

Environmental Movements in Sub-Saharan Africa

A Political Ecology of Power and Conflict

Cyril I. Obi

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Acronyms

BP	British Petroleum
CED	Centre for Environment and Development
CLO	Civil Liberties Organization
CM	Chikoko Movement
COC	Council of Ogoni Churches
COP	Council of Ogoni Professionals
COTRA	Council of Ogoni Traditional Rulers Association
CRP	Constitutional Rights Project
EIA	Environmental Impact Assessment
ERA	Environmental Rights Action
FIAN	FoodFirst Information and Action Network
FOWA	Federation of Ogoni Women's Associations
GBM	Green Belt Movement
IMF	International Monetary Fund
INGO	international non-governmental organization
IYC	Ijaw Youth Council
KANU	Kenya African National Union
MOSOP	Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People
NDWJ	Niger Delta Women for Justice
NGO	non-governmental organization
NUOS	National Union of Ogoni Students
NYCOP	National Youth Council of Ogoni People
OBR	Ogoni Bill of Rights
OCU	Ogoni Central Union
OSU	Ogoni Students Union
OTU	Ogoni Teachers Union
UN	United Nations
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNPO	Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization

Summary/Résumé/Resumen

Summary

This paper critically examines environmental movements in sub-Saharan Africa by drawing on two prominent cases: the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People of Nigeria's Niger Delta and the Green Belt Movement of Kenya.

Its thesis is that environmental movements in Africa operate within a transformative logic in which struggles for power over environmental resources connect broader popular social struggles for empowerment and democracy.

The paper is divided into six sections. The introduction delineates the aims of the paper and draws attention to the "fusedness" of the environmental with the political with respect to the struggles of social movements. It also points out that many environmental conflicts are driven by dominant power relations over the environment, which continue to benefit the "few" and threaten the survival of the majority. It is followed by the historical background, which examines the origins and evolution of environmental movements in Africa in the twentieth century, particularly their links with social movements seeking to broaden access to resources and power. The third section, on Africa's multiple crises and the environment, focuses attention on the impact of economic and political crises on the continent's ecosystem. It is argued that these crises further degrade the environment and deepen social contradictions, which explode into conflicts over shrinking resources. Next is the conceptual framework hinged upon political ecology, which examines how environmental movements seek to transform power relations in Africa, and how struggles for power over ecology lead to conflict.

The fifth section of the paper, the case studies of the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People and the Green Belt Movement, documents the travails and achievements of environmental movements in Africa in their engagement with the state and hegemonic global economic interests that seek to monopolize Africa's environmental resources. The last and concluding section sums up the arguments on transformative politics of environmental movements in Africa and the partial successes they have recorded in mobilizing the people for effective participation in the management of the African environment.

Cyril I. Obi is Senior Research Fellow at the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, Lagos. This paper was prepared for the UNRISD conference, *The Political Economy of Sustainable Development: Environmental Conflict, Participation and Movements*, which took place in 2002 in parallel with the World Summit on Sustainable Development (Johannesburg, South Africa).

Résumé

L'auteur de ce document porte un regard critique sur les mouvements écologiques de l'Afrique subsaharienne en s'inspirant de deux cas notables: le Mouvement pour la survie du peuple ogoni dans le delta du Niger au Nigeria et le Mouvement de la ceinture verte au Kenya.

Sa thèse est la suivante: les mouvements écologiques d'Afrique agissent dans une logique de transformation dans laquelle les luttes pour la maîtrise des ressources environnementales se rattachent à des luttes sociales et populaires plus vastes, pour la participation au pouvoir et la démocratie.

Le document se divise en six sections. Dans l'introduction, l'auteur définit les objectifs du document et attire l'attention sur la "fusion" de l'écologie et du politique dans les luttes des mouvements sociaux. Il signale aussi que bien des conflits sur l'environnement ont pour moteur des rapports de force et de domination sur l'environnement qui continuent à profiter à "un petit nombre" mais menacent l'existence de la majorité. Dans la section historique, il recherche les origines des mouvements écologiques en Afrique et retrace leur évolution au XX^{ème} siècle, en particulier

leurs liens avec les mouvements sociaux dont le but est d'élargir l'accès aux ressources et au pouvoir. La troisième section, qui porte sur l'Afrique, ses multiples crises et l'environnement, est centrée sur les répercussions de ces crises économiques et politiques sur l'écosystème du continent. L'auteur estime qu'elles dégradent encore l'environnement et exacerbent les contradictions sociales, qui explosent en conflits lorsque les ressources viennent à manquer. La quatrième section trace le cadre conceptuel, qui gravite autour de l'écologie politique; l'auteur y explique comment les mouvements écologiques cherchent à transformer les rapports de force en Afrique et comment les luttes pour la maîtrise de l'environnement mènent au conflit.

La cinquième section du document—les études de cas consacrées au Mouvement pour la survie du peuple ogoni et au Mouvement de la ceinture verte—illustre les réalisations des mouvements écologiques et les douleurs de l'enfantement qu'ils connaissent dans leur affrontement avec l'Etat et des intérêts économiques mondiaux hégémoniques, prêts à monopoliser les ressources naturelles de l'Afrique. La dernière section résume en conclusion les arguments avancés au sujet de la stratégie de transformation des mouvements écologiques en Afrique et les succès partiels qu'ils ont remportés en essayant de mobiliser la population africaine en faveur d'une participation réelle à la gestion de l'environnement.

Cyril I. Obi est chargé de recherche principal à l'Institut nigérian des affaires internationales de Lagos. Ce document a été préparé pour la conférence de l'UNRISD sur le thème L'économie politique du développement durable: conflits, participation et mouvements écologiques, qui s'est tenue en 2002 parallèlement au Sommet mondial sur le développement durable (Johannesburg, Afrique du Sud).

Resumen

En este documento se analizan críticamente los movimientos medioambientales en el África subsahariana inspirándose en dos casos destacados: el Movimiento para la Supervivencia del Pueblo Ogoni en el Delta del río Níger en Nigeria, y el Movimiento del Cinturón Verde de Kenya.

La tesis del autor es que los movimientos medioambientales en África actúan siguiendo una lógica transformadora en la que las luchas por el poder sobre los recursos medioambientales enlazan con luchas sociales populares de carácter más amplio por el empoderamiento y la democracia.

Este documento se divide en seis secciones. La introducción especifica los objetivos del mismo y pone de relieve la "fusión" de los aspectos medioambientales con los políticos en lo que respecta a las luchas de los movimientos sociales. También señala que muchos conflictos ambientales están impulsados por relaciones de poder dominantes sobre el medio ambiente, que siguen beneficiando "a unos pocos" y amenazan la supervivencia de la mayoría. A continuación se explican los antecedentes históricos, que examinan el origen y la evolución de los movimientos medioambientales en África en el siglo XX, en particular sus vínculos con movimientos sociales que luchan por ampliar el acceso a los recursos y al poder. La tercera sección trata de las múltiples crisis de África y del medio ambiente, y se centra en los efectos que tienen las crisis políticas y económicas en el ecosistema del continente. El autor sostiene que estas crisis degradan más aún el medio ambiente y agudizan las contradicciones sociales, que provocan conflictos por la disminución progresiva de los recursos. Después se aborda el marco conceptual en torno a la ecología política, que examina el modo en que los movimientos medioambientales luchan por transformar las relaciones de poder en África, y el modo en que las luchas por el poder sobre los recursos ocasionan los conflictos.

