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Political Opportunities and Local Grassroots Environmental Movements: The Case of Minamata*

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This paper examines the Minamata mercury victims' grassroots movement. Our analysis demonstrates the value of using a political opportunity framework to understand local grassroots environmental movement (LGEM) outcomes. We explain the variation over time in a LGEM's ability to achieve successful outcomes across different political environments. Specifically, we show that the success of the Minamata LGEM hinged on its ability to employ nontraditional and institutionally disruptive tactics during a period of expanded political opportunities.

The study of local grassroots environmental movements, especially in the U.S., has increased markedly in the last decade (see Bullard 1990; Cable and Benson 1993; Edelstein 1988; Edwards 1995; Gould, Schnaiberg and Weinberg 1996; Szasz 1994; Walsh, Warland, and Smith 1993).¹ This literature generally gives more attention to the internal dynamics of local grassroots movement organizations than to the larger political context in which these movements struggle (for an exception see Cable and Walsh 1991; Gould, Schnaiberg and Weinberg 1996). We employ a political opportunity framework in order to illustrate the important role the political environment plays in determining the fate of local grassroots environmental movements.

Under study here is a toxic waste crisis in an advanced capitalist society: the methyl mercury poisoning of Minamata, Japan. We demonstrate the variation over time in the Minamata local grassroots environmental movement's ability to influence relatively successful outcomes. Specifically, we show that the success of this movement hinged on its ability to employ non-traditional and institutionally disruptive tactics during a period of heightened political opportunity due, in large part, to the rise of a national anti-pollution social movement.

Review of the Political Opportunity Model

The political opportunity model of social movements focuses on groups with little formal political power. Research in this area asks a perplexing question: How do excluded social groups on occasion gain some level of bargaining power and concrete political influence,

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1. Several recent special journal editions focusing on environmental movements and environmental sociology indicate the growing interest in grassroots environmentalism. Examples include: *Social Problems* 40(1) 1993; *Qualitative Sociology* 16(3) 1993; *American Sociologist* 25(1) 1994; *Sociological Inquiry* 66(1) 1996; *Antipode* 26(2) 1996; *Sociological Perspectives* 39(2) 1996; and *Current Sociology* 45(3) 1997.

when they lack conventional political resources (i.e., money, social capital, and lobbying access within the polity)? Instead of looking at the internal life histories of social movements or the participants' psychological profiles as earlier social movement studies in the 1950s and 1960s did, political opportunity theory focuses on the availability of external resources and the political context in which a social movement operates. Thus, political opportunities are seen as dimensions of the political environment that act as incentives for people to engage in sustained collective action and attempt to exercise political leverage (Tarrow 1994).

Recent social movement research using a political opportunity model centers on the distinction between institutional and dynamic aspects of political opportunity structure (Cooper 1996; Gamson and Meyer 1996; Meyer 1993). The institutional components of political opportunity structure remain relatively stable over time and represent the cultural and procedural elements of local and national governments, such as their openness to reform or centralization of political power. Institutional variations in political opportunities are best analyzed using cross-sectional studies (e.g., Amenta and Zylan 1991; Eisinger 1973; Kitschelt 1986; Kriesi et al. 1995). The dynamic elements of political opportunity fluctuate over time; they are changes in opportunities affecting a specific movement's emergence, potency, and decline (Tarrow 1996). Dynamic variations in opportunities are best studied using temporal analysis (Cooper 1996; Costain 1992; Jenkins and Perrow 1977; Meyer and Minkoff 1997; C. Smith 1996). Our study uses a longitudinal design to examine the fluid nature of political opportunities in relation to a local grassroots environmental movement, focusing specifically on its ability to achieve successful outcomes across changing political environments.

Another concept of the political opportunity model germane to our study is *disruptive action* or the negative inducements applied to target groups via noninstitutionalized tactics. Popularized by Piven and Cloward's (1979) work on "poor people's" movements in the United States, disruptive action is seen as one of the few political resources outsiders to institutional power can use to exert influence (Lipsky 1968). McAdam (1982; 1983) demonstrated how strategic disruptive actions, such as sit-ins, jail-ins, freedom rides, and marches, played an important role in bringing about federal intervention in the passage and enforcement of civil rights laws.

In summary, a dynamic political opportunity model focuses on different stages of social movement activity through the lens of shifting political opportunities. Successful social movements are those that seize available political opportunities and strategically adopt disruptive tactics. We argue below that local grassroots movements follow an analogous path but at a more micro-level of political and social life.

Local Grassroots Environmental Movements (LGEMs)

There are three levels of collective action: (1) the local grassroots movement level; (2) the social movement level; and (3) a cycle of protest. We define a local grassroots environmental movement (LGEM) as a movement fighting a particular instance of pollution in a geographically specified region (Freudenberg and Steinspar 1992; Gordon and Jasper 1996). LGEMs have a limited range of goals that are tied to specific pollution problems. A social movement is a broader struggle (usually national) that involves a formal organization(s) or a federation of loosely affiliated networks (Jenkins 1983; Tarrow 1994). Social movements have a wide range of goals directed at fundamental social and political reform. Finally, a cycle of protest is a specific period of heightened protest involving several social movements spread across different geographical areas and sectors of society (Tarrow 1989; 1994). We believe that the identification of each level of movement activity is critical to understanding the political environment in which an LGEM operates. In this article, we show that the presence of a national environ-

mental social movement was crucial in creating a context of expanded political opportunity for the Minamata LGEM.

Recent social movement research notes the need to clarify the dimensions of political opportunity more precisely (Cooper 1996; Gamson and Meyer 1996; Meyer 1993). In our analysis of local grassroots movements we focus on two clusters of variables—external allies and elite instability—as central components of political opportunity. We derived these multifaceted dimensions of political opportunity from the literature on both social and grassroots environmental movements. *External allies* increase the power of the LGEM, while *elite instability* reduces the relative power of capital and the state. The change in these indicators of political opportunity over time shapes the amount of available political space (Meyer 1993) in which an LGEM may try to exercise influence.

Elite Instability

Elite instability involves the cohesiveness of the political and economic elite, as well as the elite's ability to direct or diffuse dissent into institutional channels that favor the established polity. Three types of elite instability germane to local grassroots movements are: (1) elections; (2) intra-governmental conflicts; and (3) symbolic government gestures signifying that the state is partially sympathetic to the grassroots movement's grievances.

Elections. Elections at the local, state, and national level force politicians to take a position on certain issues affecting their constituencies (Burstein, Einwohner and Hollander 1995). Politicians may behave opportunistically and use an issue of local toxic contamination to appeal for more votes within their jurisdiction. On the other hand, if political leaders believe LGEMs have the power to disrupt and use the media, they may offer concessions to the local grassroots movement in the heat of a political campaign. In Japan in the late 1960s, some of the nation's largest cities voted anti-pollution candidates into power which resulted in stringent local anti-pollution laws. Similar laws eventually "trickled up" and were enacted by the national government (Miyamoto 1991). In short, elections in capitalist states are a structural feature of the polity that at times threaten elite stability.

Intra-Governmental Conflict. Conflict among and within local, state, and federal government agencies can also create political conditions favoring grassroots movements. For grassroots anti-toxic movements this might involve government agencies sympathetic to issues of the environment and public health quarreling with agencies partisan to industrial capital. Agencies such as the Environmental Protection Agency (United States) and the Environment Agency (Japan) act as counterweights to state agencies such as the Department of Interior (United States) and the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (Japan) that have long had close ties to polluting industries (Broadbent 1989; Faber and O'Connor 1989).

