

## 9 Shell and Living Earth - Some Conclusions and Reflections

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Having used my personal learning history to add some more details about the relationship between Shell and Living Earth in this chapter I would like to pull together and highlight some aspects of the relational practice concerning both organisations. In doing so I seek to move into the next section (V) where I attempt to make sense of this praxis in a more theoretical light.

### 9.1 A network of relationships

Given that there are in fact four organisations involved in the Shell-Living Earth relationship it is useful to consider the interaction that has taken place between the British and Nigerian organisations in terms of a network of dyadic relationships, involving Living Earth Nigeria, Shell Nigeria, Living Earth UK and Shell International. Whilst the use of a formal analysis of inter-organisational networks might be extended in some interesting ways (see for example Faye et al., 1997), in the following section I seek merely to highlight important characteristics of the various dyads between these organisations in quite a simple way.

Since the Memorandum of Understanding was signed in September 1998 the formal interaction between members of Living Earth Nigeria and Shell Nigeria has remained fairly limited. During 1999 and into early 2000 Living Earth Nigeria was invited to a number of symposia and workshops alongside other local NGOs. In this time Living Earth Nigeria and Living Earth UK produced six quarterly reports for which they suggested they received very little feedback from Shell. Staff in the community development unit at Shell Nigeria suggested that meetings to discuss the contents of reports were rare.

There was a committee set up to oversee our project, to ensure that when the quarterly report comes in they [Shell Nigeria] should read it through and bring us together and we would talk about it, make a presentation to them and ask questions. But that has not happened. It happened only once...In terms of dialogue, I don't think we are doing too much of that. In the beginning there was a lot of talk, we were trying to get the programme started, but now I don't think that it is happening as regularly as it should. (Dara Akala LENF 13)

At the time of my last contact with the organisations (Summer 2000) the most recent direct interaction between the development staff at the two organisations had been in May 1999, when Shell Nigeria and Living Earth Nigeria community development staff conducted a joint Participatory Rural Appraisal workshop in Biseni, Bayelsa State. According to some people who attended, the workshop was a successful although isolated event. Living Earth Nigeria suggested that it was looking to increase the level of direct interaction and involvement with Shell Nigeria. Some development staff at Shell Nigeria suggested to me that if Living Earth were available to engage with them on such training type activities it would have been appreciated. They added that up until that point Living Earth Nigeria had not been able to meet requests because their independence meant “they seem to control their workplan entirely”.

Hugh Goyder’s evaluation of the Living Earth Environmental Action Programme in Nigeria suggests that while project implementation has been incomplete, Living Earth Nigeria has made considerable headway in developing positive relationships with wide sections of the community in Bayelsa State. He suggests that even though they have recognised the difficulties of undertaking community development in the Delta, the participatory development approach has been seen as a universal panacea within Living Earth. The “result has been that though much participatory language continues to be used, to establish themselves in their chosen communities the Living Earth Nigeria team had quickly to “provide” some tangible items before they were able to do further work in the area”. He also adds that considerable effort will be needed to make the relationship between Shell Nigeria and LE Nigeria a “partnership”.

Meanwhile, management at LEUK have maintained that the relationship with Shell is still very much emergent, that there is scope for influencing Shell’s operations and thinking and they will continue to look for other opportunities for collaboration with them. Shell suggests that the relationship is an important part of its responsibility to society and is part of its stakeholder engagement strategy. In its 1998 Annual Report on community and the environment, Shell Nigeria highlighted its relationship with Living Earth Nigeria as an opportunity for “partnering for development” (SPDC, 1998:17). Similarly, the relationship between the organisations had been presented by Living Earth as a progressive partnership. In the UK, discussion between individuals at Living Earth UK and Shell International has focused upon new opportunities and initiatives for Living Earth to be involved with Shell. One of the results was the potential development of a Pan-African literacy programme, involving Shell in South Africa and Nigeria, the International Reading Association (IRA) from Washington, the Read Education and Develop (READ) project in South Africa and the Reading Association of Nigeria (RAN).