La quinta sección de este documento, que abarca los estudios de caso del Movimiento para la Supervivencia del Pueblo Ogoni y el Movimiento del Cinturón Verde, documenta los esfuerzos y logros de los movimientos medioambientales en África en su lucha contra el Estado y los intereses económicos globales hegemónicos, que tienen por objeto monopolizar los recursos medioambientales de África. La última sección resume los argumentos sobre la política transformadora de los mo-

vimientos medioambientales en África, y los logros parciales que han registrado al conseguir movilizar a las personas para que participen efectivamente en la gestión del medio ambiente africano.

Cyril I. Obi es Investigador Agregado en el Instituto Nigeriano de Asuntos Internacionales, Lagos. Este documento fue preparado para la conferencia de UNRISD, La economía política del desarrollo sostenible: conflicto, participación y movimientos medioambientales, que tuvo lugar en 2002 al mismo tiempo que la Cumbre Mundial sobre el Desarrollo Sostenible, Johannesburgo, Sudáfrica.

Introduction

This paper undertakes a critical examination of the transformative logic of environmental movements in politics and society in Africa. It involves an analysis of these movements, their emergence, structures and deep immersion in the social struggles for power, space and resources. Particular attention is focused on the ways in which they confront or resist the hegemonic forces of capital and the state that control scarce and shrinking environmental resources. In other words, these environmental movements are the bearers of the ecological critique of the political and economic monopolies that dominate African ecosystems in the quest for profit and power. Yet, their organizational power and the quest to wrest the African environment from the control of exploitive, extractive, degrading and authoritarian forces strongly implies the dialectic of conflict: repression versus resistance, expropriation versus distribution, domination versus liberation.

The central aim of the paper is to evaluate the extent to which environmental movements in Africa have been able to interrogate the dominant hegemonic power relations over the ecosystem, particularly the monopoly of environmental resources by the state and extractive external/multinational interests. It examines the structures of these movements and how they have been able to mobilize the majority to take control of their environmental resources and draw upon international support to empower their local claims. Rather than romanticizing the gains of these movements, this study seeks to document the "trials and travails" of environmental movements within the context of "revolutionary pressures from below", which are a critical part of the social movement for a people-centred democracy on the continent.

The struggles of environmental movements in Africa are only recently being documented in a systematic manner. While considerable attention has been given to the activities of these movements within national borders or in relation to their international or transglobal linkages, particularly from the perspective of environmental rights and security, not enough has been done at a pan-African level. This could be a reflection of the weakness of horizontal transboundary linkages among African environmental movements that continue to operate within specific countries, or are vertically connected (that is, connected directly) to international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or donors with roots outside Africa. The two case studies in this paper, one from West Africa, and the other from East Africa, are the first tentative steps toward capturing the broad trends in African environmental movements, considering the constraints of time and space.

It is also important to note that the struggles of environmental movements in sub-Saharan Africa did not assume much prominence until the closing decades of the twentieth century, particularly after the end of the Cold War in the late 1980s, which also coincided with the increased emphasis on the role of environmental factors in shaping global security and world affairs (Miller 1995:1–13). This shift in thinking focused more on transcending state-centric notions of sovereignty and facing the reality of global economic and ecological interdependence (Obi 1997:1). Equally relevant was the view in certain circles in the Western world that Africa was the greatest environmental threat to global security.¹ According to this school of thought, Africa is a continent beset by an image of overpopulation, disease and violent ethnic or tribal wars that lead to environmental degradation and conflict, and generate refugees who migrate to the more prosperous parts of the world, particularly to the West, and thereby pose a threat to global peace and security (Obi 2000a:47). Scholars and policy makers who belong to this school have found it necessary to bureaucratize and depoliticize the emerging environmental movements so that they do not threaten vital Western economic interests in Africa or challenge in any meaningful manner the negative labelling of Africa in the media and official circles.

Yet, at another level, the activities of global civil society groups and the worldwide legitimization of rights discourses, conservation and democratization have provided platforms, space(s) and idioms with which environmental movements in Africa have empowered their struggles

¹ Homer-Dixon 1996; Kaplan 1994, 1997; Klare 1996.

and gained global support for their local concerns. These movements have also taken advantage of the “infrastructure and interconnectivity” attendant to globalization—the information and communications technology revolution—to collect, process and disseminate information about their plight (such as victimization, violation of rights by the state and capital, and corruption)—across the world. In this way, they have been able to bring international pressure to bear on African states and ruling classes, as well as on foreign multinationals, to respect the citizenship rights and humanity of their people.

What emerges from the foregoing is the fusion of the environmental with the political with respect to the struggles of social movements. Indeed, as noted by Hildyard (1999) and Suliman (1999), the environment in Africa is “a domain of competing interests”. Indeed, these interests do not merely compete, they conflict, as the social contradictions between nature and the dominant market economic system deepen, and as power relations with regard to the environment continue to benefit the few and threaten the ecological basis of the survival of the majority. Thus, Salih argues that liberation movements are also environmental movements operating within the context of “livelihood struggles” (Salih 1999:12). Therefore in this regard, environmental movements in Africa cannot be analytically separated from democratic movements.

It is also important to draw attention to the gender dimension of environmental struggles in Africa in both colonial and post-colonial times. Women have been the victims of what Amadiume refers to as “processes of militarization and masculinization” (1995:43) of social movements, which also reflect the dominance of male control of the environment. In this context of “maleness”, women become the “most marginalized of the marginalized” in society as it interacts with nature for survival. At the same time, women turn out to be those most affected by environmental degradation. Their responsibilities include domestic and reproductive roles that compel them to apply pressure on the environment. As the environment is degraded, women are forced to walk long distances to their farms to collect fuelwood and locate water for domestic use. Thus, when capital intervenes in the environment (that is, when foreign capital seeks to exploit natural resources such as timber, mining, oil and tourism), women are the first victims. They are dispossessed, impoverished or denied access to those resources critical to their survival. In the context of one-party, military rule or “choiceless democracies”, the power relations with regard to the environment have been tilted against women in sub-Saharan Africa.

Women also bear the brunt of repression by the state. They are beaten, detained and sometimes raped by members of the security forces. It is because the gender question has been implicated in the liberation ecology of environmental movements (that is, the gender dimension has been integrated into the notion of liberation by environmental movements) in Africa since the 1980s, that women have come to play important roles, as exemplified by the Green Belt Movement (GBM) of Kenya and the Federation of Women’s Associations—an affiliate body of the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) of Nigeria’s Niger Delta.

The Historical Background

It is necessary at this juncture to note that the impetus for environmental movements in Africa has been internal and embedded in the continent’s history and the daily struggles of its peoples to make a living from their lands and waters. Indeed, Africa has a rich corpus of environmental history. As Beinart (1999:4) explains: “The environmental consequences of colonial incursions have been explored, including appropriation by companies and settlers of natural resources such as wildlife, forests, minerals, and land.”