When pro-environment agencies come into existence (usually after heightened social movement activity), they often validate victim complaints and confer general legitimacy on the environmental movement's objectives (Cable and Walsh 1991). In addition, sympathetic individuals within environmental state agencies may at times consciously leak confidential information that LGEMs exploit. At a later point, however, these same agencies often are used to co-opt successful grassroots movements (Piven and Cloward 1979). For example, government agencies with jurisdiction over a particular pollution problem may offer concessions in a manner that reduces the benefits to LGEMs provided by strategic disruptive action. In Japan, the Environment Agency offered LGEMs monetary compensation in the early 1970s, in part to dissuade them from taking their grievances to the streets.

Symbolic Government Gestures. A final type of elite instability, related to the first two, involves officials and state agencies rendering symbolic laws and pronouncements that

acknowledge a pollution problem exists. These can become “energizing events” for pollution victims (Cable and Cable 1995; Norris and Cable 1994). The event signals to grassroots movements that a new round of organizing may be efficacious because the state is potentially willing to listen to their demands. Symbolic government gestures are more likely to occur during periods of widespread social movement activity, or during election campaigns, when the state experiences loyalty and legitimacy problems (Jenkins and Brents 1989; Suchman 1995).

External Allies

External allies also shape the structure of political opportunity available to local grassroots environmental movements. External allies provide resource-poor local grassroots movements with finances, strategies and tactics, ideologies and collective action frames, legal and scientific consultation, as well as public exposure and participants for public demonstrations. These external allies can be classified into two categories: political allies and the mass media.

Political Allies. Political allies can include political parties, students, organized labor, intellectuals, scientists, the church, and other social movement organizations. Opposition political parties, especially in parliamentary states, can provide sizable financial and legal resources to isolated LGEMs (Castells 1983). Having representation within the polity, such parties can draw the state’s attention (e.g., secure hearings) to the LGEM’s plight (Brown and Mikkelsen 1990; Klandermans and Oegema 1987).

Other external allies include sympathetic groups, such as students, the church, organized labor, intellectuals, and scientists. Students play a pivotal role by providing bodies to occupy the front line in public demonstrations and confrontations with authorities. Some students have experience in disruptive protest, while others’ lifestyles make them available for action even on short notice. In addition, depending on the nature of the contamination and industry, organized labor can give LGEMs financial support as well as inside information on the polluting industry (Castells 1983; Krauss and Simcock 1980). With a high degree of solidarity between an LGEM and local labor, a polluting plant can be shut down by a sympathy strike. Intellectuals can donate their talents to LGEMs via published works or through other creative tasks that capture the attention of the larger public. Health, biology, and chemical scientists can assist LGEMs by gathering scientific evidence demonstrating the link between the polluter and the contaminated region (Brown and Mikkelsen 1990; Edelstein 1988).

Most importantly, national social movements can play a central role in an individual grassroots movement’s struggle. Environmental and other national social movements provide LGEMs with strategic advice and collective action frames (Capek 1993; Edwards 1995; Walsh 1981). Strategic advice can be direct or indirect. Direct advice comes when social movement activists and leaders correspond with individual LGEMs, sharing tactics, successes, failures, and reinforcing the definition of the situation as a just cause (Alley, Faupel and Bailey 1995; Almeida 1994; Cable and Walsh 1991; Capek 1993; Gardner and Greer 1996). In addition, when a particular social movement dominates the political arena, it can harness supporters from other movements with complementary interests (Cooper 1996). For example, C. Smith (1996) found that throughout the 1980s the Central American Peace Movement in the U.S. drew many of its allies from other liberal and left constituencies because President Reagan’s rhetoric and actions made Central America a prominent foreign policy issue of his administration. It is our contention that the presence of a national social movement greatly enhances an LGEM’s potential to garner external allies, both from within the national movement, as well as those around it—including the mass media.

Mass Media. The mass media are a powerful force for resource-poor LGEMs (Clarke 1991; Mazur 1991; Simcock 1979). Extensive media coverage acknowledges and gives testimony to toxic waste as a social problem (Szasz 1994). It transmits the plight of the LGEM to a vast pub-

lic, eliciting the attention of both potential supporters and the state. The presence of the mass media also encourages disruptive tactics, because they dramatize the situation and thus are more “newsworthy” (Kiebowicz and Scherer 1986). Moreover, “spectacle” has been theorized as the *zeitgeist* of the postmodern era (Harvey 1989). LGEMs that strategically halt traffic, disrupt government and corporate meetings, or keep polluting industries from routine operations through sit-ins or sympathetic labor strikes, will be more likely to draw the media’s attention.

Strategic Disruptive Action, Bargaining and Influence

A longitudinal analysis of political opportunities demonstrates that the power relations between an LGEM and its target can change. As political opportunities increase and an LGEM becomes better situated to act in a confrontational manner to pursue its interests, the relation between an LGEM and its target alters. From this perspective, political power is not an attribute of a group, but is relational (Burstein, Einwohner and Hollander 1995; Emerson 1962). Thus, we must ask what resources an LGEM and its target bring to the bargaining table. If LGEMs have nothing to offer their target in exchange for some concession, the target is unlikely to capitulate.

Targets such as state officials and company executives depend on their constituencies (e.g., the electorate, stockholders) and routine operations to function effectively from day to day. They also need to be perceived as conducting business consistent with social mores of “right” and “wrong,” so as to be recognized as legitimate in their own organizational fields, as well as the broader society (Armbuster 1998; Meyer and Rowan 1977; O’Connor 1973). If an LGEM can convincingly threaten or activate disruptive tactics that convey its plight to the target’s constituency, the targets will begin to feel pressure to negotiate with the LGEM (Broadbent 1989; Reich 1984).

The political context for disruptive actions matters, however. Disruptive protests are most effective in situations of expanded political opportunity. Conditions of high elite instability—contested elections, intra-governmental conflict, and the state’s acknowledgment of a pollution problem—offer an LGEM points to exert influence. When the power and/or legitimacy of the elites is under question, elites want to avoid giving an opposition party a potential issue or doing anything that might further alienate their constituents. Conversely, powerful, well-entrenched elites have little reason to oblige or accommodate an LGEM; they find it easier to apply repression to the group, channel the protest into routine conflict resolution procedures, or simply ignore the group (Tilly 1978). In addition, the presence of external allies provides an LGEM with resources (human, financial, and tactical) to conduct and sustain its actions, as well as the means (vocal public support and mass media exposure) to protect it from state apathy or repression. Thus, political opportunities expand an LGEM’s bargaining resources. Therefore, LGEMs that exercise disruptive tactics in a context of high political opportunities are more likely to sustain protest and receive concessions from their targets than LGEMs that use such tactics in a context of low political opportunities.

In the next section we apply this political opportunity framework to analyze the case of the Minamata LGEM. Figure 1 summarizes the key elements for the political opportunity structure of LGEMs, and illustrates the dynamics of our political opportunity framework.

The Case of Minamata

Post-World War II Japan embarked upon a period of rapid industrialization and modernization. Coastal communities marked by state and business planners for the establishment of industrial complexes (*konbinatos*) witnessed unprecedented economic growth. Between 1950 and 1970 dozens of *konbinatos* sprouted up along seaside towns with excellent shipping ports.

