

Fighting for Local Resources in a Globalized World: Unity, Strategy, and Government Support

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In 1980, representatives of the Chipko movement, based in India's Himalayan Uttarakhand region, met with Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.¹ They negotiated a fifteen-year ban on felling trees above 1,000 meters, ending the exploitation of their natural resources by companies from the plains region.² Fifteen years later on another continent, Kenule Beeson ("Ken") Saro-Wiwa and eight other Nigerian activists from the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) were hanged by the Nigerian government after a prolonged dispute over control of oil fields on Ogoni lands.³ Why did these two struggles for local control of natural resources have such different outcomes? By examining the results of Chipko's and MOSOP's struggles to petition their governments for control and preservation of their natural resources, one can identify three conditions important to the success of a nonviolent movement: it needs to have a focused strategy that addresses its grievances one at a time, be uniformly supported by the community it identifies with, and be able to petition a government willing to listen.

The Chipko movement arose from concern about the State Forest Department's policy of auctioning off trees to corporate bidders.⁴ The policy became a problem in the 1960s when the Indian government constructed roads through the region, opening once inaccessible Himalayan forests to development.⁵ Forests that local villagers had depended on for centuries were diminished, while distant companies benefitted.⁶ Women now

traveled long distances in search of firewood, while soil erosion and loss of water-absorbing groundcover led to devastating floods and landslides.⁷ Frustration among villagers in the region reached a peak in 1973, when the Forest Department not only refused Dasholi Gram Swarajya Sangh, a cooperative of local workers, twelve ash trees for tool-making and construction, but auctioned off thirty-two ash trees to Simon Company, a sporting goods company from outside the region.⁸

In response, Dasholi Gram Swarajya Sangh hosted a public meeting. Chandi Prasad Bhatt, a prominent Chipko member, suggested what became an enduring strategy—hugging the trees to protect them from contractors. Many villagers wanted to foil Simon Company by sabotaging the trees, but Bhatt reminded them, “Our aim is not to destroy the trees but to preserve them.” He later elaborated, “The main goal of our movement is not *saving* trees, but the *judicious use* of trees.”⁹ The first Chipko protestors came a step closer to realizing this goal when, as a result of their peaceful demonstration, Simon Company’s thirty-two trees were awarded to the local cooperative.¹⁰ As word of their strategy spread to villages throughout the region, Chipko workers and villagers prevented contractors from felling a forest in an environmentally sensitive area near the village of Reni.¹¹ In response, the chief minister of the state met with Bhatt and agreed to create a committee of experts to examine the area. There followed a ban on felling in an area measuring more than 450 square miles.¹²

Building up momentum, Chipko continued to influence the state government, which created more protected areas.¹³ By 1980, their demands had reached the national government, and Prime Minister Indira Gandhi called a meeting with members that resulted in the ban on logging above 1000 meters.¹⁴ With this success, Uttarakhand

villages began to work on reforestation and responsible use of trees.¹⁵ Focusing on local conservation issues and working with the Indian government, Chipko has been able to claim Himalayan forests for public use and restoration.

The Ogoni people of the Niger Delta, like the Uttarakhand villagers, struggled with foreign companies for control over their natural resources. In 1956, Royal Dutch/Shell discovered oil on Ogoni land. By 1958, with the permission of the Nigerian government, they were exporting 6000 barrels a day, and by 1960, their success had attracted oil companies from around the world.¹⁶ The oil business proved lucrative for the Nigerian government and a small class of elites, but natural gas flares, oil spills, waste dumping, and canal construction polluted the air, soil, and water in the Niger Delta, destroying the ecosystems that the Ogoni depended on for agriculture and fishing.¹⁷ It was frustration at this injustice that gave rise to MOSOP.¹⁸

While Chipko and MOSOP faced similar problems, MOSOP's aims and strategies were less focused. MOSOP hoped to achieve far more than local management of land and natural resources. In the "Ogoni Bill of Rights," the document that spurred the movement's creation, Ken Saro-Wiwa makes a number of political and social demands.¹⁹ Most strikingly, he requests "POLITICAL AUTONOMY to participate in the affairs of the Republic as a distinct and separate unit."²⁰ MOSOP's goals struck at the heart of the Ogoni's political marginalization, as did some of its protests.²¹ The organization used a variety of methods, including rallies, church services, written pleas to the Nigerian government, and an election boycott, to send a variety of messages, political and social, as well as environmental.²²

