved incapable of sustaining the Ogoni *vis-à-vis* the state's onslaughts in 1994-95. Despite the threat to Saro-Wiwa and even after his judicial murder by the Nigerian state, international responses were relatively muted and short-lived. Shell's ability to call in the Nigerian security forces and the Nigerian state's own unwillingness to see the Ogoni case spread to other oil communities, thereby threatening its crucial petroleum revenues, led to harsh repression in response to Ogoni mobilizations. In this brutal crackdown, well-meaning international actors could do nothing to prevent the executions or other forms of repression against the Ogoni.

Thus, this case indicates that the international opportunity structure, while it may affect the mobilization strategies of some groups, cannot be relied upon to affect conflict outcomes. This in turn suggests that in a rapidly changing domestic and international context, MOSOP misread the overall political opportunity structure, placing too little emphasis on threats from the state and too great faith in the prospects and potency of international support. Arguably, this misreading also concerns matters of internal movement dynamics, in particular the breakdown of MOSOP in 1993 culminating in the murder of the four conservative chiefs in 1994. Absent international support for his faction within MOSOP, Saro-Wiwa might have been more compromising with the other elements of the movement and less confrontational toward the state. Thus the effect of international support structures in this case was twofold: It suggested unrealistic possibilities for pressure *vis-à-vis* the state-opponent; and it distorted the "natural" internal dynamics of the movement itself. By choosing particular leaders on whom to bestow support, international actors do not simply bestow international legitimacy on the entire movement as a whole. In addition, they favor their own interlocutors over others who may be more conservative, less internationally savvy, or simply late to the international scene.

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