There is also ample evidence that before the colonial encounter with the African environment, African people had a rich knowledge of their environment. In many cultures, land, water and even forests were either deified or held in sacred trust. They were symbolically insured against abuse or pillage. It was the forceful integration of the African environment into the world market through the instrumentality of the colonial state (and unequal trade) that laid it open to

predatory extraction, disease, pollution and degradation by external hegemonic forces. By the same logic, resistance to colonialism by African nationalist movements did have strong environmental components. Beinart (1999:9) observes that “scholars have systematically illustrated the centrality of conflicts over natural resources and environmental issues in rural anti-colonial movements and rebellions”. While the case of the Mau-Mau Movement in Kenya in the struggle for freedom and land is instructive in this regard, Beinart also points to the environmental origins of the Pondoland revolt in South Africa in 1960 (1999:9). He further refers to the Pondoland revolt as South Africa’s “most serious rebellion in the 20th century”, with links to the anger of the people with “government’s conservation-driven rehabilitation programme, the denial of access to reserved forests and conflict over a chief dismissed for failing to co-operate in locust eradication” (Beinart 1999:9–10).

Thus, African environmental history has provided concrete evidence of the dialectic of state intervention (in the environment) versus local resistance (to the appropriation of natural resources). It has also underscored the role of environmental considerations in the logic of the anti-colonial movement and its social constituents. The subsequent delinking of the social from the political agenda by the African ruling class at independence has implied the subordination of popular movements, and by extension, the subordination of environmental movements to the ideology of nation building or national development. As has been argued elsewhere, this has led to the flowering of political parties and the wilting of social movements (Mamdani 2000:229). It has been argued that the anti-colonial, nationalist movements were a coalition of social movements, peasants, workers, students, the elite and political parties. At independence, this coalition disintegrated, with the ruling elite jettisoning the popular forces and rival forces, and emphasizing the primacy of wielding political power for the purpose of modernization/development and national unity, rather than “distractions” (Mamdani 2000:230) such as competing social movements, which would disrupt the single-minded pursuit of national growth. Indeed, by the late 1960s, as the contradictions within the post-colonial ruling elite in Africa deepened, the party in power crushed the opposition and suppressed social movements leading to one-party rule, or was overthrown in a coup, resulting in military rule. Within this context of authoritarianism, social movements were suppressed.

Thus, it was not until the 1980s, when the single-party and military regimes got caught in a web of their own internal contradictions and crises of legitimacy, that they were challenged by democratic forces from below. Social movements re-emerged to organize the struggle for the “second liberation”. Apart from the internal contradictions arising from long years of dictatorship, corruption and misrule, the refraction of the global recession into the dependent monocultural African economies led to severe crises with far-reaching, adverse social and political consequences. Indeed, the adoption of the International Monetary Fund (IMF)/World Bank economic reform packages by African states, with their emphasis on the deregulation of the state, privatization and the liberalization of the economy, together with the adoption of managerial approaches to governance (Olukoshi 1999), deepened the crisis in which African economies were immersed. Market reforms also had severe social and environmental consequences. Devaluation of the national currencies eroded the purchasing power of the people and further fuelled inflation, which placed the prices of most items, particularly food, beyond the reach of the vast majority. The deregulation of the state also meant that subsidies for essential services, including health, education, infrastructure and essential commodities such as food, fuel and electricity, were drastically reduced or removed entirely, leading to social misery and pauperization. The import-dependent industries reeled under the impact of devaluation and the falling prices of Africa’s traditional exports in the international market, which undermined the amount of foreign exchange available to fund the importation of raw materials. The result of this was unemployment, retrenchment and the adoption of multiple survival/coping strategies by the impoverished middle class and the poorest of the poor, especially women.

It should also be noted that the rural areas, in many cases, were more affected by the deregulation of the economy, as they were more intensely exploited by multinationals, the logging industry and state monopolies, in order to extract more profit, surplus or revenues. In the same manner,

the poor people living off the land (in cases where they were not dispossessed) exerted more pressure on the environment in order to eke out a living in the face of rising costs of essentials and social services.

It was in this context of the sharpening of social contradictions, partly as a result of the conditionalities and impacts of structural adjustment, that the legitimacy of the state was increasingly eroded and subjected to growing challenges by popular forces. In many instances, the state's resort to repression and authoritarianism, in order to contain the pressures from popular forces, turned out to be futile as resources available for patronage shrank due to the effects of the economic crisis. The result was that the push for democracy by social movements became stronger, and eventually forced many one-party states and military regimes in Africa to embrace multiparty democracy and a measure of constitutionalism by the end of the twentieth century.

Africa's Multiple Crises and the Environment

From an environmental perspective, the impact of the crisis of legitimacy of the state in Africa, as well as the economic crisis, were devastating. In the first place, the crisis of the state placed greater pressures on the environment and led to greater repression of those groups seeking equitable access to, or contesting the state's control of, environmental resources. In the same way, market reforms led to the further commodification of Africa's natural resources, such as forests, water and minerals, opening them up to increased exploitation (and degradation) for profit by the state, its business partners and multinational corporations. Even the poor who were further impoverished by crises of structural adjustment also turned to the environment for cheaper food, fuel and livelihoods. In this dire struggle for survival, the ongoing exploitation of environmental resources was overlooked, thereby further degrading the environment in the process. This also suggested the intensification of struggles over shrinking or relatively scarce resources. In the face of the push and pull between those who had power over the environment and others whose survival was threatened as a result of their lack of power over the environment, the cycle of repression, resistance and conflict was further reinforced. It was in this context of the high premium placed on power over environmental resources by the state and the ruling class that the excluded groups organized themselves into environmental movements. This enabled them to protest their exclusion, stake claims and defend the right to gain access to environmental resources critical to their survival and reproduction.

Thus, environmental movements re-emerged, particularly in the 1980s, as a potent social force to contest power over environmental resources by the state and foreign capital. In the age of globalization, in which the quest for a maximization of profits by exerting pressure on the world's finite resources is at its peak, the conflict between political-economic and environmental interests, particularly in Africa, has assumed new and more ferocious dimensions. It has become the very substance or prize of the zero-sum politics of the ruling elite across the continent, by which they seek to expand their control over these resources at any cost. The political elite also use the same resources to oil the wheels of the patrimonial networks of power that underpin what Mkandawire (1999:122) once described as "choiceless democracies", which are "electoral democracies" that offer citizens no real choice. In the bid to contest the monopolization of environmental resources – and the attendant abuses and corruption – environmental movements have also adopted political, ethnic, national and gender identities in Africa. Examples include the MOSOP, GBM, Niger Delta Women for Justice (NDWJ) and the Squatter Settlement Movement in South Africa (Isaacs 1989). Others include the coalition of church and civic movements protesting against the Lesotho Highlands Water Project, and the Centre for Environment and Development (CED), which is coordinating protests and resistance against the multibillion dollar Chevron-Exxon-Mobil-Petronas Chad-Cameroon oil pipeline project, on the basis of the violation of human rights of indigenous people and an inadequate environmental impact assessment (EIA) for the project. As pointed out earlier, some national liberation movements adopt environmental components in which the struggle over who owns the land assumes the form of national resistance against

external aggressors or internal colonizers. Salih (1999) notes the existence of such considerations with regard to conflicts in the Sudan and the Horn of Africa.