The Nigerian government responded by repressing the Ogoni brutally, the most horrific example being the 1993–1998 occupation of Ogoniland. During just a few days of the occupation, villages were leveled and the local clinic was overwhelmed with the wounded.²³ In 1995, the Nigerian regime accused Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other MOSOP leaders (the “Ogoni Nine”) of encouraging the murder of four pro-government Ogoni elders. Although Saro-Wiwa had always endorsed nonviolence, all nine were convicted and hanged.²⁴ After Saro-Wiwa’s death, many of MOSOP’s goals remained unaccomplished.²⁵

The experiences of Chipko and MOSOP show the importance for politically marginalized communities of discussing approachable goals and specific strategies prior to taking nonviolent action. MOSOP developed from Saro-Wiwa’s “Ogoni Bill of Rights,” which laid out a variety of aims but did not suggest a winning strategy, impeding the movement’s ability to focus on any one goal.²⁶ For example, MOSOP’s attempts to achieve its most ambitious end, political autonomy, distracted the movement from its fight to manage Ogoni land and oil. When General Sani Abacha came to power in a 1993 coup, MOSOP extended a “cautious welcome,” believing he could help negotiate the creation of an Ogoni state. They quickly discovered that General Abacha was eager to silence MOSOP and exploit oil-rich Ogoni land.²⁷ Chipko members, however, managed to maintain clear priorities by discussing objectives and methods before taking action. Their goals were not the product of one man’s pen, but developed during the public meeting called by the Dasholi Gram Swarajya Sangh. This dialogue resulted in specific, approachable aims and a strategy used to achieve larger political change.²⁸

Nonviolent movements would be further helped if the communities supporting them worked to resolve internal conflict before it undermined the movement. Class divisions among the Ogoni caused major difficulties for MOSOP: they were at the root of the murders that Saro-Wiwa was executed for. In May 1994, Ogoni chiefs who had grown wealthy through government support declared their native Gokana kingdom independent of MOSOP and loyal to the federal government. Many residents of Gokana did not wish to disassociate themselves from MOSOP, and during the ensuing protest, four of the chiefs who had signed the accord were killed.²⁹ The victims, despite connections to Shell and the Nigerian government, had once been members of MOSOP and professed sympathy with many of the organization's goals.³⁰ Had the Ogoni worked to sort out the class tensions that led to the murders, they might have been able to prevent Saro-Wiwa's execution. Chipko, by contrast, does not appear to have been significantly weakened by internal conflict. In fact, the villagers at Reni, where protestors protected 2,500 trees from destruction, overcame a conflict of interest. Though the government had paid them to mark trees for felling, Chipko workers convinced them that protecting the trees was more important than being paid to cut them down.³¹

The international community can also help ensure the success of nonviolent movements. By applying economic sanctions to corrupt governments, outside countries can help marginalized communities work with their governments as Chipko did, rather than struggle against them as did MOSOP. In the past, the international community has successfully used economic sanctions to force repressive governments to hear opposition. For example, economic sanctions on South Africa, including an oil embargo and a ban on exporting arms to the country, are said to have significantly influenced the end of

apartheid.³² Indeed, there was hope among the Ogoni that the United States would boycott Nigerian oil, but the bill that would have enabled the embargo never became law.³³

Given the radically different outcomes of Chipko's and MOSOP's struggles for local control of resources in a world influenced by global corporations, it is clear that politically and economically marginalized communities must resolve internal conflicts and set goals and strategies at the beginning of a nonviolent movement. Equally importantly, powerful countries should use economic sanctions to support communities like the Ogoni and the Uttarakhand villagers. Although the bill that would have enabled an embargo on Nigerian oil never made it through the U.S. Congress, it is never too late to help achieve the change that Ken Saro-Wiwa died for. "The struggle continues," as he said—in people and governments around the world.³⁴

Notes

¹ Sakuntala Narasimhan, "The Roots of a Movement: India," *Connexions* 41 (1993), in the AcademicOne File, <http://sfpl.org/sfplonline/dbcategories.htm> (accessed December 11, 2009).

² Narasimhan, "Roots of a Movement."

³ Oronto Douglas and Ike Okonta, "Ogoni People of Nigeria versus Big Oil," in *Paradigm Wars: Indigenous Peoples' Resistance to Globalization*, ed. Jerry Mander and Victoria Tauli-Corpuz (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 2006), 153–156.