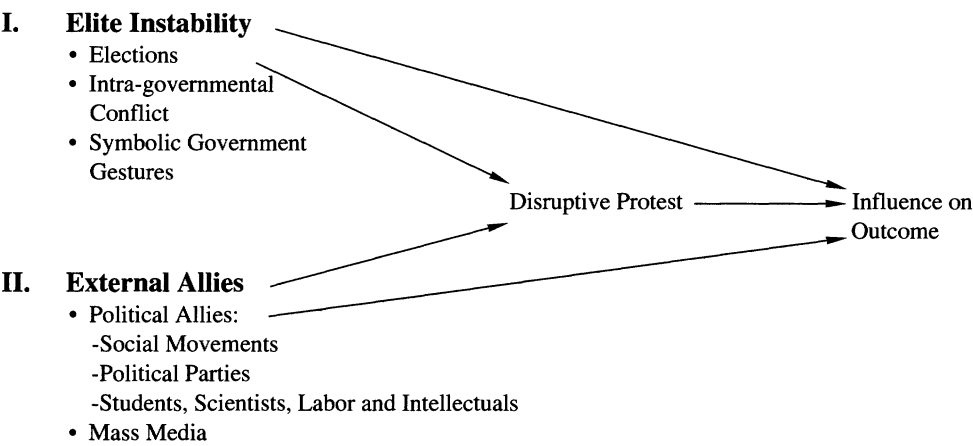


Figure 1 • Political Opportunities of LGEMs

Though not an industrial park city, Minamata housed one of Japan’s leading petrochemical manufacturers, Chisso Corporation. Located on the southern island of Kyushu, the community of Minamata was economically and politically dominated by the Chisso plant. The plant coexisted alongside small communities of fishing families who lived on the outskirts of the city and in neighboring seaside villages.

Chisso Corporation began operations in Minamata as a carbide and fertilizer manufacturer in 1909. As early as the 1920s, the company began polluting the local bay with industrial effluents leading to protests and negotiations with local fishermen (Ui 1992). With the advent of World War II and postwar modernization, Chisso transformed its production from strictly fertilizer and carbide to an array of plastics. Chisso innovated breakthroughs in organic chemistry and became a major component of the Japanese postwar industrial recovery (Ui 1992).

In the late 1950s, Chisso directly employed one-third of Minamata’s residents, and the company accounted for 60 percent of local tax revenues (Huddle and Reich 1975; Ishimure 1990; Thurston 1974; Ui 1992; Upham 1987). Minamata’s mayors and city council members in the postwar era consisted primarily of former Chisso managers and union members (Thurston 1974; Upham 1987).

Accompanying Chisso’s economic success, however, was severe industrial pollution. In the 1930s Chisso began to emit mercury into local waterways, a byproduct of its acetaldehyde production (a key component in plastics fabrication).² Local residents, especially fishing families, began consuming the mercury-contaminated fish that increasingly accumulated in the local aquatic ecosystem of Minamata Bay and the surrounding Shiranui Sea. Since 1956, when medical authorities first detected “Minamata disease,” thousands of Japanese citizens living in the vicinity of Minamata were inflicted with methyl mercury poisoning. Mercury poisoning is insidious. Not only does it destroy the central nervous systems of those who eat contaminated food, it also causes severe prenatal birth defects in their offspring. As of 1996, close to 1,000 Japanese citizens have officially died from the disease while another 6,000 to 8,000 victims still suffer from mercury poisoning (Efron 1997; *Japan Times* 1996).

Though media attention has been focused on the plight of the victims (and the vilification of Chisso), little notice was given to the victims’ grassroots environmental movement. In this

2. Chisso continued its acetaldehyde production until 1968 when a more sophisticated technology was introduced.

paper we examine the case of Minamata in four chronological phases: 1955–1963, 1964–1968, 1969–1974, and post-1974. Each chronological period roughly represents a different configuration of political opportunity. Our analysis demonstrates how changes in the political environment over time affected the victims' ability to force the state and economic elites to respond in a positive fashion. The political opportunity structure changed as a result of the emergence of a nationwide anti-pollution social movement, support from potent external allies, intra-governmental conflicts, and a state legitimization crisis, coupled with the victims' willingness to employ nontraditional, institutionally disruptive tactics.

1955–1963: Minamata Disease Outbreak and Restricted Political Opportunity

Coinciding with declining fish harvests, a growing number of villagers were affected by the Minamata disease. In 1958, an LGEM consisting primarily of families in the local fishing industry inflicted with the disease formed the Mutual Assistance Society (MAS). Political opportunities, however, were all but nonexistent during the LGEM's early years (1958–1963). The only external allies the victims had at this time were a few Kumamoto University researchers investigating the disease, and even this resource came under attack. By 1963, the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI), a powerful pro-industry government agency, had discontinued funding Kumamoto researchers, and disbanded two other public units investigating the disease (Thurston 1974:37).³ Moreover, the Kumamoto prefectural government ceased to examine potential mercury victims after 1963 (Ishimure 1990). In contrast to the political powerlessness of the Minamata disease victims, Chisso had enormous political resources; the corporation was at its economic zenith (Huddle and Reich 1975). National, prefectural, and municipal government bodies were unified in their commitment to rapid industrial growth and expansion, while local citizens depended on Chisso for their prosperity. In addition to the government's support, the Japan Chemical Industry Association buttressed the Chisso Corporation by supplying its own scientists and research teams to find alternative explanations for the outbreak of Minamata disease (Iijima 1979).

Despite the lack of political opportunities, the local fishermen and the MAS held rallies and participated in disruptive protests. In late November 1959 MAS began a month-long sit-in outside Chisso's factory gate aimed at securing a compensation settlement from Chisso. At the same time, thousands of local fishermen stormed the Chisso factory and destroyed property with the similar aim of forcing Chisso into a settlement (Ishimure 1990; Mishima 1992). Although these protests received some media attention, they were subsequently repressed by the arrest and incarceration of their leaders.

The disruptive tactics were not totally without effect. In December 1959, Chisso agreed to take part in negotiations with the MAS to be mediated by the local government (prefectural governor and Minamata mayor). Shortly afterwards, Chisso and MAS signed a contract (*mimaikin*). The *mimaikin* stated that Chisso would pay a small compensation, ¥300,000 (\$830), to families of the deceased and ¥100,000 (\$278) to surviving victims. These amounts were only a small fraction of what the MAS initially proposed (Iijima 1979; Ui 1992; Upham 1987). Furthermore, in Japan a *mimaikin* is seen as a gift to the less fortunate (a sympathy or condolence payment). Chisso used the agreement to eschew its legal responsibility for the victims' disease by adding a stipulation that acceptance of the *mimaikin* forfeited any future claims by the victims should the company at a later date be found culpable of the mercury poisoning (Huddle and Reich 1975). (Testimony given in court at a later date proved that, at the time of the *mimaikin* signing, Chisso already knew, from its own research scientists, that it was responsible for the mercury poisoning.)

3. At the same time, MITI surreptitiously sent letters to other petrochemical firms across the country warning them of the potential dangers of using mercury in production (Gresser, Fujikara and Morishima 1981).

Confronting a powerful, cohesive elite and without resources or influential external allies, the exhausted MAS accepted the terms of the government negotiated *mimaikin* (Mishima 1992). Hence, concealing evidence against Chisso and signing the *mimaikin* put an end at this time to the disruptive tactics of the Minamata LGEM. For the next eight years, the group served primarily as an internal support system.

1964–1968: Expanding Political Opportunities

The state's refusal to regulate industrial waste, together with its active protection of the polluters, gave Chisso and other industrial firms *carte blanche* to continue contaminating the environment. By the mid-1960s, Japan had become the most severely polluted country in the industrialized world (OECD 1977). Increasingly hazardous environmental conditions, and the accompanying rise in public health problems, in turn sowed the seeds for a national citizens' anti-pollution social movement. This social movement became a key factor in helping the Minamata LGEM succeed in its struggle against Chisso and the government. After Chisso's apparently definitive victory, the political environment slowly began to change in the Minamata victims' favor. The two processes responsible for this change in the structure of political opportunity were: (1) *the increase in external allies* in the form of local support groups, a nationwide anti-pollution social movement, the Japanese Communist Party, and the mass media; and (2) *increased elite instability* in the form of the national government's symbolic gestures aimed at addressing Japan's deteriorating environmental conditions, changes in local electoral politics, and internal conflict among state administrative agencies.

