

SECTION IV: PRAXIS

The execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other environmental activists in Nigeria on 10th November 1995 and the subsequent disruption to the international reputation of the Shell Group of companies is indicative of many things, for example the impact that the operations of multinational companies can have on their host communities in Southern countries and the influence that international public opinion can have in forcing an organisation to consider change¹. In the context of a study into private sector relations with NGOs what is immediately striking is the adversarial nature of relationships that existed between Shell and various NGOs at the time of the incident. In addition to the problems that Shell was facing in Nigeria there was also considerable protest activity and media interest in the situation surrounding the disposal of the Brent Spar oil platform in the North sea. Numerous international NGOs, including Greenpeace International, Human Rights Watch, Project Underground and Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) condemned and undertook direct action protests against alleged environmental and human rights abuses by Shell in Nigeria and the North sea.

Meanwhile, Shell attempted to get away from the stickiness of adversarial relationships with NGOs and to instead work with a range of them across a number of forums with a portfolio of engagement styles. This engagement was initiated during this time of crisis in both Nigeria and the North sea. In order to help solve the disposal situation with Brent Spar, Shell worked with the Environment Council, a UK based dialogue organisation. In the middle and aftermath of the executions in Nigeria, Pax Christi and Amnesty International were involved in on-going dialogue with Shell via correspondence of letters over the company's involvement with the military dictatorship in Nigeria, the existence of a Shell police force and the use of firearms against local people (Bishop van Luyn, 1998). Shell was also engaged in dialogue with NGOs over emergent and significant problems across the globe in its regional operations, for example in Peru over the proposed operations in the Camisea region, and at its central headquarters in the UK and Netherlands. Whilst some of this activity has subsequently been severely criticised² they were some of the most significant first moves in the development of

¹ The opening line of this paragraph is also perhaps indicative of the strong and persistent mythological and emotional force of the story concerning Shell and Nigeria.

² Pax Christi/Amnesty International and Shell had corresponded over a 2 year period about the role of the company in human rights violations in Nigeria. Shell extracted one remark in the foreword to the final letter where the NGO had said "Pax Christi and Amnesty International wish to again express their appreciation of the pioneering role that Shell is fulfilling in recognising that multinational corporations bear responsibility in the field of human rights" and quoted this in their report Profits and Principles without reference to the wider context and content of the dialogue. Many activists considered this a hugely cynical move by Shell and a severe mistake by Pax Christi that compromised the force of the

collaborative relationships between business and civil society organisations(Elkington & Fennell, 1998; Heap, 2000; Bendell & Lake, 2000).

While the level of international media attention upon the Nigerian situation had waned since the mid-nineties campaigns against oil companies, in particular Shell, and their operations in Nigeria were still on-going in both activist and academic circles (see for example Kretzmaan & Wright, 1997; Okonta, 1997; Frynas, 1998; Omoweh, 1998; Gilbert, 1999; Maxey, 1999; Storey, 1999). MOSOP and the Ogoni people remained active in their demands for justice and reparation from Shell. The Ijaw Youth Council, another indigenous organisation of the Niger Delta wanting greater control of the resources that their land produces, demanded “that all oil companies stop all exploration and exploitation activities in the area” (United Nations, 1998, 1999, 2000). Shell continued to experience a significant number of environmental and development difficulties with the host communities and whilst it had sought to work with the communities through the operation of its own community assistance programme for a number of years it was still finding it difficult to ease the situation. In an attempt to move away from these adversarial relations and their effect upon the organisation, Shell sought to engage with some NGOs in Nigeria by entering into dialogue, collaboration and partnership. In line with this Shell International suggests that one part of its new Sustainable Development Management Framework is to increase its engagement with external parties, including NGOs, through initially consulting, then increasing co-operation and eventually developing alliances with them (Shell, 1999).

As part of this strategy towards Nigeria and sustainable development, Shell developed a relationship with Living Earth a UK-based environmental-education NGO. In September 1998 a Memorandum of Understanding was signed between Living Earth Foundation UK, Living Earth Nigeria Foundation and Shell Petroleum Development Company of Nigeria for the undertaking of community development work in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria with the provision of \$2.25mn from Shell to Living Earth. Living Earth Nigeria Foundation set up an environmental action programme aimed at the sustainable development of a number of communities in the Delta, the main operating area of Shell Petroleum Development Company of Nigeria. In addition to the interaction in Nigeria there is a relationship between key individuals in the UK that looks towards establishing other potential collaborations.