⁴ Mark Shepard, "'Hug the Trees!': Chandi Prasad Bhatt, Gaura Devi, and the Chipko Movement," http://www.markshep.com/nonviolence/GT_Chipko.html (accessed December 7, 2009).

⁵ P. P. Karan, "Environmental Movements in India," *Geographical Review* 84, no. 1 (1994), in the AcademicOne File, <http://sfpl.org/sfplonline/dbcategories.htm> (accessed December 6, 2009).

⁶ Brian Nelson, "Chipko Revisited," *Whole Earth Review* 79 (1993), in the AcademicOne File, <http://sfpl.org/sfplonline/dbcategories.htm> (accessed December 6, 2009).

⁷ Thomas Weber, *Hugging the Trees: The Story of the Chipko Movement* (Calcutta: Penguin Books, 1987), 26–27.

⁸ Shepard, "Hug the Trees."

⁹ Shepard, "Hug the Trees."

¹⁰ Shepard, "Hug the Trees."

¹¹ Nelson, "Chipko Revisited."

¹² Shepard, "Hug the Trees"; and Ramachandra Guha, *The Unquiet Woods: Ecological Change and Peasant Resistance in the Himalaya* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 158–159.

¹³ Shepard, "Hug the Trees."

¹⁴ Narasimhan, "Roots of a Movement."

¹⁵ Nelson, "Chipko Revisited."

¹⁶ J. Timothy Hunt, *The Politics of Bones* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2005), 12.

¹⁷ Douglas and Okonta, "Ogoni People," 153–154.

¹⁸ Douglas and Okonta, "Ogoni People," 155.

¹⁹ Hunt, *Politics of Bones*, 63–64.

²⁰ Ken Saro-Wiwa, "Ogoni Bill of Rights," in "Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People," http://www.mosop.org/ogoni_bill_of_rights.html (accessed December 6, 2009).

²¹ In one conspicuous instance, protestors at a march celebrating Ogoni Day carried signs that read, "Give Ogoni oil money today."

²² Hunt, *Politics of Bones*, 66–109.

²³ Hunt, *Politics of Bones*, 171–175.

²⁴ Aaron Sachs, "Dying for Oil," *World Watch* 9, no. 3 (1996), in the AcademicOne File, <http://sfpl.org/sfplonline/dbcategories.htm> (accessed December 6, 2009); and Joshua Hammer, "A Voice Silenced," *Newsweek*, November 20, 1995, in the AcademicOne File, <http://sfpl.org/sfplonline/dbcategories.htm> (accessed December 10, 2009).

²⁵ The Nigerian government is still heavily dependent on oil revenues, with 95 percent of its foreign exchange earnings coming from oil, and residents of the Niger Delta continue to see few of the benefits of these revenues. MOSOP successfully drove Shell out of Ogoni, but its facilities are poorly secured and continue to pose a threat to Ogoni villages and farmland. Douglas and Okonta, "Ogoni People"; and "The Niger Delta: No Democratic Dividend," *Human Rights Watch* 14, no. 7 (October 2002), <http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2002/10/22/niger-delta> (accessed January 3, 2010).

²⁶ Saro-Wiwa, "Ogoni Bill of Rights."

²⁷ Hunt, *Politics of Bones*, 147.

²⁸ Nelson, "Chipko Revisited"; and Shepard, "Hug the Trees."

²⁹ Hunt, *Politics of Bones*, 183–191; and Sachs, "Dying for Oil."

³⁰ Hunt, *Politics of Bones*, 192.

³¹ Shepard, "Hug the Trees." More recently, a reporter asked one of the many Uttarakhand women who have worked to replant the forests if the movement ever faces serious conflicts or a lack of cooperation. She responded, "No. This is a peace movement." Nelson, "Chipko Revisited."

³² Alexander Laverty, "Impact of Economic and Political Sanctions on Apartheid," in "The African File," <http://theafricanfile.wordpress.com/ucsd-2/impact-of-economic-and-political-sanctions-on-apartheid> (accessed January 10, 2010).

³³ V. Adefemi Isumonah, "The Making of the Ogoni Ethnic Group," *Africa* 74, no. 3 (2004), in the AcademicOne File, <http://sfpl.org/sfplonline/dbcategories.htm> (accessed December 5, 2009).

³⁴ "Wiwa v. Shell," <http://wiwavshell.org> (accessed December 7, 2009).

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