External Allies. In 1965, mercury poisoning was discovered in Niigata Prefecture. The Showa Denko Petrochemical Corporation (the source of the mercury), located on the Agano River, employed production techniques similar to Chisso's. Despite resistance from the petrochemical industry and MITI, local officials were quick to side with the victims. This was probably because the polluting plant was located 40 miles upstream from the contaminated fishing and farming village. As a result, local officials were not associated with Showa Denko, nor was the community economically dependent on the firm (Smith and Smith 1975a). Furthermore, in 1967 a group of left-wing lawyers from Tokyo convinced the Niigata victims to file a lawsuit against the Showa Denko facilities (Upham 1976). In the context of Japanese political culture, a lawsuit by citizens against a prestigious industrial firm was an unprecedented, radical act (Huddle and Reich 1975; McKean 1981; OECD 1994; Upham 1976, 1987).⁴

During 1967 and 1968, the Niigata victims traveled to other cities (including Minamata) in an effort to promote the tactic of the lawsuit (Huddle and Reich 1975; Iijima 1979; Ishimure 1990). The Niigata victims can be seen as "early risers" who stimulated a larger anti-pollution social movement.⁵ As Tarrow (1989; 1994) notes, early risers play an instrumental role by highlighting the vulnerability of the state and elites, while simultaneously diffusing effective tactics which can be mimicked by other challengers.

The Niigata mercury poisoning occurred in the milieu of numerous other industry-induced pollution diseases and mishaps. The most notorious cases included the outbreak of

4. Upham (1976) emphasizes that in Japan a lawsuit goes beyond the liberal democratic notion of formal rights. A lawsuit breaks with strong societal pressure not to stand out or put individual needs above the community. The pollution victims, however, agreed to adopt this strategy because they perceived themselves as bringing to the surface the violation of social norms by the polluting firms. At the same time, the sympathetic lawyers viewed themselves as contributing to a larger anti-pollution social movement.

5. Another important "early riser" was the Numazu-Mishima-Shimizu LGEM which mobilized the citizens of these three cities to rally against development plans of their local and national governments. In 1964 this group successfully prevented the tri-city area from receiving a number of polluting industries. The LGEM's efforts signaled to local groups that it was possible to challenge the state and to solve pollution-related problems through collective action (Apter and Sawa 1984; Reich 1984).

bronchial asthma in Yokkaichi, *Itai itai* cadmium poisoning in Toyama, and the mercury poisoning in Minamata. These four incidents became known as the “Big Four” pollution cases because their subsequent lawsuits charged some of Japan’s most esteemed industrial firms with gross negligence. Throughout the mid-1960s, numerous other LGEMs emerged to demand reprieve, compensation, and environmental restoration from industrial pollution (Krauss and Simcock 1980; Miyamoto 1991). These included the victims of Kanemi Cooking Oil (PCB poisoning), SMON disease (quinoform poisoning), Milk poisoning (arsenic), and the anti-*konbinato* (petrochemical complexes) movements (Iijima 1979). Collectively, these pollution outbreaks led to 30,000 officially recognized pollution victims and hundreds of deaths in Japan between 1960 and 1970 (Iijima 1979).

One measure of rising national anti-pollution sentiment can be seen in the dramatic increase in environment-related complaints and petitions registered with local and regional governments. The number of complaints and petitions was virtually zero in 1960, increased to about 20,000 in 1966, and peaked at more than 86,000 in 1972 (Environment Agency 1977; OECD 1977).

Two indicators of the subsequent rapid growth in anti-pollution social movement activity are the increase in anti-pollution actions and the formation of new anti-pollution organizations. Figure 2 shows a sharp increase in the number of reported rallies, demonstrations, marches, and public demands carried out by LGEMs after 1966.⁶ At the same time, the number of LGEMs (or citizen’s groups as they are called in Japan) increased dramatically. In 1970 there were approximately 292 LGEMs fighting environmental pollution; by 1973 the number had increased to 1,007 (Environment Agency 1974).

Within social movements and cycles of protest, collective action frames provide a selected view of the world that communicates the injustices suffered by movement members to a larger population (Snow and Benford 1992). The collective action frame in Japan was that of “environmental rights” (i.e., the democratic right to a healthy, safe living environment; Krauss and Simcock 1980; Miyamoto 1991; Reich 1984). Along with the creation of a collective action frame came a repertoire of tactics, the most important being the lawsuit.

Other external allies who made important contributions to the Minamata LGEM included scientists, intellectuals, labor, students, and the mass media. Besides Kumamoto University researchers who were early sympathizers of Minamata victims, other scientists and professionals came to their support in the late 1960s. These included the *Minamata Research Group* in Tokyo and the *Society to Indict Minamata Disease*, a local group which published a nationally circulated monthly paper on the status of the disease. In addition local, national, and international cultural producers, including writers (e.g., Michiko Ishimure), photographers (e.g., Eugene Smith), and film makers (e.g., Tsuchimoto Noriaki), came to the movement’s aid. Beginning in the mid-1960s, Ishimure wrote a series of articles and books about Minamata Disease which inspired other intellectuals (including Jun Ui, a central figure in creating a national network between the loosely affiliated LGEMs) and students to involve themselves in the Minamata movement (including living in Minamata with the patients, as well as raising funds). By the late 1960s, several books and documentary films detailing the plight of the Minamata victims appeared, and Ishimure’s works were transformed into theatrical performances dramatically conveying the condition of Minamata victims nationally and internationally.

Sectors of labor began to support the Minamata victims. In the 1950s, the Chisso labor union, with the full support of the Japanese Socialist Party, sided with the company and took a “defend the plant” stance against the victims (Ui 1992). After a turbulent strike in the early 1960s, Chisso workers split into two unions. The “old” union formally sided with the

6. The number of pollution complaints per year (Environment Agency 1977) was correlated with the number of reports of LGEM activity per year (with anti-pollution movement activity lagged one-year behind complaints) for the period 1965–1975 (Pearson’s $r = .62$; Iijima 1979).

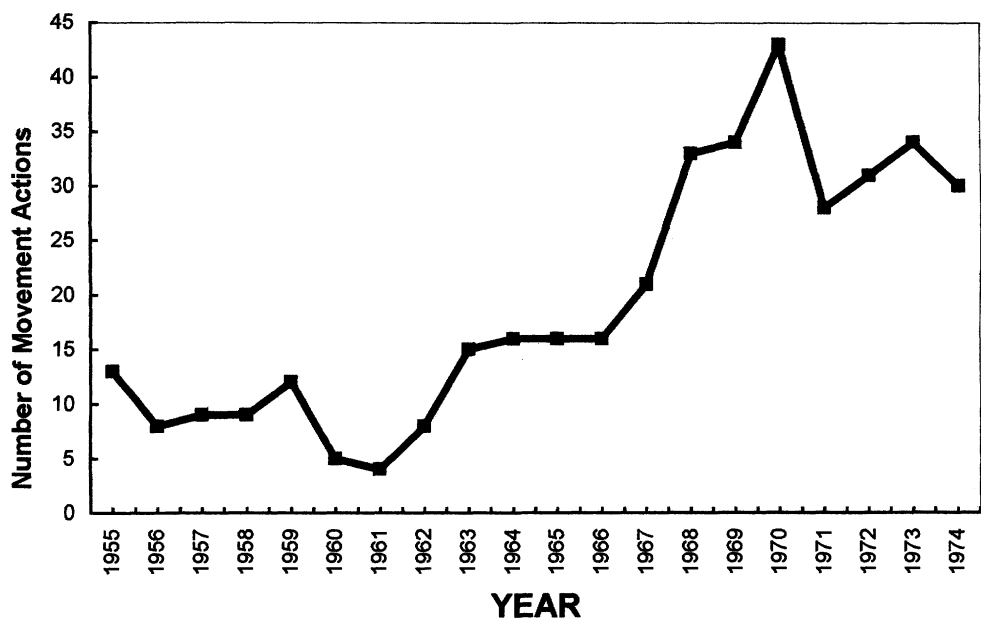


Figure 2 • Reported Anti-Pollution Social Movement Activity in Japan.
Movement activity includes marches, rallies, demonstrations, and public demands made by anti-pollution groups. This chronology documents the history of pollution in Japan. Iijima (1979) reports examining over 800 sources, primarily newspapers, journals, and magazines, not counting separate issues of magazines and newspapers.