In the UK, the interaction between Shell International and Living Earth UK essentially took place between a number of key individuals, in particular Roger and Malcolm. It was from this initial relationship, which goes back almost 10 years, that the idea for a collaboration in Nigeria arose and where discussion about future opportunities occurs.

Shell International's motivations for working with Living Earth UK emanated largely from the company's position at the centre of Shell, where it lends direction and strategy to the work of the Shell operating companies. From its experience with Brent Spar and Ogoni, Shell International has clearly understood the potential power of public opinion. Part of this realisation, along with internal realignment (vis the creation of their “Sustainable Development Management Framework”), has been a re-orientation towards external parties and a change in the way Shell Nigeria operates. Shell feels it can keep in touch with society’s expectations through a “commitment to greater engagement and dialogue” (Shell 1999b) and thereby prevent any of the Shell operating companies repeating the problems of Brent Spar and Nigeria. Thus, working with NGOs enabled a change of mindset both outside the company and within Shell itself:

So there were so many intangibles that were involved,...there was no way we could get to grips with it, based on our own mode of doing things; our basic mode in our minds is to find, explore and produce oil in the most economic, safe, environmentally responsible manner. So you needed, then, all the help you can to bring about the change of mindset, first and foremost within your own self. (Emeke Achebe SI 6)

In this sense, at least for Shell International, the relationship with Living Earth has been a strategic one, part of an attempt to change society’s perceptions of Shell’s community relationships. In the “show me” world (Shell 1999) Shell feels that society looks for actual activities to indicate that the company is responding to social concerns and is no longer content to just trust that the company is doing the right thing.

Due to the personal relationships built up over time, trust between Roger and Malcolm has grown and enabled much progress. It is probably only with such trust that Shell International felt that its objectives for working with Living Earth would be met and so committed the funds for the Nigeria programme even before Living Earth UK had undertaken any projects in the country or had set up offices there.

However, while it is true that trust existed between certain key individuals, other staff members appeared quite uncertain about the nature of the relationship. Internally, Living Earth UK seemed divided over its motivations and objectives for working with Shell and what it felt it was gaining from the relationship.

The opportunity to engage with Shell and influence organisational change was a significant motivation and justification for individual staff members in the UK to enter the partnership and accept the money. However, as mentioned above, the formal agreement did not mention competence development, a training element or any active involvement between Shell and Living Earth as originally envisaged within Living Earth. Roger rationalised this shift:

There should have been a 4th [element in the programme] about competence development within Shell Nigeria and it should have been overt and clear. Now at the time because of all the forces on us, it was very hard to see how to do that. We talked to people about it here. Its like the hidden curriculum in the school “we can’t talk about it, we can’t make it obvious, because then that will tend to blow it.” (Roger Hammond LEUK 2)

However, without an explicit reference to the activity, staff at Living Earth came to view organisational change and influence as having progressively slipped down the agenda:

So we had written in the MOU that Shell would play an active part in using the results from our reports as learning documents with which to change the way the programme worked....Now the reality has been very, very different. Once we got the money from Shell, Shell were no longer interested. (Tunde Morakinyo LEUK 4)

As the possibility of directly fostering change within Shell appeared to decline, programme staff at LEUK came to see their relationship with Shell Nigeria not as a partnership but as the sub-contracting of development work from a donor (Shell) to an outside programme implementor (Living Earth). Instead of expending effort in trying to build a relationship with Shell, the development staff at Living Earth, both in the UK and in Nigeria, concentrated on conducting development work with the communities. Meanwhile the other, almost distinct relationship between Roger and senior management Shell International, caused considerable internal

uncertainty and turmoil for the effect that it had upon operations and direction within the organisation.

