

Why Ken Saro-Wiwa matters for climate justice

Laurence Cox

As a social movements specialist I often find myself talking to nice, well-meaning students and professionals in the global North. Often they are (rightly) focussed on the terrifying reality of climate crisis and desperate to know what to do – but the strategies for change that are easy to find turn out to be very simplistic, shallow to the point of being trivial, and completely inadequate to the scale of the problem.

In particular, many of the forms of action they are presented with ignore the history of what has actually worked in ecological movements – in their own countries in previous decades, or around the world at the moment. We are offered solutions that suit us, whether or not they actually have any track record of winning against the huge concentrations of power and wealth, and the entrenched cultural and social habits, that underpin carbon capitalism.

When I can, I tell them some of the story of Ken Saro-Wiwa and MOSOP as a way of helping them start to think more seriously, in ways that might actually work. The Ogoni are one of the world's most disadvantaged populations – so rural and remote from the centres of power that even their exact numbers are uncertain – and yet they were able to effectively resist Shell, which on recent figures is the world's 18th largest economic entity, bigger than the economies of Mexico, Sweden or Russia, in times of a military dictatorship. That alone suggests that we should try to learn from them.

[We need to think more about movements](#)

We are used to researching problems and issues, and sometimes to digging into the structural reasons behind them – but for various reasons the journalists, teachers and charities who do this often find it much harder to discuss honestly how to tackle those problems – which is a “political” question. And so concerned citizens are brought to see the problems, but rarely get to learn from the experience of organising and mobilising strategies around these kinds of problems.

A major reason for this is that the climate crisis is “baked in” to a breakneck capitalism which depends on permanent growth and within which the industries that most contribute to global heating – fossil fuels, air and car transport, agribusiness and so on – are very powerful. It is one thing to discuss policy solutions that can conceivably be adopted by today's governments without upsetting those economic interests. It is another thing entirely to ask what it means if the survival of our societies depends on breaking the power of those industries and transforming the whole direction of state policies.

And so awareness is raised about problems, but the entrenched, systemic nature of those problems is rarely addressed – leaving the people whose awareness has been raised in a state of anxiety or despair, keen to find things that look like simple solutions, and ignorant of the long history of attempts to actually tackle these problems.

How words lose their meaning

“Climate justice” is just the latest round of attempts to name the shape of this problem. The phrase draws from “environmental justice” as an organising strategy – which emphasised the impossibility of tackling the root causes of ecological destruction without challenging the economic system that gives rise both to a ruined planet and to ruined lives and communities, and so highlighted the need to build strong alliances between ecological movements and popular struggles for social justice.

For exactly the same reasons, a problem on the scale of climate change requires these kinds of alliances in order to build an effective social majority – whether Saro-Wiwa’s mobilising of a desperately poor rural population to resist Shell, or in a very different kind of society the Norwegian “just transition” campaign, which brings environmentalists, trade unionists and church bodies together around the demand for climate jobs.

Yet already, in Ireland and much of the world, policy makers and NGOs have simply substituted the phrase for earlier wordings on global warming or climate campaigning, so that it means precisely no change to their activities. When I was a student *in another century*, the same thing was happening to the phrase “sustainable development”. This once meant “we have to think how we can bring together large-scale improvements in ordinary people’s lives around the world without relying on permanent economic growth”, but by that time it had become watered down to the point of meaning almost nothing, either in terms of the goal or of how to get there.

Earlier phrases with a similar meaning – such as “eco-socialism” or “red-green” – have proved less easy to absorb into business as usual, but regularly get forgotten and are rediscovered every decade or so.

This process of noticing, and then forgetting, has been going on at least since the 1970s. In that past fifty years, the inability of our societies to look this problem clearly in the eye, understand the systematic reasons why things keep getting worse, and to *learn* from past attempts to tackle them, has cost us all dearly. We have very little time left in which to indulge our desire to find easy solutions to difficult problems.

Why climate justice matters

Irish newspapers, and social media, are full of comments which pit the needs of “ordinary people” against the supposedly elitist concerns of environmentalists. Environmentalists who act in high-handed ways, allying themselves with the rich and powerful and blaming the poor for the problem, play right into this particular perception.

If climate crisis is an outcome of hugely damaging industries, in turn deeply entrenched within the policy process and states’ priorities, and ultimately expressing a capitalism which is determined to pursue infinite growth on a finite planet ... then the rich and powerful will not, and cannot, save us. It is by challenging their priorities and pushing for a radically different kind of economy – which in turn means huge changes in society, politics and culture – that we can hope to avert utter disaster.