Minamata victims. In 1968 they released their “Shame Declaration” in which they publicly apologized for their earlier “defend the plant” position. In the same year, the “old” union called a wildcat strike at Chisso’s Minamata plant in an effort to prod Chisso into reentering negotiations with the Minamata victims. The strike succeeded in shutting down Chisso for several hours (Iijima 1979). “Old” labor union members also assisted the Minamata LGEM by leaking confidential documents and testifying against Chisso in court (Thurston 1974).

Students also played a critical role in aiding the Minamata movement.⁷ Most of their support came between 1969 and 1974, when Tokyo students joined Minamata victims in protests at Chisso’s Tokyo headquarters. Also, a student group in solidarity with Minamata victims formed at Kumamoto University. Kumamoto students performed an important role by participating in rallies outside the court in Kumamoto city where the lawsuit trial against Chisso took place (Mishima 1992).

Finally, after first accepting Chisso’s and the state’s explanation as to the cause of Minamata disease, national newspapers began to take a more favorable stand toward the Minamata victims (Huddle and Reich 1975; Ishimure 1990). For example, the *Asahi Shinbun* (Japan’s premier national newspaper) published a feature on Minamata disease in 1968 after receiving inside information on Chisso’s suppression of its own doctor’s research findings in the late 1950s (Iijima 1979).

7. Besides anti-pollution movements, the period between 1964 and 1974 witnessed the rise of militant student movements (e.g., *Zengakuren*) and extra-parliamentary new left organizations (e.g., *Beheiren*). These groups played an important role in the Japanese anti-pollution movement by providing participants for a variety of protest events and sharing tactics and experiences (Apter and Sawa 1984; Reich 1984; Smith and Smith 1975b).

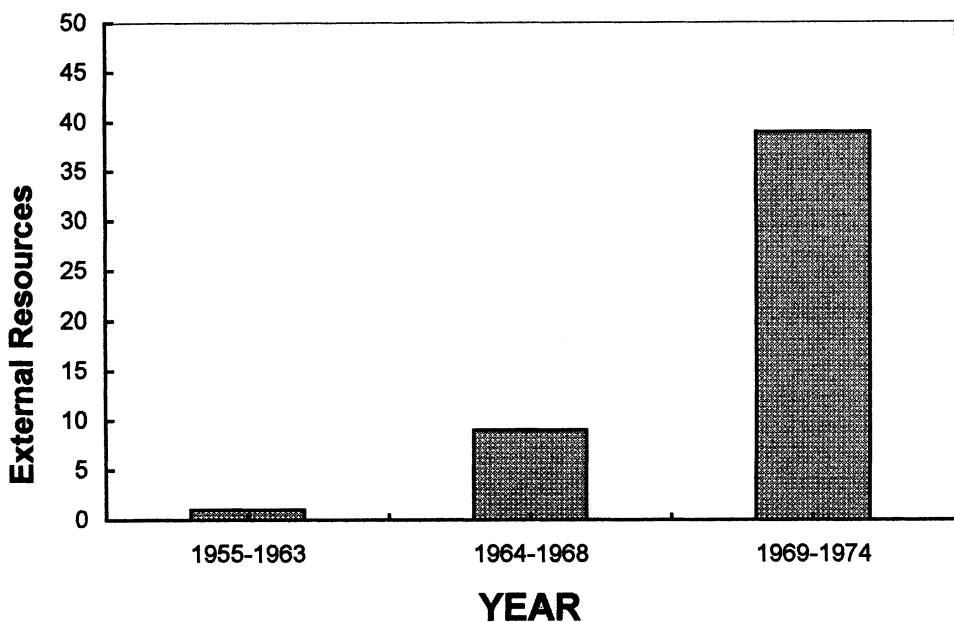


Figure 3 • Reported External Resources Aiding Minamata Victims.
Source: Iijima 1979. External Resources include intellectuals, scientists, students, mass media, cultural producers, and organized labor acting in ways directly beneficial to Minamata victims.

Figure 3 documents the increase in external resources available to the Minamata LGEM. Iijima’s (1979) chronology of Japanese environmental history from 1955 to 1975 identifies 418 events detailing the progression of the Minamata incident. When an event described an outside group (i.e., those other than the victims themselves) assisting the Minamata victims in a manner that benefited the group, we coded it as an “external resource” (e.g., writing a book about the plight of the Minamata victims, holding a solidarity labor strike, etc.). Out of the 418 Minamata Disease-related events documented by Iijima, 49 referred to external resources and concentrated in the period between 1969 and 1974. In sum, the rapid decline in environmental quality in Japan during the mid 1960s dramatically increased public complaints and made industrial pollution a national social problem. The accompanying rise of a national anti-pollution social movement benefited the Minamata victims by making available to the LGEM much needed, resource-rich, external allies.

Elite Instability. In 1967, in response to increased social unrest surrounding environmental issues, the Japanese national government implemented the Basic Law for Pollution Control (Environment Agency 1978). In brief, the law stipulated that industrial growth needed “to harmonize” with environmental requirements. Due to pressure from MITI and the *Keidanren* (Japanese Federation of Economic Organizations) the law’s original stringent anti-pollution measures were elided and the “harmonization” clause appended. Although mostly symbolic, the law conveyed to the anti-pollution movement and pollution victims that, at least on some level, the national government recognized a problem existed (Wiedner 1986).

At the local level, anti-pollution movements met with some electoral successes. Starting in the late 1960s, several large municipalities—Tokyo, Kyoto, Okinawa, and Osaka—voted

pro-environmental candidates into office (MacDougall 1976). The mayor or city council in these cities in turn enacted substantive anti-pollution ordinances. The effects of these elections were to legitimize and encourage the anti-pollution groups' goals, to increase the degree of conflict between national and local governments, and to provide a template for future environmental demands and laws.

At the national level, the Japanese Communist Party (JCP) rose in popularity throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, in part due to its legal and political involvement in the grassroots anti-pollution movements (McKean 1981; Sumisato and Hiroshi 1977; Tsurutani 1977).⁸ The JCP increased its membership and received 10.5 percent of the popular vote in the 1972 national elections (up from 2.9 percent in 1960). In addition, the JCP became the second wealthiest political party (after the Liberal Democratic Party) in the early 1970s due to the success of the party's newspaper, *Akahata*.⁹

Another feature of the expanding political opportunities was the presence of conflict among administrative agencies within the national government. In 1966 conflict erupted between the Ministry of Health and Welfare (MHW) and the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) over publicly acknowledging the cause of the mercury poisoning in Niigata (Iijima 1979). MHW investigators were prepared to indict Showa Denko publicly as the source of the mercury poisoning because researchers at Niigata University had linked Showa Denko as the responsible polluter. MITI, however, delayed this public announcement for nearly two years by finding scientists to offer counterclaims about the difficulty of establishing a causal relationship. In the context of an emerging national anti-pollution social movement and mounting evidence that Showa Denko was indeed the source of the mercury, the report was finally released to the public in late 1967. In 1968, the same internal conflict led to government recognition that Chisso was the source of the mercury poisoning in Minamata (Harada 1978; Iijima 1979).