The opinion of this relationship differs between the core development staff and the management level in both organisations. Malcolm suggested that the relationship with Living Earth was “more than just dialogue. It is really about involvement, because its only when you get the real involvement and working together that things really move on. So it’s partnership” (Malcolm Williams SI 8). Similarly, Roger said the relationship was “more than dialogue. Dialogue to me is still very much at the partner level. It’s slightly beyond partnership in that we can think of issues, they can think of issues and we are able to say 'I need some help'. There is not prejudging of the positions. This is more than dialogue - it’s much more open” (Roger Hammond LEUK 2).

While development staff in LEUK concentrated on work with the communities, management maintained a desire for programme staff to move beyond this traditional development focus and “to be able to look over their shoulder to be aware of how can we link in SPDC appropriately” (Roger Hammond LEUK 2). The difference in perception over whose needs – company or community – were more central created considerable tension within Living Earth; trust and internal communication seems to have broken down between staff and management in the UK, with specific regard to the Nigerian programme.

Initially, Shell International, in its desire for Shell Nigeria to work with an International NGO that would add legitimacy to efforts to change community relations, drove the relationship with Living Earth. As production was increasingly threatened, management of Shell Nigeria realised that relationships with groups like Living Earth would be key to easing community discontent. Senior management came to see Living Earth Nigeria as an organisation that could carry out community development programmes on Shell Nigeria’s behalf; the relationship contributing towards their attempts at re-orientation of community attitudes towards the development work conducted by Shell Nigeria. Such operational concerns for Shell Nigeria contrasted with Shell International’s more strategic objectives for the relationship. As one member of Shell Nigeria said:

“You have the Area Manager who is meant to produce 10,000 barrels of oil a day, and the Community Development Group has to get the community to like the company...the Area Manager is looking for instant results, so the heat is on the Community Development Group and it has got to be transmitted somewhere.”

As mentioned previously, when Living Earth was first introduced to Shell Nigeria, the community assistance department largely consisted of engineers. Thus, Living Earth initially provided one of the few sources of development expertise and skills to those within Shell who were charged with working with communities. The growth and professionalisation of Shell Nigeria's development department expanded their in-house skills considerably. As a result, transferring *skills* from Living Earth to Shell became a less important output for the relationship. Instead, the benefit of working with an external NGO with *abilities* on the ground grew in importance.

Within Shell Nigeria, perceptions were affected by the fact that funds for the Living Earth project were not managed from the Community Development department and by an impression that the relationship was initially driven by and resided mainly with Shell International. Staff of the Community Development Unit regard the externally driven nature of the relationship negatively; Living Earth was promoted as an NGO to work with despite the fact that the environmental and resource management focus of the Living Earth Nigeria programme did not fit with Shell Nigeria's development orientation<sup>1</sup>. Living Earth Nigeria also tended to maintain its distance and independence more than other NGOs that Shell Nigeria had been working with since the reincarnation of the community development department at Shell. These factors combined to create a feeling amongst those managing the relationship in Shell Nigeria that they did not 'own' the project. Within the Community Development Unit the relationship was called "tenuous", an "arranged marriage", with Living Earth Nigeria regarded as "a partner at a distance". At the same time senior management of Shell Nigeria suggested:

So you could call it partnership based on trust and they are delivering services within the funds that they got from us and letting us know whether they are being judiciously applied and demonstrating that we are getting the desired result. That's the first stage... When we move to the next phase where we will be criss-crossing each other's area of working. That's when the maximum partnership will come, in the sense that they would probably be pursuing things of their own that will cross our path. (Basil Omiyi SPDC 28)

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<sup>1</sup> This is perhaps one of the potential hidden benefits of the relationship, in so far as it may be able to bring about a greater integration of the environmental and community development departments in Shell Nigeria.

Thus, while senior management at Shell Nigeria regarded the relationship as a partnership that still held potential benefits, development staff were more circumspect, uncertain about the relationship and the internal motivations within Shell that lead to its formation.

