

# Commoners Against Climate Change

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*We demand that the world takes the example of Ecuador and join with one voice to demand the revolutionary step of keeping the oil in the ground in order to rescue the world from the destructive path mapped and propelled by the fossil fuel mode of civilization. This major move makes both moral and economic sense and every nation that takes it should be adequately compensated for the positive contribution.*

Nnimmo Bassey, Environmental Rights Action, Nigeria, 2007

There is a globally recognized need to drastically reduce greenhouse gas emissions by burning less oil. Coincident with this awareness are the calls for moratoria on oil and gas exploration and production. Beyond these calls are successful actions to block production and to leave the oil and gas in the ground. Since this program of halting emissions at the source both disempowers major petroleum corporations by denying them their product, oil, and reduces emissions from both deforestation associated with oil production and from the oil production process itself, it is a movement of world historical significance and demands close analysis and support.

This paper is presented in seven parts. Part one introduces the actors in general and summarizes our approach to the power of unwaged people and ‘commoners’ in the struggle against capital. Part two distinguishes our revolutionary eco-feminism from the liberal approach to the analysis of gender and climate change. This section of the paper further delineates aspects of the actually existing subsistence political economy from which much resistance to climate change arises and in which key elements of a post-oil, carbon-balanced society are located. Part three roots a fundamental power of the commoners in the international networks of the capitalist market which draw producers and consumers into one shared, global system thereby facilitating their efforts to mobilize resistance on a global scale.

Parts four and five turn to the analysis of the global ramifications of two actions undertaken by women in the Niger Delta and their allies in 1999 and 2002 aimed at stopping the destructive force of oil exploitation. Part six examines how coordinated direct action against the global warming

activities of Big Oil has proliferated worldwide via commoners' and indigenous peoples' struggles to enact moratoria to stop oil production. Part seven concludes with observations about the implications of oil moratoria including the ways that they impel the transition from exchange values underlying capitalism towards use values underlying the resurgent commons.

## **1. Introduction: Commoners vs. Capital**

This paper reviews global direct actions against climate change, oil and war, undertaken by the unwaged and, in particular by peasant women of the Niger Delta in gendered and ethnicized class alliances with men within their own communities and with women and men on a global scale.

Three features of these direct actions are given special attention.

First, unwaged peoples are identified as historic actors against global capital. This is significant because the actions of these social forces suggest that the 'way forward' towards a post-capitalist, post-climate change and post-oil world is not (only) about workers taking over factories, but instead about the much broader conception of commoners taking over the commons. [\[1\]](#)

Second, the actions that these commoners have taken, especially global, coordinated direct action to stop the production and consumption of oil, are effective challenges to corporate rule and suggest strategies for further action.

Third, peasant women commoners of the Niger Delta, like much of the poorest half of the world's population, already live in a largely non-oil age. The subsistence political economies within which 21<sup>st</sup> century commoners live provide actually existing low-oil, carbon-balanced alternatives to the capitalist political economy. When commoners (peasants, indigenous peoples, others) say "No!" to capitalist exploitation of oil, they already have a "Yes!" in mind, for they are acting against oil exploitation in order to defend their subsistence political economies which sustain them, the earth and the earth's climate.

The paper details Nigerian women's 'production-consumption strikes' of 1999 and 2002 to suggest ways in which these strikes have contributed to global movements for moratoria on oil production and the establishment of direct deals between oil producers and consumers. Ecuador's offer to leave discovered oil in the ground expands this pattern. These shifts within the energy sector are indicative of the general direction of a global transition from a capitalist political economy to a commoning political economy. The power of indigenous peoples and peasant women commoners in this transition derives in part from their already-established subsistence relations and practices. This fundamental power is augmented by their participation in the global organizations of major petroleum corporations by virtue of the fact that they live on oil-rich territory. For instance by shutting down oil production, Niger Delta peasants significantly impact the international capitalist energy system in multiple ways.

## **2. Gender and climate change**

We here briefly contrast two kinds of "women's global activism against climate change" in order to distinguish our perspective from the dominant 'gender analysis' of global warming. Perhaps the most prominent women's international initiative against climate change is the Germany-based group "gendercc - women for climate justice." The group is "an informal network which started at COP9 in Milan (2003) and was broadened during following UNFCCC Conferences. The network aims to

encourage gender mainstreaming in UNFCCC negotiations and national climate change debates, to strengthen effective participation of women's organisations and gender experts in climate change debates, to raise awareness and provide information related to gender and climate change, and to develop advocacy positions and opinions towards climate change policy" (<http://www.gendercc.net/>).

The network also lobbies for funding for gender analysis of climate change policies and climate mitigation strategies. Members of the network disagree on the approach to carbon trade, with members expressing "different views on whether to fundamentally oppose market based mechanisms, or whether to seek to use them and get more women involved in CDM [Clean Development Mechanisms] projects" (Rohr 2008).