In the context of this emerging elite instability, the Minamata victims reactivated their LGEM with the help of invaluable external allies (JCP, scientists, intellectuals, media, and students) and a cohesive ideology of environmental rights. The position of Chisso and the state was being undermined by the increasing internal conflict among government units, as well as the growing public disillusionment with the state's ability to provide its citizens with a safe environment. Thus, the high level of political opportunities now available to the Minamata victims gave them an opening to exercise greater leverage, to strengthen their bargaining position *vis-à-vis* the state and Chisso. Disruptive actions would play a critical role in helping them apply that leverage and convert political opportunities into concrete influence.

1969–1974: Nontraditional and Disruptive Tactics in a Context of High Political Opportunities

The widespread environmental problems in Japan in the 1960s both threatened state legitimacy and the routines of pollution victims' everyday lives. Furthermore, institutionalized patterns proved ill-suited for alleviating the deterioration of public health, as well as the public outcry resulting from the high levels of industrial pollution. In reaction to growing social unrest, the government made a dramatic turnabout in environmental policy. A special session of the national Diet (known as the "Pollution Diet") met in December 1970. Devoted to environmental issues, this session enacted a series of amendments and passed 13 new statutes that established Japan as an innovator in environmental policy and a leader in pollution control (OECD 1977; Upham 1987). Indicative of the political and social momentum of the time was

8. McKean's (1981) extensive survey of fourteen Japanese LGEMs in the early 1970s found that the LGEM participants in her sample supported the JCP more than any other political party.

9. The JCP simultaneously served as an external ally to the Minamata LGEM (providing them legal expertise and media coverage), and as a source of instability for the elite (by challenging the once indomitable LDP).

Table 1 • Successful Outcomes Gained by Japanese National Anti-Pollution Social Movement and Minamata Local Grassroots Environmental Movement, 1967–1973

<i>Year</i>	<i>National Social Movement</i>	<i>Minamata LGEM</i>
1967	Basic Law for Pollution Control	
1969	Compensation Law	
1970	“Pollution Diet” (13 new environmental laws)	
1971	Creation of Environment Agency	New Victims Certifications
1973	Compensation Law Revised	Favorable Court Verdict
		Compensation for All Victims
		Public Apology by Chisso
		Clean Up of Minamata Bay
		Minamata Disease Center

the unanimous vote of the Diet to eliminate the “harmonization” clause in the Basic Law for Environmental Pollution Control of 1967 that limited environmental regulation to that consistent with economic growth. In 1971, the Prime Minister created the Environment Agency. Though not a Ministry (thus less powerful than MITI or MHW), the Director of the Agency was a member of the Cabinet and had the title of Minister of State (indicating to the public that the state viewed the environment as an important concern). Both of these actions were clear victories for the national anti-pollution social movement (see Table 1).

The Minamata LGEM’s successes paralleled (with a slight lag) those of the national anti-pollution movement. Between 1964 and 1968 the victims of Minamata disease made several attempts to get more help from Chisso and the government. These efforts used normal institutional channels, and each attempt met with little or no success. For example, the MAS petitioned Chisso several times during the early 1960s to increase the annual allowance paid to adult Minamata disease patients under the solatium agreement. After much stalling Chisso finally raised the allowance by ¥5,000 (or approximately \$14).

In the meantime, hundreds of new local citizens were affected by the illness (the cyclator Chisso had installed in 1960 to eliminate toxic substances from the waste products it dumped into Minamata Bay was ineffectual). Few of these new victims, however, were certified as having Minamata disease. In part, this reflected the victims’ reluctance to come forth for fear of being stigmatized, but it was mostly due to the government’s unwillingness to acknowledge the growing problem (to do so would attest that the cyclator was inept; McKean 1981). On September 26, 1968, when the government finally announced Chisso’s responsibility for the mercury poisoning, only 111 persons, including 42 who had already died, had been officially certified as victims.

Eleven days following the government’s announcement, the 89 households of the MAS presented Chisso with a new indemnification demand. Their demand was aimed at updating the December 1959 solatium by increasing the compensation for death to ¥13 million and the annual allowance for victims to ¥600,000. On February 28, 1969, the Ministry of Health and Welfare requested the MAS swear in writing, as Chisso had already done, that the appointment of arbitrators would be left entirely to the ministry and that the arbitration proposal for compensation would be accepted without complaint. This led to a dilemma and eventual split within the victims’ group.

By April 1969, three dominant factions of mercury disease victims coexisted within Minamata. They were: (1) the mediation group (*Ichinin-ha*); (2) the court group (*Sosho-ha*); and (3) the direct-negotiations group (*Jishu kosho-ha*). The mediation group, or the “leave it up to others” group as they were disparagingly labeled by the other two victim factions, was the largest group, consisting of 50 families. This group of *certified* pollution victims opted for the

traditional Japanese means for conflict resolution. They agreed to accept the MHW's terms (i.e., to settle for the compensation decided upon by the government). In May 1970, the mediation group received its settlement. Chisso agreed to pay a maximum lump sum of ¥1.9 million (\$5,515), a maximum annuity of ¥180,000 (\$155), and a medical allowance to each living victim. In addition, a maximum sum of ¥3 million (\$11,100) was paid to the families of each deceased victim (Environment Agency 1972; McKean 1981; Upham 1976). Although this settlement was substantially higher than the 1959 *mimaikin*, the compensations that would be secured by the court group and direct negotiations group in 1973 were 5 to 15 times higher.

The court group came into existence when it rejected the MHW's demand of binding arbitration in favor of filing a lawsuit against Chisso. It, too, contained only *certified* victims and consisted of 30 families. The JCP provided the legal representation for these victims (Mishima 1992; Reich 1984; Upham 1987). The legal resources of the JCP and the fund-raising activities of the external support groups were important to the success of the Minamata LGEM since the victims were poor. The local government repeatedly denied the group any financial assistance to aid them with their legal fees in suing Chisso (Iijima 1979).

The direct negotiations group was the third faction to emerge. It was the smallest of the three factions (although the group originally had close to 100 members, it later declined to 12). The direct negotiations group's goal was to engage in direct, unmediated negotiations with Chisso's executive officers. This group originally consisted of *uncertified* victims and was responsible for a wide variety of tactical innovations.¹⁰

The actions taken by the court group and the direct negotiations group (and their external allies) were intended to support and complement the work of the other (Smith and Smith 1975b). Only these two groups are defined here as the Minamata LGEM since both opted to achieve their goals via noninstitutionalized channels (Burstein, Einwohner and Hollander 1995). Although the majority of Minamata victims chose to join the mediation group, it was the court and direct negotiations groups that achieved the most successful outcomes.

Nontraditional and Disruptive Strategies. Similar to McAdam's (1982; 1983) findings regarding the Black civil rights movement, the deployment of innovative tactics by the Minamata LGEM kept the state and Chisso off-guard. Filing a lawsuit against an industrial firm for pollution-related damage by citizens was unprecedented in twentieth-century Japan (Upham 1987). With the Big Four pollution cases occurring during a widespread national anti-pollution social movement, there was public pressure for favorable verdicts, with little time for industrialists to manipulate the legal system (Upham 1976). In March 1973, the court ruled in favor of the Minamata plaintiffs (as it had in the three other pollution cases in the preceding two years). Chisso was forced to pay a total of ¥930 million (\$3.6 million) in compensation to the plaintiffs. This was the largest court settlement paid to citizens in Japanese history (Upham 1987).

The direct negotiations group also used nontraditional tactics against Chisso. The group and hundreds of its supporters bought one-dollar shares of stock in Chisso and traveled to its annual stockholders' meetings. At the 1970 stockholders' meeting in Osaka, with national television cameras present, the direct negotiations group and their supporters (numbering well over a thousand) interrupted the meeting. The cameras captured the victims (many of them physically deformed) challenging Chisso's executives face-to-face.