In this paper, emphasis is placed upon the social movements in Africa from which environmental movements have emerged, and which are deeply immersed in the political ecology of power and conflict. In this context, political ecology refers to how the distribution of power over the environment breeds conflict, and connects broader social struggles for democracy and justice. The arguments on the transformative politics of environmental movements will be illustrated by drawing upon two case studies: MOSOP, "arguably one of the most internationally visible African social movements of the 1990s" (Watts 1999:15) and the GBM, clearly the most well-known women's, or women-led, environmental movement in Africa since the 1980s. These two "internationally visible" environmental movements provide a basis for exploring the content and changing patterns of social responses to the political economy of conflict in the African environment.

In undertaking the analysis of the foregoing issues, this paper has been broadly organized into six sections: the introduction, which sets out the parameters of the analysis and identifies the critical issues, followed by the historical background, which places the evolution of environmental movements over the past century in perspective. This sets the stage for the third section on Africa's multiple crises and the environment, which brings the devastating impact of political and economic crises on the African ecosystem into sharp relief. The fourth section involves a treatment of the conceptual issues in the political ecology of environmental movements and provides a framework of analysis for the paper. The case studies, which constitute the fifth section, make up the analytical core of the paper and focus on the Nigeria's MOSOP of the Niger Delta and Kenya's GBM. The sixth and concluding section sums up the arguments on the transformative politics of environmental movements in Africa and captures its implications in relation to the participation of the people in the management of the environment.

Some Conceptual Issues in the Political Ecology of Environmental Movements in Africa

Examination of environmental movements in sub-Saharan Africa involves dealing with the linkages between nature, survival, power and social justice, bringing into sharp relief the centrality of this nexus in grappling with the concept of the environment in its full ramifications. As Salih (1999:2) explains: "Environment therefore is much broader than nature or resources. It encompasses the dialectics of the changing relations between society, the state and nature and involves a continuous transformation of both nature and society."

Thus, the relationship between society and nature is a dynamic one, defined also by the distribution of power in society and the way(s) in which such power provides access to, and control over, the natural resources needed for survival. Where power is concentrated in a few hands, giving them disproportionate control over large amounts of natural resources by blocking access to others, marginalizing them, or worse, dispossessing them of their resources, conflicts invariably arise. In Africa, where the state is central to the extraction and accumulation process by direct intervention in, or appropriation of, environmental resources, either on its own, or in partnership with foreign capital, environmental movements emerge autonomous of the state to contest the control of the environment and defend the rights of the people whose survival is tied to the land. In this regard, environmental movements as social movements involve "the crystallization of group activity autonomous of the state" (Mamdani 1995:7).

It is important to note that the environmental movement cannot be fully understood outside its differences and linkages with the state in Africa, or even its own internal contradictions. What is critical, then, is to understand how environmental movements act as a transformative force in the relationship between society and nature. In an attempt to theorize about the nature of envi-

ronmental movements, Salih (1999:8) identifies two broad categories of environmental actors: the urban-based and the rural-based. While the former are identified as including the state, NGOs, indigenous peoples, women, youth and others, the latter are identified as those “who rely on traditional institutions of collective action and community responsibility and on the use of counter violence vis-à-vis state violence”. Salih’s typology of environmental actors is not without its problems, mainly because it is no longer feasible to draw a clear line between the rural and the urban in Africa, and it does not take heed of actors who straddle both rural and urban Africa, or even external actors who sometimes play decisive roles in the African environment (Obi 2001b:176–180). Clearly, these movements have overlapping objectives for dealing with problems across urban-rural spheres. In spite of these conceptual problems, Salih (1999) enables us to grasp the social constituents and origins of environmental movements in Africa. In this regard, he notes that environmental movements emerge “either as a reaction to development intervention by capitalism, grievances emanating from a subdued state and civil society relations or political discontent engendered by those excluded from access to power, the state apparatus and institutions” (p. 8).

These movements target the state because it is linked to the domination of the environment and the exclusion, alienation and impoverishment of those that are denied access to environmental resources. This defines the broadly emancipatory, pro-democracy, or liberationist logic of environmental movements in Africa, making them a ready target for state repression and, paradoxically, for support from global environmental rights and conservation movements. It is this logic that also delineates the framework of political ecology that lays bare the relationship between people, society and ecology (or land-based resources) and goes to the heart of environmental conflict.²

From the foregoing, it is clear that environmental movements in sub-Saharan Africa emerge from, and draw their legitimacy from, their immersion in social struggles directed at accessing power over the environmental space for hitherto expropriated and repressed groups. In this regard, they come up against local (state) and global hegemonic forces that exert power over scarce and shrinking environmental resources in a rapidly globalized world. In drawing upon the cases of MOSOP in Nigeria, and the GBM in Kenya, two issues come out in sharp relief: the intersections of ecology, ethnicity and gender, as well as the ways most environmental movements in Africa organize and empower local protests and claims by drawing on international support in the face of state repression and the further commodification of environmental resources by the forces of globalized capital.

Case Studies of Environmental Movements

The Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People

The case of Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People, which, in the 1990s, waged an international and local campaign for environmental and minority rights against the Shell Petroleum Development Company and the Nigerian state, illustrates the difficulties that confront environmental movements as they seek effective participation in the control and management of the African environment. It also shows how the deterioration of social and environmental conditions in Nigeria’s oil-rich, but impoverished, Niger Delta region dialectically produced one of Africa’s well-known environmental movements. In more ways than one, despite the reverses that MOSOP suffered in the mid-1990s, it has served as a watershed for other environmental movements, such as the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC) and the Chikoko Movement (CM), which emerged from the Niger Delta and continue to contest the domination of the environment by the Nigerian state and its partners, the oil multinationals.

² Blaikie and Brookfield 1987; Harper 1996; Obi 1999, 2000b, 2001b.

The origins of MOSOP lie in the culture and the struggle for self-determination of the Ogoni. More relevant, perhaps, was their strategic location in the geography and political ecology of petroleum. In a succinct analysis of the MOSOP campaign, Carr et al. (2001:150) assert that:

The grievances of the Ogoni people, like those of other communities in the Niger Delta, are long-standing, dating back to the British colonial era. They centre on the environmental damage done to their region by oil exploration and exploitation, their rights to a fair share of the oil revenue, and their oppression as a minority ethnic group by Nigeria's ethnic majorities.

The foregoing shows that MOSOP was launched on the popular foundations of political and ecological grievances, and sought to win back for the Ogoni the political control (power) over their (oil-rich) environment. It is instructive, therefore, when Douglas and Ola (1999:334) rightly argue that MOSOP expanded the scope of the struggle beyond minority rights and self-determination for indigenous people to include opposition to ecological devastation. In order to place MOSOP in critical perspective, it is apposite to examine the background of the Ogoni people.

The Ogoni people

The Ogoni are found on the plains of the Niger Delta, east of Port Harcourt, the capital city of the Rivers state. With a population estimated at approximately 500,000 occupying an area of 404 square miles, the Ogoni are an ethnic minority group in a region of many (and mostly larger) ethnic minority groups. One of the last groups to be subdued by the forces of British colonialism in the Niger Delta, the Ogoni have long nurtured the quest for self-determination. In 1908 they protested against inclusion in the Opobo division and by 1947 were granted their own Ogoni Native Authority under the then Rivers Province. In the late 1950s they were a part of the struggle for a state for the minorities, which was only realized seven years after independence in 1967, when the Rivers State (an administrative region in the Nigerian federation) was created.