When entering a new country, Living Earth UK normally sets up an initial programme with local staff using funding and expertise developed in the UK, and then moves towards creating an independent sister organisation in the new area. An internal workshop in Nigeria in early 2000 began the discussion of how to create this independence for Living Earth Nigeria. However, the project and organisation owed its existence to the funds provided through Shell International and the direction provided by Living Earth UK. The Memorandum of Understanding signed with Shell Nigeria determined the lion's share of Living Earth Nigeria's development activities. Without the initial input from Shell International and initial direction from Living Earth UK it is difficult to say whether the organisation would have been created. As Hugh Goyder's report suggested, there was considerable uncertainty surrounding the disbursement of money between Living Earth UK and Living Earth Nigeria from the original funds from Shell. He added that this uncertainty has left Living Earth Nigeria with insufficiently developed management structures. The abundance of funding has also revealed that Living Earth UK's financial systems are insufficiently transparent and not in line with the best practice of other British NGOs.

When Living Earth Nigeria was established, it was felt at Living Earth UK that an important part of the reason for working with Shell would be the opportunity to influence and change the organisation by involvement in internal competence development and training activities. However, as suggested above, the reality has proved different. While Living Earth Nigeria developed as an organisation, what originally seemed to be an important motivation during its creation and for its programmes seems to have disappeared. Additionally, the strategic drive for developing a partnership emanating from Shell International has not been matched by Shell Nigeria on the ground. Thus, the relationship that developed with Shell did not match the initial expectations:

[Partnership is] what we call it...that is the terminology that is being used both within Living Earth and from Shell. But really, whether that is what it is...its questionable, whether it is a real partnership....to me, to all intents and purposes, what is happening is that Shell has given us a grant to do a project. So beyond that I don't see any other thing....you know beyond the donor-

grantee relationship. And so that is what is “called” a partnership. (Dara Akala LINF 13)

Living Earth Nigeria, thus, came to concentrate on its core activities of undertaking development work in the Delta, de-emphasising the importance of building a partnership with Shell Nigeria. Interestingly, this sub-contracting type relationship may actually be closer to what Shell Nigeria requires of NGOs with whom they wish to relate. It was suggested by Shell Nigeria community development staff that Living Earth’s decision to work outside of “spearhead communities” - areas where the company has wellheads - conflicted with Shell’s objectives with respect to the communities. However, the lack of direct engagement meant that Living Earth Nigeria’s objective for influencing change within Shell Nigeria has not moved beyond the drawing board, and in fact management seem to regard it as an unrealistic objective.

Additionally, within Living Earth Nigeria there was a feeling that the direction provided from the UK concerning organisational development and management was not as participatory as it could be, particularly for an organisation that suggests participation is central to its way of thinking and working. There was a suggestion that the influence of the relationship with Shell (providing funding and objectives) has meant that a top-down management style from Living Earth UK has been necessary.

Despite the lack of engagement in Nigeria, Roger was optimistic that a partnership which could address the issue of creating change within Shell was emerging. He suggested that one of the biggest challenges and learning points in the relationship was the difficulty of actually getting engagement and learning in Shell Nigeria. Living Earth Nigeria as a relatively young organisation spent the first two years establishing its own competence to conduct development work. Meanwhile, Shell Nigeria was continually involved in maintaining operations in a difficult environment with a community development department that was also relatively young. The suggestion was that as Living Earth Nigeria established its projects, abilities and its organisation the training and competence development activities with Shell Nigeria could follow.

Some individuals, particularly those in London at Shell International and Living Earth UK, consider their relationship to be a highly progressive and innovative partnership while others, such as those working on the ground, have felt it is essentially a financial relationship with very limited interaction. To the outside world the relationship between Living Earth and Shell in Nigeria has been described as a partnership, while in reality the relationship has perhaps been



more multi-faceted. Whatever the description, a relevant point to be made is that the Living Earth-Shell relationship straddles numerous critical boundaries - between North and South; business and non-government; resource extraction, community development and environmental protection; powerful multi-national and disempowered local. The internal “tensions” and difficulties that have arisen within both Shell and Living Earth suggest that attempting to collaborate across such boundaries can have noticeable implications within the organisations involved in attempting to create change.