The use of nontraditional and disruptive tactics did more than just catch authorities off-guard. These actions helped to transform the political environment in which the Minamata LGEM operated and to increase the movement's bargaining power. An 18-month-long sit-in

10. The direct negotiations group was initially formed to address the issue of certification. In 1971, the group was successful in getting its own members certified; then in the same year, it succeeded in getting the state to relax its rigid certification requisites for other victims as well.

by the direct negotiations group outside of Chisso's Tokyo headquarters (1971–1973) invited police attacks and attempts at removal. (This was the longest recorded sit-in by a grassroots movement in Japanese history [Ui 1992]). The police actions received media coverage and evoked sympathetic outcries by the larger public in favor of the victims. Also, Chisso's heavy-handed crackdown (including serious physical injuries) on direct negotiation leaders at Chisso's Goi plant in Chiba prefecture was strongly criticized by the mass media and the public. Thus, acts of overt repression by state authorities and Chisso to deal with the disruptive tactics of the Minamata LGEM had the unintended consequence of increasing the LGEM's bargaining power by assisting its efforts to mobilize a larger constituency.

In July 1973, following its victory, the court group joined the direct negotiations group in Tokyo to pressure Chisso executives to compensate all certified victims. After arduous drawn-out negotiations, Chisso agreed to pay compensation comparable to that received by the court group to all certified victims (at this point numbering approximately 500) *in exchange for the cessation of disruptive protest campaigns* (McKean 1981; Thurston 1974; Upham 1976).

Chisso agreed to pay lump sums of ¥16, 17, or 18 million [\$80,000, \$85,000 or \$90,000] to each Minamata victim who had not filed suit, plus lifetime monthly pensions of ¥20, 30, or 60 thousand (depending on the seriousness of the victim's illness), and to create a fund of ¥300 million for medical and economic aid to the victims. . . . Chisso also agreed to an order from Kumamoto prefecture to pay 65 percent of the ¥20.3 billion expense of dredging contaminated sludge from the floor on Minamata Bay. (McKean 1981:57)

The stark difference between the 1959 *mimaikin* and the 1973 concessions testifies to the change in the victim's bargaining power over time. Table 1 lists the successful outcomes gained by the anti-pollution social movement at the national level as well as those of the Minamata LGEM between 1967 and 1973.

Post 1974 and Diminishing Political Opportunities

After 1974, political opportunities began to contract once again for the Minamata LGEM. This decline in the level of political opportunities reflected an increase in elite cohesiveness and a decrease in support from external allies.

When Japan's economic growth rate declined for the first time in two decades in 1975, the business and political elite quickly united behind a policy of sustained economic growth. In particular, they wanted to keep the Japanese economy from experiencing the kind of stagflation occurring in the United States and Europe. As a result, "(e)nvironmental protection was put on the back burner" (Miyamoto 1991:87). The Environment Agency, once friendly to the national anti-pollution movement, was placed under the directorship of a conservative, Shintaro Ishihara, in 1976. Ishihara took the position that the anti-pollution movement had become a kind of "witch hunt"; he believed it had been a mistake to discard the "harmonization principle" of the former Basic Law of Environmental Pollution Control.

Similar to the change within the Environment Agency, beginning in 1978 the governors and mayors of Kyoto, Tokyo, Okinawa, and Osaka all changed from progressives to conservatives. This marked the end of the era in which progressive local authorities took the lead in environmental action. Eventually, these local governmental units adopted most of the national government's policies. For example, the Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly voted down its own "citizen participatory" environmental assessment act passed during the time of progressive Governor Minobe (Miyamoto 1991). As a result of the personnel changes in city government and in the Environment Agency, the degree of public conflict within the state, and between the state and economic elites, over the regulation and the handling of pollution problems decreased markedly.

Political opportunities also decreased as the number and the dedication of the Minamata LGEM's external allies declined. The national anti-pollution movement diminished signifi-

cantly after 1975. Many Japanese citizens now felt that the battle was over: that is, the state had moved to eradicate and respond to the most egregious pollution outbreaks; and the victims of the Big Four court cases had been compensated. By the late 1970s, those still interested in the environmental movement shifted from championing specific pollution problems to focusing on more abstract quality of life and nature conservation issues (OECD 1994; Upham 1987). By the early 1980s, even these groups had largely faded from the political scene. While local incidents of pollution still occurred, these problems were again channeled back into institutionalized, government-controlled procedures. A few cases ended up in the courts, but most plaintiffs were unsuccessful. In the absence of a powerful counter force, the central government recaptured the power to handle Japan's pollution problems and set its environmental policies.

Reinstitutionalization of Government Control. The most effective strategy the government developed for defusing both the national anti-pollution social movement and local LGEMs was to redesign institutional structures within the state to handle victim compensation and to regulate pollution. These institutional mechanisms included: (1) the Law for the Resolution of Pollution Disputes (the Dispute Law), and (2) the Law for Compensation of Pollution-Related Health (the Compensation Law).

The Dispute Law (1970) created local and prefectural government committees to resolve local pollution grievances. The law in effect reinstitutionalized the three-way mediation between citizens, industry, and the government that had historically benefited economic and state elites in Japanese society. This new government structure provided an organizational mechanism for the state to intervene in pollution conflicts in their infant phase so as to thwart a larger crisis such as the Big Four pollution cases (Upham 1987). The state now became involved during the early stages of pollution conflicts in an effort to isolate any potential local grassroots movement and to prevent a wider anti-pollution consciousness from evolving.

The Compensation Law (1973) provided designated pollution victims (including Minamata mercury-poisoning victims) the right to apply for compensation as a consequence of industrial pollution. Nationally over 80,000 pollution victims had been certified by the state (Upham 1987) by 1980 and over 100,000 by 1990 (Environment Agency 1993). The Japanese state and major industrial polluters viewed the Compensation Law as a means to dissuade pollution victims from taking their grievances to the courts or to the streets (Gresser, Fujikara, and Morishima 1981; Reich 1983).

Both the Compensation and Dispute Laws attempted to prevent anti-pollution movements from using litigation for social redress. The Big Four pollution cases revealed the relatively autonomous nature of the Japanese legal system and the role the judiciary could play in abetting the anti-pollution movement. These new laws reintroduced the vertical structure of the Japanese political system (Broadbent 1989) and worked to preclude future anti-pollution litigation against industrial capital and the state (Upham 1987).

Minamata Outcomes. For Minamata victims, the allies that continued to support them tended to work at the arduous task of locating and assisting the thousands of new patients potentially certifiable in the new state bureaucracy established to process pollution victims. However, after 1975, the federal and prefectural government certified few new Minamata disease victims (Ui 1992; Wilkinson 1996). Leaders of the Minamata LGEM, such as Kawamoto Teruo, formed official Minamata victim organizations to assist victims in obtaining certification. Other Minamata disease victims enacted lawsuits against Chisso as well as the national and prefectural government. These cases were tied up in the courts throughout the 1980s and into the mid-1990s—in part due to the Japanese state's appeal of three separate court rulings favoring Minamata victims (Ross 1995; Ui 1997).

Finally, in early 1996, the five largest victims' organizations struck an agreement to compensate an additional 8,000 (out of 14,100 claimants) previously uncertified Minamata victims (Yoichi 1997). The agreement called for a compensation lump sum payment of ¥2.6 million (or \$24,000) to each individual and for Chisso to pay (backed by state loans) the past legal fees of the victims' organizations.

Though this latest settlement offers some relief, after a long period of government intransigence, it is a shallow victory (somewhat akin to the signing of the 1959 *mimaikin*); the settlement amount is one-third of the 1973 agreement (before adjusting for inflation); the compensated victims will not be recognized as official mercury poisoning patients; and the state takes no official responsibility for the outbreak of the disease, its failure to regulate Chisso, or its hindering of the certification of potential victims (Wilkinson 1996). Finally, the victims had to agree to drop all pending lawsuits against the state and Chisso, as well as to cease applying for official certification as Minamata patients.