The Ogoni were integrated into the political economy of oil when oil was struck in commercial quantities in the Bomu oilfield (in the village of K-Dere) in 1958. This resulted in opening up Ogoni lands to further exploration and exploitation in the oil fields of Bomu, Bodo West, Tai, Korokoro, Yorla, Lubara Creek and Afam (Saro-Wiwa 1995; CLO 1996). All of these concessions were owned by Shell (Saro-Wiwa 1995:67). The intensive exploitation of oil in Ogoni territory further aggravated the pressures on the land in one of the most densely populated parts of Nigeria. Naanen (1995) aptly points out that the Ogoni represent the paradox of capitalist accumulation as the poorest, and yet the most industrialized, enclave in Nigeria. This was borne out by the concentration of six oil fields, two oil refineries, a huge fertilizer plant, petrochemical plants and an ocean port within the small space of Ogoni land (Obi 2000b:287-288). According to MOSOP estimates, about \$30 billion worth of oil was extracted from Ogoni lands within 30 years, while the Ogoni contributed as much as five per cent of Nigeria's total oil production in 1973, "with nothing to show for it" except poverty, unemployment, pollution and misery. There were also strong feelings among members of MOSOP that they were being denied their rights to oil by a federal government dominated by the big (three) ethnic groups in Nigeria because the Ogoni were ethnic minorities. It was these feelings of alienation and anger, and the quest to give voice to Ogoni aspirations for self-determination and the control of their environment, which gave birth to MOSOP during 1990 and 1991.

During the Nigerian civil war between 1967 and 1970, most Ogoni cast their lots with the federal side. This was because they wanted to defeat secessionist Biafran claims to the oil fields of the Niger Delta, and also because they hoped that with a regional state of their own (the Rivers State) and direct access to oil within their territory, they would realize their dream of self-determination. These expectations turned out to be misplaced when, during the war, the federal military government, through legislation,³ transferred the control of oil revenues to itself. Worse still, the ecological damage of oil production had begun to manifest itself on Ogoni

³ Decree No. 15 of 1967; Offshore Oil Revenue Decree No. 9 of 1971; and Decree No. 6 of 1975. See Obi 2001a:30.

land following an oil blowout on 19 July 1970. According to a letter written by Sam Badilo Bako and reproduced by Ken Saro-Wiwa (1992:57–64):

[A]n ocean of crude oil had emerged, moving swiftly like a great river in flood, successfully swallowing up anything that comes its way. These include cassava farms, yams, palms, streams, animals...for miles on end. There is no pipeborne water and yet the streams, the only source of drinking water [are] coated with oil (p. 58).

In spite of similar letters written to Shell, British Petroleum (BP) and the state government by various groups on Ogoni land, little was done to ameliorate the impact of the ecological disaster that struck during the harvest period. Compensation for crops destroyed was not adequate and the cleanup of the spilled oil was not comprehensively addressed (Robinson 1996:32–46). Thus, the Ogoni were further marginalized, both in relation to the highly centralized Nigerian federation after the war, and with regard to the control of their land, which was now exposed to oil exploitation, pollution and environmental degradation. Apart from losing out in terms of the allocation of oil revenues to the states of the federation, the Ogoni were to be adversely affected by the Land Use Decree of 1978. According to a report by the Constitutional Rights Project (CRP 1999:2): “Nowhere else in Nigeria has the impact of the Land Use Decree manifested, in all its imperfections and inequities, as in the Niger Delta region, Nigeria’s main oil producing region.”

The Land Use Decree (later Act) vested all land in each state of the federation solely in the governor of the state (who, during military rule, was appointed by the federal government). According to the Constitutional Rights Project (CRP) report, the decree (section 28.2) provided that the right of occupancy could be revoked in the public interest, which includes, “the requirement of land for mining purposes or oil pipelines or for any purpose connected therewith” (CRP 1999:3). This brought to a head the alienation of the Ogoni people from their land. In an area of fragile ecosystems, mangrove swamps and relatively scarce land, the power to grant oil concessions rested with the federal government and officials far away in the federal capital. The concessions were given without consulting the local inhabitants, whose lives were tied to the land. Worse still, they were forced to give up their farmlands, fishing grounds and ancestral shrines to create a right of way for the pipelines of the oil industry that offered no real employment to the locals who had little or no skills to sell to the capital-intensive and powerful oil multinationals (Obi 2001a). The situation was further aggravated by the fact that those directly dispossessed ended up with little or no compensation.

With Nigeria being under military rule at the time of the Land Use Decree, and the collapse of the democratic experiment of the Second Republic (1979–1983) after barely four years, the Ogoni were largely unable to have their complaints heard or addressed. Thus, they suffered the consequences of their political powerlessness and the domination of their lands by the partnership of the federal government and Shell, which excluded them from direct access to oil revenues, while they bore the full environmental impact of oil production. This was the case right up to the outbreak of Nigeria’s economic and external debt crisis in the early 1980s and the military coup that brought the regime of General Ibrahim Babangida to power in 1985.

MOSOP: Power and conflict

It was in order to push through a social project for the renegotiation of power relations in the oil-rich Niger Delta that MOSOP was born. It sought to contest and block further exploitation, pollution and marginalization of Ogoni oil-rich lands and the Ogoni people by the state-oil business alliance, and to assert Ogoni rights to claim and control their own resources. Essentially, the Ogoni struggle was one of identity in order to claim power over land. Its eruption as an environmental movement no doubt found an enabling atmosphere in the pro-rights, post-Cold War world. It was in this context that MOSOP “globalized” its struggles in the Niger Delta. As Carr et al. (2001) assert, MOSOP adopted a high-risk confrontational strategy against Nigeria’s military federal government and deliberately targeted Shell, the country’s largest and most visible onshore joint venture agreement operator. MOSOP also tapped into global discourses on the environment,

indigenous peoples and human rights to empower its local claims and protests, and put international pressure on Shell and the Nigerian state to respect the rights of the Ogoni to control their environmental space (and land).

MOSOP's "high risk" strategy was predicated upon the mobilization of social power to block the extraction of oil from under its land until its complaints were addressed. This was because of the strategic importance of oil as the provider of over 80 per cent of Nigeria's national revenue and over 90 per cent of export earnings. At a time of economic crisis when the need for revenue and foreign exchange was high, resulting in increased pressure on the Niger in the search for more oil, MOSOP's blocking power was bound to catch the attention of the government. But first the Ogoni issued a list of demands to government through the Ogoni Bill of Rights (OBR) (See Obi 2001a:121-123) on 2 October 1990. The OBR demanded, among other things, political autonomy, including political control of Ogoni affairs by the Ogoni people, the right to control Ogoni resources for Ogoni development and the right to protect the Ogoni environment and ecology from further degradation. The OBR was debated at all levels of Ogoni society in the local dialects and was adopted and signed after massive grassroots mobilization by traditional Ogoni rulers and leaders. After waiting for roughly a year for a response from the government, an addendum to the OBR was sent by MOSOP to the federal government of Nigeria on 26 August 1991, after another round of broad social mobilization, consultation and adoption (Obi 2001a:124-125). The addendum went beyond the OBR and included criticism of the 1979 and 1989 Nigerian Constitutions for legitimizing the expropriation of Ogoni rights and resources because they were a minority ethnic group. The addendum also sought restitution for the harm done to the health of the Ogoni people by the flaring of gas, oil spillages, oil blowouts and related problems caused by Shell, Chevron and their Nigerian accomplices. Again, MOSOP received no real response from the Nigerian state or the oil companies, which continued with business as usual. It was at this point that MOSOP internationalized its local struggle.

