Gold Medal to Shell: A mockery to Nigeria's peoples

Oil companies are worldwide known for the negative environmental impact they produce both at the local and the global levels. While in the places where oil prospection and exploitation is performed, environmental destruction and social disruption is the rule, at the global level the burning of fossil fuels is one of the main causes of global warming.

In this regard, Shell's performance at the Niger Delta, in Nigeria, constitutes a paradigmatic example. Since 1958, when the company arrived in the region, the Ogoni indigenous people, who are the traditional inhabitants of the delta, have been suffering environmental devastation, the loss of their livelihoods, as well as high unemployment and poverty rates. Threats, abuses, imprisonment and murder have been also frequent in order to break popular resistance. Ken Saro Wiwa, the Ogoni leader murdered in 1995, remains a symbol of this struggle. It has been estimated that about 80,000 people had their villages destroyed and about 2,000 were killed by the state armed corps, which act in collusion with the interests of the company. Shell has been declared by local communities persona non grata in the area. The 'Human Rights & Environmental Operations Information on the Royal Dutch/Shell Group of Companies, 1996-1997' states: "There are approximately 7,000 square km of mangroves in Rivers and Bayelsa States, which contain 349 drilling sites, 700 kilometres of flowlines, 22 flow stations, and one terminal. According to a European Community study, the waters of the Niger Delta contain levels of petroleum ranging from 8 ppm to 60 ppm. ...these levels are hazardous to both aquatic and human life."

To face increasing criticisms, Shell recently launched a campaign --"Profits and Principles. Is there a choice?"-- in influential Northern press media, trying to portray itself as environmentally sound and a defender of human rights (see http://www.wrm.org.uy/bulletin/40.html#Nigeria)

The campaign seems to have born fruit: Shell will receive next March the 2001 Gold Medal for International Corporate Environmental Achievement awarded by the World Environment Center (WEC). According to WEC's web site, this prize is annually awarded "to a major multinational corporation with an outstanding, creative, sustained and well-implemented global environmental policy . . . The Jury cited Shell for its commitment to sustainable development, both as a guiding principle for its worldwide operations and as a cornerstone of the company's management values".

If one looks at Shell's sad environmental and social record in Nigeria and other parts of the world such decision is impossible to understand. Nevertheless, considering who are involved in the WEC and which companies received the award in previous years, things become much more clear. In effect, according to its web site, "WEC continues to carry out its mission thanks to the generosity of its many funders". Many of the biggest oil, pulp and paper, biotechnology and chemical companies in the world are included as funders: British Petroleum, Occidental Petroleum, Exxon, Texaco, International Paper, Weyerhaeuser, Novartis, Monsanto, BASF, Dow Chemical, and, of course, the Royal Dutch Shell Group. In 1986 the precious Gold Medal was granted to Exxon, in 1989 to Dow Chemical, and in 2000 to International Paper!