“stick” that had been established.

Both organisations have seen their relationship as part of a wider commitment to working with organisations from the other sector. According to Shell International and Living Earth UK the engagement between the organisations in Nigeria is an example of a progressive partnership involving the active interaction between the business and non-governmental sectors of society; Shell and Living Earth have suggested that the relationship moves beyond the traditional philanthropic and adversarial relationships to one that attempts to develop solutions to an operational problem that has affected both Shell and wider society. Other parties outside of the relationship have suggested that the arrangement is part of a growing co-optation of the NGO sector by multinational companies through deliberate engagement of less “confrontational” NGOs. Meanwhile Shell and Living Earth have sought to establish lessons from their experience and this desire has led both organisations to seek out a range of methods for evaluating and researching their relationship. It is here where their story meets my own.

At the beginning of 1999 I was making inquiries with a number of collaborating business-NGOs as to the possibility of working with them to research their relationships. During this time I became aware that INTRAC (International Non-Government Training and Research Centre) was looking for researcher to help them with their own global research project looking at NGO-private sector relations. They had a number of potential participant organisations and in January 1999 I made a proposal to see if I could tap into their network of contacts. Subsequently, Simon Heap and Penny Fowler from INTRAC said that Shell and Living Earth had expressed an interest in working with the INTRAC study in order to reflect upon and learn from their on-going interaction in the UK and Nigeria.

As a result, in May 1999 I made a proposal to conduct a learning history with Living Earth and Shell (appendix E). This was accepted in September 1999 and as a result I also was to receive a contribution towards my research expenses of up to £1,800. I began gathering background information about the Nigerian context, the interaction of human rights, environment and development issues and the history of the relationship. As described in chapter 5 I spent time with the organisations, conducted a series of reflective interviews here in the UK and in Nigeria, visited with communities in the Delta and talked with numerous participants inside and outside of the relationship informally and over e-mail. Following the completion of interviews I produced learning history documents for each organisation and followed this up with a dissemination workshop with Living Earth UK.

In this section I seek to describe and explore the two tracks of relational praxis that have formed the core of my research.

The first reporting of the relational practice in chapter 6 from my inquiry takes a descriptive form, where I seek to provide the reader with some more detail about the Nigerian context and the relationship between Shell and Living Earth. After this in chapter 7 I present a learning history of the relationship between Shell and Living Earth. As mentioned above, I actually produced separate learning history documents for each organisation; these were similar to a large extent with some adjustments made for the specific focus and needs of each organisation and so the learning history that I have presented here is the first one that I wrote - for Living Earth UK. Not only did this one form the ground from which I developed the others, but this was also the only document which was followed up by a dissemination workshop. In the introduction to this section I refresh you as to how to approach your reading of the learning history document. At this stage you may find it appropriate to gauge how attentive and engaged you would like to be. At the end of the learning history I present the details from the workshop conducted with Living Earth UK. Then in chapter 8 I present my own personal learning history where I trace some of the aspects of my own interactions and thinking while I have been conducting this research. As I describe in the introduction to chapter 8, one of the aims of presenting this is to provide a picture of my authoring of the Shell-Living Earth story, and to further aspects of the relationship between Shell and Living Earth and some discussion about my relationship with the organisations in general and specific individuals. This will help to frame the final chapter of this section, chapter 9, where I suggest some conclusions about the relationship.

In general the section is written such that it would be accessible to non-academic audiences. I have sought to keep any theoretical inputs either brief or clarified in the text. I approach the relational praxes explored in this section from a more theoretical and purposively analytically frame in the three chapters (10-12) of section V. Nevertheless, there are important theoretical implications not only of what I am presenting, but also the way in which I have chosen to do so. The format of the learning history, around which this section is built, means that the traditionally separated “findings” and “analysis” sections are brought far closer together. Thus, in addition to referring to the relationships between the various participants (Shell, Living Earth, myself, the communities), my description of this section as “praxis” also connotes the process of action and reflection through which I have been able to find out about, analyse and ultimately tell this story. Finally, the open ended nature of the learning history sections means that your relating to my writing may also be included within the network of on-going praxes described in the section.

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