Discussion

Table 2 summarizes the changes over time in the level of political opportunities, the degree of disruptive action, and the outcomes achieved by the Minamata local grassroots environmental movement. We believe this case study demonstrates the significance of a political opportunity perspective in explaining the outcomes of local grassroots movement activity. During the initial outbreak of the disease, political opportunity was restricted by the political unification of Chisso and the state, a paucity of external resources, and the victims' general acceptance of the legitimacy of traditional and institutionalized means of conflict resolution.

Between 1964 and 1968 the political environment gradually transformed into a situation *potentially* benefiting Minamata victims. The transformation in the structure of political opportunity included the rise of a national anti-pollution social movement, an increasing number of external resources assisting Minamata victims (the JCP, scientists, intellectuals, media, labor, and students), internal conflicts in the state, and a state legitimation crisis. In other words, the level of external allies and elite instability increased substantially.

Between 1969 and 1974 the Minamata victims seized upon the favorable political environment by unleashing a wave of grassroots movement activity that included the nontraditional tactic of the lawsuit and a series of institutionally disruptive protests (e.g., sit-ins, street marches, and interrupting stockholders' meetings). These movement tactics transformed the political environment itself in the dialectical interplay between movement actions and elite and state responses. The disruptive acts of the LGEM made it impossible for Chisso and the state to continue "business as usual." When Chisso and the state tried to eliminate these disturbances using repressive means, their actions served to convey the victims' plight to a larger audience and to place their own moral conduct in question.

The relatively successful outcomes that followed the Minamata LGEM's use of nontraditional tactics and institutionally disruptive actions support our argument that LGEMs that exercise these strategies in a context of *high political opportunity* are more likely to receive concessions from their targets than LGEMs that exercise these strategies in a context of *low political opportunity*. As found in previous studies of "poor people's" movements, nontraditional tactics and institutionally disruptive actions, while initially quite effective, become less potent as the state successfully regains legitimacy and reinstitutionalizes protest activities (McAdam 1983; Piven and Cloward 1979). In the case of the Minamata LGEM, favorable court verdicts and state enacted environmental legislation decreased political opportunities by diminishing public support and restoring the state's legitimacy. Thus, at the same time pollution victims gained institutional access, through the Dispute and Compensation Laws, they lost bargaining power. The structurally built-in bias of formal politics gave the state and economic elites the upper hand through these "reinstitutionalized" problem-solving procedures.

Table 2 • History of Minamata LGEM: 1955–1996

Political Opportunities	Disruptive Action	Outcomes
Restricted Political Opportunities: 1955–1963		
External Allies: Low Limited to local fishermen Media believes Chisso Elite Instability: Low National, prefecture, and local governments are united behind Chisso	Disruptive Action: Yes Victims hold sit-in outside Chisso	Negative <i>Mimaikin</i> signed limiting Chisso’s responsibility Meager compensation Chisso continues to pollute
Expanding Political Opportunities: 1964–1968		
External Allies: Medium Emerging national anti-pollution movement Cultural producers Scientists Labor Elite Instability: Medium Basic Law for Pollution Control Pro-environmental candidates win local elections Government acknowledges Chisso’s responsibility	Disruptive Action: No	Negative Chisso refuses to re-negotiate
High Political Opportunities: 1969–1974		
External Allies: High Apex of national anti-pollution movement Japanese Communist Party Media Cultural producers Scientists Labor Students Elite Instability: High State legitimacy crisis “Pollution Diet” Creation of Environment Agency	Disruptive Action: Yes Law-suit Sit-ins Marches Stockholder meeting interruption	Positive New Victim Certifications Favorable Court Verdict Substantial compensation Chisso’s public apology Minamata Disease Center Clean up of Minamata Bay
Diminishing Political Opportunities: Post 1974		
External Allies: Low National anti-pollution movement loses steam Public believes state has adequately addressed the victims’ problems Elite Instability: Low Government and business unite behind policy of sustained growth Environment Agency turns pro-business Conservatives win city elections replacing pro-environment officials	Disruptive Action: Limited Ongoing lawsuits Traditional conflict resolution procedures reinstated	Negative Few new victims certified Lawsuits tied up in courts until 1996 Final Settlement similar to 1959 <i>mimaikin</i> in that the amounts are low and the state accepts no responsibility for its role in the outbreak of the disease, for its failure to regulate Chisso, or for impeding the certification process of the victims

Conclusion

The use of a political opportunity framework highlights the oscillating fortunes of the Minamata disease victims. Recent literature in political opportunity centers on measuring and delimiting political opportunity variables and their relationship to the emergence, mobilizing structures, tactical choices, and outcomes of social movements (McAdam 1996; Meyer and Minkoff 1997). It concludes that for political opportunity to be an effective model for social movement research, its key dimensions need to be better specified. In our case, we are examining *a locally-based grassroots movement*. Specifically we outlined two dimensions of political opportunity that we found most salient for a local grassroots movement in explaining both *tactical choices* and *movement outcomes: elite instability* and the *presence of external allies*.

This case demonstrates that a political opportunity approach can help explain tactical choices and movement outcomes at the local level of collective action. Just as social movements and cycles of protests are determined by the presence of external allies, electoral instability, conflict within the state, and signals of openness, so too are locally-based movements. Our categories of political opportunity are consistent with the literature on social movements and cycles of protest. A major difference we found is that institutional access mentioned in the political opportunity literature has a different dynamic for locally-based grassroots movements. Increased institutional access (e.g., the creation of local pollution boards) by the Japanese state served to disarm the Minamata LGEM of its most crucial internal resource—institutional disruption. It is possible that LGEMs do not benefit from institutional access in the same way broader-based social movements do, because local grassroots movements generally lack the ongoing organizational resources (e.g., non-volunteer full-time staff, an ongoing budget, etc.) that larger social movements have available. Such organizational resources may be critical to whether a movement can make effective use of institutional access.

Similar to the social movement literature on political opportunity, we found external allies to be critical in generating successful movement outcomes. Just as cycles of protest nourish social movements (Minkoff 1997; Tarrow 1989), social movements help sustain locally-based grassroots movements. With the birth of a national anti-pollution social movement in Japan during the mid-1960s, the Minamata victims' relatively weak and isolated political position slowly transformed. As the victims made linkages with other local groups and the larger anti-pollution social movement, they garnered the kind of support necessary to initiate and maintain their disruptive protest campaign. This support included financial, legal, ideological, and tactical assistance. At the same time, the rise of a national social movement greatly increased the saliency of the pollution issue and contributed to the Japanese state's declining legitimacy in that area. As a result, it became increasingly costly for the state to disband the Minamata LGEM or terminate the latter's use of institutionally disruptive tactics via repression.

Our findings regarding the effect of institutionally disruptive tactics are consistent with earlier research on the use of these strategies (Gamson 1990; Jenkins and Brents 1989; Lipsky 1968; McAdam 1983; Piven and Cloward 1979). However, instead of asking solely whether institutionally disruptive tactics are more efficacious for movements than the use of conventional conflict resolution procedures, we explore the deployment of such tactics within changing levels of political opportunity. Our case informs us that, while initiating institutionally disruptive protest under conditions of limited political opportunity is difficult and ineffective, exercising such tactics during periods of expanded political opportunity can potentially give an LGEM the bargaining leverage it needs to accomplish its goals.

We believe the Minamata case opens the political opportunity framework to a larger research program of investigating locally-based grassroots movements in longitudinal case studies, large sample, and cross-national research. One advantage to the study of locally-based grassroots movements is that their goals tend to be more limited and specific than broader-

based national social movements (e.g., monetary compensation or preventing an incinerator siting vs. equal rights or environmental conservation). This creates an appealing research possibility for furthering our knowledge of the roles that specific political opportunity dimensions and tactical choices play in local movement outcomes—a task much more complex and indirect at the national social movement and cycle-of-protest levels of collective action.

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