Within the Shell-Living Earth relationship there are different domains to which change is alluded - Living Earth’s desire to influence the attitude within Shell towards working with NGOs and communities, Shell’s need to change their relationship and perceived standing with communities or the promotion, by both parties, of effective community development. As suggested in Chapter 4, for NGOs and their change efforts, the private sector holds two types of benefit: i) increasing reach - tapping into corporate sector wealth can directly contribute to the funding of traditionally-defined NGO activities and ii) increasing impact - the large sphere in which business activities have influence means that a direct effect on corporate behaviour can have significant impacts upon latter generation NGO strategies of institutional and social system change.

Living Earth has sought to combine both of these benefits - taking money from Shell to conduct its work and directly seeking to influence behaviour and attitudes in Shell. Perhaps rather uniquely as an NGO it includes institutional change and work with the corporate sector as part of its organisational objectives. Despite this, Living Earth seems to be unclear about the type, level and importance of change within Shell that is being sought, with individuals pulling in different directions. This uncertainty has led to conflict over the relative importance of meeting Shell’s needs (as a donor), delivering tangible developments to the communities and expending effort to change thinking and behaviour within Shell.

The Delta is an extremely volatile environment and the achievements must be considered in this light. But Living Earth’s influence upon Shell has also been minimal. While some changes have been made, Shell still faces complaints about its treatment of local communities and the environment in the Delta. The issue over the treatment of “spearhead communities” is one of the areas where Living Earth could direct its change efforts with Shell; in segregating communities in the Delta into those with wellheads and those without there is a danger that Shell is further contributing to fragmentation of the region. Living Earth’s independence can afford it to consider the Delta as a whole. However, these and other changes are unlikely to be

fostered by Living Earth alone; for example the fact that Shell staff are not permitted to stay over-night in the Delta means that their interaction with the communities is inevitably diminished. Clearly, Living Earth cannot affect the security situation in the Delta that has made the threat of hostage taking and hijacking a reality.

## 9.2 Deeper levels of connectivity

Or can they? Critics regard the relationship to be part of a growing co-optation of NGOs by multinationals; deliberate engagement with less “activist” NGOs undermining grass-roots activist opposition. The point that they are seeking to make is that underlying problems of security, human and land rights and environmental devastation are not being addressed and worse are being sidelined by such developmentally-oriented relationships; this developmental action seems to ensure that the perpetuation of unjust and ecologically unsound development will persist.

My experiences and reflections of working near the heart of these relationships have suggested that there were strong bonds and ties in the UK but that they were absent on the ground in Nigeria where the communities needed effective collaboration and change.

What also seems significant is the way that a lack of transparent, “un-felt” and disconnected relationships seemed to be mirrored across a number of arenas. The colonial and missionary of the problem, the existence of military dictatorships and ethnic division; the hidden nature of the relationship between management of Shell International and Living Earth UK; the feelings of staff within Living Earth UK of not being consulted and being placed outside the decision making structure; the top-down relationship between Living Earth UK and Living Earth Nigeria where material resource control has meant considerable power wielded by one party over the other; the isolation of Living Earth from an ecology of other NGOs in the Delta and the UK; the mistreatment of environmental bounty in an energy company; the waste of energy in an environmental NGO; the apparent (ab)use of participatory language on the ground by Living Earth staff; my stumbling attempts at participating with the various parties and enacting sustainability.

Perhaps the positivist mind would regard any connection between these various behaviours - from those at the historical, institutional and ethnic levels to those at organisational and personal levels - as a series of remarkable co-incidences. However, my feeling is that, although it may require synaesthesia and an opening to mystery, there might be ways in which to make

sense of the communication taking place therein through the lens of our imaginary participatory world-kaleidoscope. In section V, then, I seek to attempt such sense making and analysis.

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