But if we want to challenge the fossil fuel giants, the airline companies, the meat industry, the political parties and the financial institutions that are driving us towards destruction ... ecologists are going to need allies, from those who are neither powerful

nor rich. Without a mass movement, we are not going to win. And that movement (or rather alliance of movements) cannot be brought together without involving the needs of the poor and powerless for a more just world.

This is true both in terms of what is needed now to create the social majorities that are required to face down the determined opposition of those whose livelihoods, power and status depend on keeping the carbon show on the road – and in terms of what a new society might look like in the future. It is not credible that we could create a genuinely “sustainable” way of living – one that enables us to survive ecologically and that is socially and politically stable – unless it meets the needs of the large majority of people on this planet.

Perhaps by now it is clear why these sorts of considerations are not centre-stage in the strategies presented to school students, newspaper readers and NGO members.

It may also be clear why it is worth remembering Ken Saro-Wiwa.

What works?

Last summer I had a number of discussions with excited members of the Extinction Rebellion Group¹ who had just come into possession of “a little knowledge” – a misreading of research that suggested a magic number of protestors that would inevitably bring about social change. Almost none of them – thoughtful, educated people – had any idea that there was actually a *history* of struggles against climate change that could be learnt from.

The practical part of that history is above all one of indigenous resistance to the extraction and transport of fossil fuels, to drilling and pipelines. It is a history of some of the poorest and most oppressed people on the planet, managing to stand up to, and sometimes defeat, ruthless states and mega-corporations. In recent years this has been very visible in North America, as First Nations and Native Americans have mobilised again and again against tar sands projects, gas pipelines and so on. Images from Standing Rock or the Wet’suwet’en protests have gone round the world.

Saro-Wiwa’s effective struggle against Shell similarly mobilised the poorest of the poor against huge odds: an indigenous population against one of the world’s largest corporations, backed up by a military dictatorship that was willing to execute the movement’s leadership and unleash brutal terror against Ogoni villages. And it was broadly successful: Shell remain *persona non grata* in Ogoni to this day, while the dictatorship has fallen (in part also due to the Ogoni struggle).

If we think about ecological survival without any awareness of these stories, it is very tempting to think that if it was only possible to tone down the conflict, get policy-makers on board, get an issue into schools, convince journalists ... then it could all be solved. In that perspective, conflict is just a personality flaw, not in any way inherent in (say) how fossil fuel corporations make their money.

From this perspective, social justice – and alliances with movements of the poor and oppressed – are unnecessary and awkward add-ons to a simple environmental “message” that would slip down much more easily if only all its rough corners were rubbed off.

¹<https://extinctionrebellion.uk/>

But as we can see in Ogoniland, the real story is the opposite of this. In order to challenge Shell and the military dictatorship effectively, Saro-Wiwa had to mobilise the large majority of a desperately poor and downtrodden population. The 60% (never mind 3.5%) of Ogoni who are commonly said to have taken part in the 1993 protests, and the large majority of Ogoni who still identify with Saro-Wiwa's MOSOP, took a lot of convincing.

[A social majority for climate justice](#)

Their needs and concerns – economic justice and social development, indigenous self-determination and human rights – are not awkward add-ons to a simple environmental “message”. They are precisely the things that made it possible to mobilise effectively against one of the world's largest companies and a murderous, corrupt regime.

It is worth remembering that Saro-Wiwa was a key player in pushing the concept of “indigenous” onto the UN's agenda, as a way of furthering this struggle. When, today, Native Americans or First Nations resist the fossil fuel industry and the US or Canadian states as indigenous populations, they are drawing on this shared history.

If we want to bring together social majorities for a world we can all live in, we need to look to the Niger Delta and to Ken Saro-Wiwa, as well of course as to other indigenous struggles against fossil fuels around the world where we see small and massively disadvantaged populations, hugely vulnerable to state violence, face off against and often defeat the forces that are driving us all to destruction.

We also need to have the humility and the good faith to learn from people who are so far away from us – in their lives as well as geographically – that we need to go the extra mile in terms of finding out where and how we can listen to them. That means not being satisfied with the very first answers we find, but asking critical questions about whose experiences and movements those answers are actually based on – and reaching out towards learning from the struggles of the world's poor and powerless.

If we are able, at this eleventh hour of human civilisation, to mobilise social majorities for a world that we can all live in, we will need to pay more attention to Ken Saro-Wiwa.