As argued elsewhere (Obi 2001b:184):

The insertion of the Ogoni resistance into the global rights agenda, its success in waging one of the most sophisticated environmental rights struggles in the 1990s, was predicated not merely on the co-optation of the global rights discourse on the universalization of human rights and freedom, but also on a solid project of local popular empowerment and mass mobilization, under a conscious leadership.

The story of how MOSOP was formed has been told elsewhere and will not be detailed here,⁴ but it will suffice to point out that MOSOP was an umbrella body of the Ogoni affiliate organizations. As Barikor-Wiwa (1997:4) notes, these included the Federation of Women's Associations (FOWA), the National Youth Council of Ogoni People (NYCOP), the Council of Ogoni Churches (COC), the Council of Ogoni Professionals (COP), the Council of Ogoni Traditional Rulers Association (COTRA), the National Union of Ogoni Students (NUOS), the Ogoni Students' Union (OSU), the Ogoni Teachers Union (OTU) and the Ogoni Central Union (OCU). MOSOP gained legitimacy through its mobilization of popular forces using indigenous idioms of solidarity, unity and victory, and provided them for the first time with "a credible platform to voice their grievances and exercise power" (Obi 2001a:76).

In 1992, MOSOP contacted the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) based in the Netherlands and began networking with NGOs from other parts of the world. In the same year, it presented the Ogoni case before a global assembly, the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations, painting a picture of the Ogoni as an indigenous people suffering discrimination, expropriation and imminent genocide as a result of the wanton destruction of the environmental basis of their existence by the oil industry and the repressive Nigerian military government (Obi 2001a, 2001b).

⁴ Saro-Wiwa 1995; Obi 2001a; CLO 1996.

MOSOP's strategies for linking global arenas lay essentially in shocking its audiences and winning sympathy and support by showing the extent of ecological devastation, repression and abuse of rights by the alliance of the Nigerian state and Shell. It accomplished this by using the news media, public lectures, publications, documentaries, the Internet, personal contacts, letters and the lobbying of pressure groups, politicians, parliaments and foreign governments. As noted elsewhere (Obi 2001b:185):

MOSOP's 'complaints' were well packaged for the global audience, through networking with human and environmental rights INGOs [international non-governmental organizations] such as Amnesty International, FIAN International, Human Rights Watch Africa, Article 19, Inter-Rights, the Body Shop, Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth and others.

On 4 January 1993, MOSOP successfully organized a peaceful rally against the state-oil alliance in which over 300,000 Ogoni people participated as part of the celebration of the UN's International Year of the World's Indigenous People. The success of the rally underscored the strength of MOSOP as an environmental movement contesting the power of the state-oil alliance over its oil-rich land.

In the months that followed, conflict ensued between MOSOP, as a local force of resistance, and the state-oil alliance, which wanted to continue the process of oil-based capitalist accumulation. On 30 April 1993, Ogoni villagers, protesting damage to their farms by Willbros—an American oil service company working on behalf of Shell—were fired upon by soldiers. Many were wounded, and one man was killed.

In June 1993, Ken Saro-Wiwa, the spokesperson for MOSOP, was arrested and detained by security forces. At the same time, the leadership of MOSOP was immersed in a struggle between moderate and radical elements. The Ogoni territory was militarized by the state, leading to repression, intimidation and a climate of fear. The tactics of the security forces included beatings, detention of activists and MOSOP supporters, shootings, burning of houses, rape and even murder. Misunderstandings between the Ogoni and their neighbours were exploited and manipulated to punish the Ogoni. In the conflicts between the Ogoni and the Andoni, and later the Okrika, many Ogoni lost their lives in what was in some quarters considered to be covert military operations by the Nigerian military.

Similarly, cracks within the leadership of MOSOP were exploited by the state-oil alliance to divide and weaken the environmental movement of resistance. It was during one such instance of crisis with MOSOP that four moderate chiefs suspected of being "sellouts" were murdered by a mob on 24 May 1994. Ken Saro-Wiwa and nine other MOSOP leaders were arrested and charged for inciting the murder of the chiefs. On 10 November 1995, in spite of worldwide pleas following a trial that was considered to fall short of the conditions of judicial fairness, Saro-Wiwa and eight other Ogoni leaders were hanged in Port Harcourt prison. Following the hangings, waves of repression were unleashed against the Ogoni, while numerous activists were detained or forced underground, or escaped into exile. Ogoni refugees were found in neighbouring countries and dispersed across Europe and North America.

There is no doubt that after the literal beheading of MOSOP in 1995 and the repression that followed, the environmental movement of the Ogoni was seriously weakened and went into retreat. Since the return of Nigeria to democratic rule in 1999, MOSOP has been trying to overcome divisions and rebuild itself. Shell withdrew from Ogoniland in 1993 as a result of popular pressure, and has yet to return. There are also official signals that may be interpreted as an admission that the Ogoni were short-changed. In this regard, a development commission has been established for the Niger Delta, while federal revenue allocations to oil-producing states have been raised from five to 13 per cent on the basis of the principle of derivation (Obi 2002). It is also important to note that a Federal Ministry of Environment has been established, while the

Department of Petroleum Resources, the monitoring arm of the Ministry of Petroleum Resources, has been granted autonomy.

In spite of the foregoing, the power relations between the state-oil alliance and the Ogoni, which are skewed against the latter, remain unchanged. If anything, MOSOP has been considerably weakened (Azuatalam 1999). However, the forces at the grassroots of Ogoni society remain deeply committed to the ideals of Ogoni resistance, for which leaders like the charismatic Saro-Wiwa lived and died.

The Green Belt Movement

Historical and background issues

The Kenya Green Belt Movement represents yet another notable case of a popular ecological challenge to authoritarianism, corruption and the monopolization of resources in sub-Saharan Africa. It has gained worldwide acclaim, especially for its role in the economic empowerment of women, the conservation of forest resources, environmental education, and more recently, a sustained struggle against the abuse of human rights and the private expropriation of public lands in Kenya by the state and ruling party officials and their business associates, local and foreign. The Kenyan Green Belt environmental movement has confronted existing hegemonies in Kenya, particularly as they affect the ownership, control and use of land – the very basis of survival and reproduction of the peasantry and the urban poor. By the same logic, its programme of empowering women through tree planting and mobilization for environmental management directly challenges dominant patriarchal relations and the marginalization of women in ways that have denied them control over environmental resources.

Thus, the GBM is deeply immersed in the contestations over control of the environment. At the core of the struggle is the resistance of the peasants, urban poor and popular class, including grassroots people such as the unemployed, petty traders, squatters and low-paid workers, to the threat posed to their livelihoods and food security by the increasing expropriation of public lands by the state for private use. In real terms, the struggle is one for the democratization of power over land in order to guarantee equal access and the rewards of sustainable development to all of the citizens of Kenya.