The gendercc group, by seeking to work gender into 'mainstream' climate change policies, works fully within the blinkered framework of the capitalist climate change approach. In our perspective, there is no point in this 'add women and stir' approach because the 'pot' is already poisoned. That is, the mainstream policies, whether or not they "consider" women, are unworkable and exacerbate rather than mitigate climate change. Instead we seek direction about effective global activism against climate change by studying (and participating in) the actions of those indigenous and majority world women and their allies who offer a 'whole new recipe' in the shape of the defense and elaboration of actually existing subsistence political economies within which they live (Mies and Bennholt-Thompson).

The subsistence political economy defended and promoted, for instance, by Niger Delta commoners is echoed and elaborated in diverse and multitudinous ways across the world within indigenous peoples' movements, many of which are similarly facing off with oil companies and seeking the shut-down of oil production activities which are destroying the environment and their lives. And, like the Niger Delta women who in 1999 launched their "Gift to Humanity" campaign to shut down Nigerian gas flares, many indigenous peoples' anti-oil struggles make universalist claims for the protection and defense not only of their own communities, livelihoods and cultures, but of all of planetary life.

According to Vandana Shiva, village commoning in India has long provided non-oil sources of fuel. "The ecological biodiverse farm is not just a source of food; it is a source of energy. Energy for cooking the food comes from the inedible biomass like cow dung cakes, stalks of millets and pulses, agro-forestry species on village wood lots. Managed sustainably, village commons have been a source of decentralized energy for centuries."

Further, she states that "ecological, organic agriculture reduces emissions both by reducing dependence on fossil fuels, chemical fertilizers and intensive feed, as well as absorbing more carbon in the soil. Our studies show an increase of carbon sequestration of up to 200% in biodiverse organic systems.

"When "ecological and organic" is combined with "direct and local", emissions are further reduced by reducing energy use for "food miles," packaging and refrigeration of food. And local food systems will reduce the pressure to expand agriculture in the rainforests of Brazil and Indonesia. We could, with a timely transition reduce emissions, increase food security and food quality and improve the resilience of rural communities to deal with the impact of climate change. The transition from the industrial globalised food system being imposed by WTO, the World Bank and Global Agribusinesses to ecological and local food systems is both a mitigation and adaption strategy. It protects the poor and it protects the planet. The post-Kyoto framework must include ecological agriculture as a climate solution" (Shiva, 13 December 2007).

The People's Protocol on Climate Change recognizes that "there are large parts of humanity who are more dependent for their survival on their access to and use of natural resources, as well as on the state of the climate and the natural environment. We then stress that the specific needs of farming

communities, indigenous peoples, coastal communities, fisherfolk, and other marginalized, poor and rural producers need to be given special attention in all adaptation efforts” (People’s Protocol, 10 December 2007). [2].

Inuk climate activist Sheila Watts-Cloutier, in her brief on climate change and human rights, observed that “As the Inter-American Court of Human Rights has noted, ‘the close ties of indigenous people with the land must be recognized and understood as the fundamental basis of their cultures, their spiritual life, their integrity, and their economic survival’” (Watts-Cloutier 2005).

These many testimonies underline the reality that women among peasants and indigenous communities are most closely connected through livelihoods to the natural world and are therefore most directly impacted by climate change and are prone to standing up against it. In this way, our ‘subsistence perspective’ valorizes commoning and conceptualizes it as the only way forward for planetary survival. This can be sharply distinguished from the gender mainstreaming approach of “gendercc - women for climate justice” and other similar groups which are situated - conceptually and in terms of the actions they advocate - within the corporate camp.

Our subsistence perspective is grounded in a marxist critique of capital, featuring a recognition of the “global net” of capitalism within which the world’s peoples are now entangled. We turn now to a brief exegesis on how capital itself “organizes, unites and disciplines” the exploited to resist and to transform capitalist relations of exploitation.

### **3. “Disciplined, united, organized by the very mechanism of the process of capitalist production”**

CLR James centralized the orthodox marxist perspective that “the working class is united, it is disciplined and it is organized by the very mechanism of capitalist production itself; and the more progressive capitalist production is, the more it unites those who are destined to be its grave-diggers” (James 1960:53). [3]

In 1985 James drew attention to the objective, physical capacity of capitalist technology to unite people: “The means of communication, means of information today are such that it is impossible to believe that as time goes on it does not mean greater and greater communication between people, which means, ultimately, a democratic system of some sort.... I’m speaking in particular about the objective materials, physical means of living, means of communication, means of spreading information. That is going on every day. That’s what I look at and say the tendency towards a democratic relation between people is bound to follow. I believe that’s what Marx and Engels meant ... There is an absolutely remorseless movement towards democratic relations between people. That I learned early, and I’ve never seen anything to make me change it. Television, in my opinion, is one of the greatest strengths of democracy, because the people who are working for television think of the whole public; that is what they have to [do]” (James 1986:26,29). The communications revolution is central to the emergence of the new society.