The GBM was founded in Kenya in 1977 by Wangari Maathai, a professor of Veterinary Anatomy. It grew out of a programme of the National Council of Women of Kenya, Envirocare, and rapidly developed into a grassroots women's movement for the sustainable management of the environment and the economic empowerment of women (cited in Dankelman and Davidson 1988:147–148). It was able to draw linkages between environmental degradation, the marginalization of women and poverty, and the need to approach development from the grassroots upward by empowering women to directly intervene in, and control, the environment. Such intervention was primarily targeted at ensuring the conservation and sustainable management of environmental resources, but even more fundamentally, to ensure that women had independent sources of income, and could effectively claim control over the environment.

In the words of the founder of the movement, Wangari Maathai (1995:1): "The Green Belt Movement is a national indigenous and grassroots organization whose activities are implemented mostly by women. Its mandate is environmental and the main activity is to plant trees and prioritize the felt needs of communities."

It can thus be gleaned that the movement intended to promote the control of Kenya's environment through planting trees or reforestation. It is reported that to date, about 20 million trees have been planted through GBM efforts, and this project has come a long way in empowering poor women by guaranteeing them a steady source of income through the planting of trees (GBM paid them for planted trees that survived), and by simultaneously providing for a sustainable supply of food and domestic energy (fuelwood) through reforestation.

The GBM thus assumed a potent gender perspective that linked up with the ecological basis of survival and development. According to the Web site of the Right Livelihood Award:

The Green Belt Movement grew very fast. By the early 1980s there were estimated to be 600 tree nurseries involving 2,000–3,000 women. About 2,000 public green belts with about a thousand seedlings each had been established and over half a million school children were involved. Some 15,000 farmers had planted woodlots on their own farms.⁵

Apart from reports that women had planted over 20 million trees in Kenya, the success story of the GBM led to the establishment of a Pan African Green Belt Network with its membership drawn from six African countries. Thus, the Kenya GBM gave voice to hitherto marginalized women who had been systematically denied access to, and control over, environmental resources. Of particular note was the issue of land, which, though central to the survival of women and the urban grassroots, was also critical to the reproduction of capitalism and to networks of political patronage in Kenya.

The principal programmes of the GBM, which underscore its popular intervention in the political ecology of Kenya, include:

- food security;
- Pan African training workshops;
- advocacy;
- Green Belt safaris;
- peace trees;
- the Earth Charter;
- civic education; and
- business networks.⁶

It is apposite at this juncture to place the importance of land in Kenya in historical perspective. As in other parts of sub-Saharan Africa, one of the bases for the integration of the colonies into the international capitalist economy was the commodification of African lands and their outright expropriation through the instrumentality of the colonial state. In this manner, prized land was expropriated outright and placed under the control of colonial administrators and then given to white settlers or to companies affiliated with the colonial power. This forcible seizure of African land and the subsequent dispossession of the Africans, reducing them to migrants, squatters and even victims of extinction, symbolized the loss of power by Africans over their land and livelihoods. In spiritual terms, because of the strong link in most African traditional religions between the people, their lives and the land, the loss of land to the colonizers was particularly devastating. Indeed, this loss was tantamount to powerlessness and defeat. Land was a symbol and a store of wealth as well as a source of food, medicine, raw materials and energy. It was the resting place of the ancestors. Throughout the continent the loss of land was equated with the loss of sovereignty. Logically, the politics of nationalist resistance had the recapture and control of land as a central unifying theme.

The history of the land question in Kenya has been adequately addressed and will not be treated in detail here.⁷ What is important here is that in the context of the struggle for Kenya's independence, the alienation of the best agricultural lands by white settlers and the marginalization of the original Kenyan land owners formed the basis for Mau Mau resistance and conflict with the colo-

⁵ www.rightlivelihood.se/recipe/maathai.htm, accessed in December 2003.

⁶ www.geocities.com/gbm0001, accessed in December 2003.

⁷ Kanogo 1987; Sorrenson 1967; Klopp 2000.

nial authorities in the 1950s. What is also critical is the observation by Klopp (2000:6), citing Ship-ton, that "land is an important idiom for establishing and challenging power relations". It is there-fore logical that the activities of the GBM and its broad grassroots base framed its complaints and demands as a challenge to existing power relations in Kenya, particularly domination over the environment by the ruling party, the Kenya African National Union (KANU). KANU had been in power since independence in 1963, and only allowed multipartyism in the 1990s following inter-nal demands and external pressures. Operating within a context of economic crisis and market-based economic reforms that reduced government revenues and expenditures, the ruling class, in effect, turned against the environment, particularly through expansion of the allocation of public lands to wealthy individuals, office holders and corporate interests as a patronage tool. It is this drive by the ruling elite to further reduce the environmental space to which women and others had access, feeding a cycle of repression, resistance and conflict, which is being resisted and blocked by the Green Belt Movement.

Power and conflict

The GBM, with its emphasis on the centrality of women to the control of the environment in Kenya, engaged the state of Kenya in a struggle for power underlined by conflict. Its tree plant-ing and environmental management campaigns created jobs and provided incomes, food security and a means of livelihood to millions of Kenyan women, youth and children. It is thus hardly surprising that in terms of its political ecology it clashed with hegemonic interests in Kenya. As Maathai (1995:11) put it in a critique of dictatorship and its monopolization of en-vironmental resources:

The traditional acquisition of absolute power and control of national re-sources by the 'winner' is a major motivation for dictatorship in Africa. Those who 'win', even with a minority vote, inherit all the land and its wealth ...literally! And therefore make all effort to retain that power, the privileges and trappings that go with it.

She further links dictatorship to the exclusion of citizens from access to resources, the violation of rights and environmental degradation. Indeed, she shows how the movement is an ecological critique of the personalization of power in Kenya (Maathai 1995:7):

In many African states, including the one I know best, Kenya, citizens have become prisoners within their own borders. They are denied freedom of speech, movement, assembly and association. ... All these resources are utilized as if they are the personal property of the Heads of state and their appointees.

It is thus clear that the GBM, in order to achieve its objectives, has clearly adopted a political approach, both as a critique of hegemonic power and as a platform for claiming alternate power. It is therefore not surprising that the GBM has framed its struggles within the context of opposition politics in Kenya. This explains why the movement has not only criticized the gov-ernment/party in power, but has been the target of state repression, intimidation and attack. Its response has been to mobilize popular power to block attempts by government to divert public lands to private use, and to mobilize international support for its course of action. Apart from receiving the support of rights groups including Amnesty International, the Gaia Foundation and the Sierra Club, the GBM has also been the recipient of international awards. Its leader has received such awards as the African Prize, the Goldman Prize, the 1984 Right Livelihood Award and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) Global 500 Award. GBM has also received diplomatic backing from some countries, and has even won the support of the United Nations Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, who has put pressure on the Kenyan government to respect human and citizen rights within a democratic framework.

Therefore, since the late 1980s, the movement has entered into the political sphere by way of the environmental sphere. As Maathai succinctly pointed out in an interview with the magazine of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, the *UNESCO Courier*: "If

you want to save the environment you should protect the people first, because human beings are part of biological diversity. And if we can't protect our species, what's the point in planting tree species?" (Anbarasan 1999:46).

In 1989, for instance, the GBM mobilized popular support to block an attempt by the government to build what would have been the tallest structure in Africa at the Uhuru Park in Nairobi. It organized a public campaign and demonstrations and lobbied donors, international investors and INGOs not to support the building of the structure in a public park⁸ (Ndegwa 1996). As a result of these pressures, the foreign investors withdrew from the project and it was cancelled. In October 1998, Wangari led a group of activists to replant trees at the Kurura forest reserve in plots that had been cleared after the government had parcelled them out to private developers to establish a luxury housing estate. It was alleged that the land was sold in order to raise funds for the ruling party for the forthcoming presidential elections. The 150 armed guards at the construction site at Kurura forest fled when confronted by the angry demonstrators, who damaged construction equipment and planted about 2,000 tree seedlings on the site. This was an act of resistance in which the replanting of trees symbolically meant the reclaiming of land by the people. When Maathai and her supporters followed this up the next year, in January 1999, with the planting of more tree seedlings and demonstrations in the Kurura forest reserve, they were attacked by about 200 security guards. Maathai, two opposition members of Parliament (MPs), two German environmentalists, some local and foreign journalists, and members of Maathai's group were so badly beaten that they had to be hospitalized.⁹ In February, riots broke out in Nairobi involving students protesting the transfer of parts of the Kurura forest to private developers. Although the attorney-general allegedly apologized for the action, the GBM has led other demonstrations against illegal land allocation that were violently broken up by the police as recently as 2000 (Klopp 2000; *The Independent on Sunday*, 2 February 1999). Of particular note are the campaign against the land-grabbing of parts of the Onturiri Forest on Mount Kenya and protests against the indiscriminate logging of trees in this forest, which was declared a World Heritage site by UNESCO in 1997. The initial point of GBM's intervention was a report from a delegation of people from the Nyayo Settlement Scheme (*Daily Nation* 2001). Maathai has also spoken out against the trend towards land grabbing and its links to corruption and the politics of patronage of the ruling party:

In the city of Nairobi for example, corruption has enabled the grabbing of open spaces which are essential aspects of a good urban environment and a good quality of life. In these open spaces are mushrooming huge villas, community centres, temples and sports complexes for exclusive members of communities who thrive because of corruption (Maathai 1995:15).

What follows from the foregoing is that the Green Belt Movement of Kenya, like MOSOP, underscores how the empowerment of local movements has helped draw attention to, and even, in some cases, partially block, the unbridled expropriation and deterioration of the African environment. Yet, it also reveals that the state remains a central actor in the control of relatively scarce environmental resources, acting in alliance with local political elites and foreign corporate interests to deny its people their rights and alienate them from resources that are critical to their survival and development. This clearly outlines the anatomy of conflict in Africa's contested environment. What is most critical, however, is how environmental movements, through their politics, are demonstrating the immense potential of alternative popular power for the sustainable management of the African environment.

It is also important to note that these movements, many of which are built around a charismatic or heroic leader, have some limitations, including institutional-organizational weaknesses and the factionalism that goes with this, as well as the general lack of transparency in the movements' decision making and management of resources. Apart from this, the movements still de-

⁸ S. Nasong'o, correspondence with author, June 2002.

⁹ See www.sigi.org/Alert, accessed in December 2003.

pend on foreign governments and donors to apply pressure on African governments, a trend that, however successful in the short run, constrains the effectiveness of these movements within their local/grassroots constituencies in the long run.

There is still a need today for these movements to reflect more on the issue of balancing the local needs of the people against the protection of forests for sustainable development. The issue of the threshold, or carrying capacity, of the land and the exigencies of the survival of the local peoples who live off the land, is one that environmental movements will need to pay more attention to when defining acceptable limits for local extraction and use of resources.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the ongoing deterioration of the world's social and environmental conditions since the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, or the Earth Summit, in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, particularly in the case of sub-Saharan Africa, implicates both the state and its adoption of neoliberal market reforms. These economic and political reforms have further alienated its citizens from the environment and have intensified the commodification, exploitation and degradation of nature. The result has been the massive transfer of Africa's renewable and non-renewable resources to the world market and eventually to the vaults of banks outside of Africa. The laws of the market, as defined by the Bretton Woods institutions, subordinate the environment to profitability and the extractive ethos of capitalist accumulation. This is at odds with the survival and livelihood concerns of millions of African people who depend directly upon the land and are caught up in this contest between extractive forces and those who resist them—a contest that lies at the heart of the ongoing struggle for the control of the African environment.

Concomitantly, African states, which have been increasingly weakened by popular pressures for democracy while engaging difficult market reform policies that have undermined the welfare of its citizens, have responded to the struggle for control of the environment in two ways. The state, while "retreating from the economy", has asserted more physical control over the environment in order to subordinate it to extractive and accumulative purposes. It has also opened up the environment to greater penetration and control by local political elites and foreign corporate interests that were expected to provide it with a share of the surplus accruing from extraction and the transformation of nature into a commodity. Thus, the state in Africa has increasingly reinforced its gatekeeper role of guaranteeing access to the local environment to international capital while repressing local opposition. At the same time, the local governing elite has opened up a new front in its accumulative drive by acting either in partnership with foreign capital, or, within its local political and economic networks, monopolizing environmental resources. The great attractions for this elite are mineral-rich and prime lands on the coast, in the mountains, forests and valleys, and land in capital or commercial cities. Similarly, they are also attracted to rich agricultural land. In most of the cities, land grabbing is impelled either by the desire to go into real estate development or to build luxury mansions that reflect the wealth and power of their owners.

From this it is clear why the African environment has become a context and site for some of the most intense struggles since the end of the Cold War, especially since these battles in Africa are fought in the physical environment, involve struggles over environmental resources and end up degrading the environment. In spite of international regimes (and donor rhetoric) that provide for the participation of hitherto excluded or marginalized groups in the management of environmental resources, and despite indications of respect for human rights, including those of minorities, African states continue to repress environmental movements that contest the exclusion of the majority from effective participation in the management and control of environmental resources.

Although there is evidence that environmental movements in sub-Saharan Africa are engaging the state and international groups in the quest for the popular control of the environment, their efforts are mostly local and confined within national borders. There is as yet only limited suc-

cess in cross-border networking among environmental movements in Africa. This is due to a host of historical and structural causes. These movements are confronted with considerable hostility from the state, as well as from the strategies of Big Business that simultaneously create and use some environmental NGOs to co-opt these movements and subvert them from within, while backing the state's repression of the same movements.¹⁰ Thus, environmental governance is a deeply conflictual issue across sub-Saharan Africa, reflecting the contradictions embedded in the environment, which in turn spawn struggles for control and hegemony.

The political ecology of conflict with regard to the ways that both MOSOP and the GBM have confronted the state in Nigeria and Kenya aptly show how the dialectics of social struggles reflect popular mobilization and participation in the management of the environment. Thus, with effective local mobilization and sustained international support, both organizations have been partially successful in using their blocking power to resist the further expropriation of their environmental space, while bringing their local causes into the centre of the struggle for democracy. Thus, in concrete terms, there is a groundswell of social mobilization in sub-Saharan Africa that challenges both the hegemonic state project and modes of global accumulation that dispossess the people and degrade the environment. It is from these grassroots movements, confronted daily by the might of the state and global capital, that an alternative social and democratic agenda that is environmentally sustainable and guarantees participation of the people in exercising power over Africa's ecosystems, will ultimately emerge.

¹⁰ This refers to the so-called NGOs that are funded by corporate interests in order to break the ranks of activist NGOs.

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