James built his view of capital’s tendency to unite people out of Marx’s statement in Chapter 32 of *Capital*, Volume One:

*“One capitalist always kills many. Hand in hand with this centralization, or this expropriation of many capitalists by few, develop, on an ever-extending scale, the co-operative form of the labor-process, the conscious technical application of science, the methodical cultivation of the soil, the transformation of the instruments of labor into instruments of labor only usable in common, the economizing of all means of production by their use as means of production of combined, socialized*

*labor, the entanglement of all peoples in the net of the world-market, and with this, the international character of the capitalistic regime. Along with the constantly diminishing number of the magnates of capital, who usurp and monopolize all advantages of this process of transformation, grows the mass of misery, oppression, slavery, degradation, exploitation; but with this too grows the revolt of the working-class, a class always increasing in numbers, and disciplined, united, organized by the very mechanism of the process of capitalist production itself."*

This sentiment was echoed, from the other side of the class divide, by C.C. Pocock, the Chairman of Shell and Managing Director of Royal Dutch Shell Group, in a speech delivered to OPEC in Vienna in 1977. Pocock observed that "The complications involved today in supplying the right crude when and where it is required in an increasingly diverse, competitive market grow greater, not less. Buyers and sellers, producers and consumers are all locked into a worldwide kaleidoscope, in which the movement of one piece inevitably alters the position of all the others" (Pocock 1977).

#### **4. Nigerian Women's 'Gift to Humanity'**

In 1999, Nigerian women spearheaded an "Operation Climate Change" campaign to shut down gas flares in the Niger Delta. They dubbed their campaign a 'Gift to Humanity' in recognition of the contribution that they could make to reducing global warming emissions by stopping the flaring of natural gas in the Delta. Their shut-down was coordinated with activists' occupation of Shell headquarters in London. This collective, simultaneous global direct action signaled the potential for a much wider set of relations of solidarity in support of all life. These relations of solidarity are manifest, for instance, in the 2007 Ecuadorian moratorium on oil production, addressed below. The 1999 'Gift to Humanity' action also suggests tactics that, if adopted more generally today, promise to deliver success in the complex struggle to reverse climate change.

In Europe and elsewhere, Shell and other petroleum producers use valuable natural gas for electricity, petrochemicals or pressure maintenance in oil wells. In contrast, to save money, Shell and other oil companies in Nigeria flare or burn off most gas associated with the oil that is produced. In June 2005, the Port Harcourt organization, Environmental Rights Action stated that "More gas is flared in Nigeria than anywhere else in the world. Estimates are notoriously unreliable, but roughly 2.5 billion cubic feet of gas associated with crude oil is wasted in this way everyday. This is equal to 40% of all Africa's natural gas consumption in 2001, while the annual financial loss to Nigeria is about US \$2.5 billion. The flares have contributed more greenhouse gases than all of sub-Saharan Africa combined. And the flares contain a cocktail of toxins that affect the health and livelihood of local communities, exposing Niger Delta residents to an increased risk of premature deaths, child respiratory illnesses, asthma and cancer." [4]

Environmentalists in Nigeria, notably from among the Ogoni, Ijaw and other ethnic groups in the oil-rich Niger Delta; have persistently tried to douse these 'flames of sHELL.' On November 10, 1995 Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other environmental activists were hanged by Nigeria's military dictatorship in what was described by a UK Queen's Counsel as "an act of state-sponsored murder." Those executed were part of an indigenous movement, MOSOP (Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People). In this movement, Ogoni women were prominent. The movement's objective was to shut down the polluting operations of Shell. [5]

To protest Shell's gas flaring and complicity in the murder of Saro-Wiwa, Niger Delta women and their allies staged simultaneous actions in Nigeria and the UK. These actions featured shut-downs of Shell, on an international basis, on and after Ogoni Day, 4 January 1999. Ogoni Day has been celebrated since 1993 to mark the anniversary of the day the Ogoni people launched their struggle

against Shell and forced the oil company off their lands. While business-suited environmentalists occupied Shell's London headquarters, women and men in the Niger Delta closed down gas flares.

In London on 4 January 1999 thirteen activists from three human rights and environmental groups occupied Shell headquarters. They barricaded themselves in the Managing Directors' offices and broadcast the event to the outside world via digital cameras, lap-top computers and mobile phones. Six hours later, police cut off electricity, smashed down the wall and arrested the activists. Shell declined to press charges.

One participant stated that the London occupation aimed "to show real solidarity with people in the Niger Delta rebelling against Big Oil and its private security force (the Nigerian army). It was becoming increasingly easy for multi-national corporations to isolate struggles and resistance. The strength of linking together undermines their ability to do this. ...Oil companies, with their hideous environmental and social record, combine a series of struggles not only in the developing world but in the UK too." [