

UK Supreme Court in *Okpabi v Royal Dutch Shell* (2021 UKSC 3): Jurisdiction, duty of care, and the new German “Lieferkettengesetz”

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The Supreme Court’s decision in *Okpabi v Royal Dutch Shell* (2021 UKSC 3) concerns the preliminary question whether English courts have jurisdiction over a joint claim brought by two Nigerian communities against Royal Dutch Shell (RSD), a UK parent company, as anchor defendant, and a Nigerian oil company (SPDC) in which RSD held 30 % of the shares. The jurisdictional decision depended (among other issues that still need to be resolved) on a question of substantive law: Was it “reasonably arguable” that RSD owed a common law duty of care to the Nigerian inhabitants whose health and property was damaged by the operations of the subsidiary in Nigeria?

In the lower instance, the Court of Appeal had not clearly differentiated between jurisdiction over the parent company and the Nigerian sub and had treated the “arguable case”-requirement as a prerequisite both for jurisdiction over the Nigerian sub (under English autonomous law) and for jurisdiction over RSD, although clearly, under Art. 4 (1) Brussels Ia Reg., there can be no such additional requirement pursuant to the CJEU’s jurisprudence in *Owusu*. In *Vedanta*, a case with large similarities to the present one, *Lord Briggs*, handing down the judgment for the Supreme Court, had unhesitatingly acknowledged the unlimited jurisdiction of the courts at the domicile of the defendant company under the Brussels Regulation. In *Okpabi*, *Lord Hamblen*, with whom the other Justices concurred, did not come back to this issue. However, given that from a UK point of view, the Brussels model will soon become practically obsolete (unless the UK will still be able to join the Lugano Convention), this may be a pardonable omission. It is to be expected that the English courts will return to the traditional common law restrictions on jurisdiction such as the “arguable case”-criterion and

“forum non conveniens”.

Although the Supreme Court’s decision relates to jurisdiction, its importance lies in the potential consequences for a parent company’s liability on the level of substantive law: The Supreme Court affirms its previous considerations in *Vedanta* (2019) and rejects the majority opinion of the CoA which in 2018 still flatly ruled out the possibility of RDS owing a duty of care towards the Nigerian inhabitants. Following the appellants’ submissions, *Lord Hamblen* minutely sets out where the approach of the CoA deviated from *Vedanta* and therefore “erred in law”. The majority in the CoA started from the assumption that a duty of care can only arise where the parent company effectively “controls” the material operations of the sub, and furthermore, that the issuance of group wide policies or standards could never in itself give rise to a duty of care. These propositions have now been clearly rejected by the Supreme Court as not being a reliable limiting principle (para 145). In the present judgment, the SC affirms its view that “control” is not in itself a meaningful test, since in practice, it can take many different forms: *Lord Hamblen* cites with approval *Lord Briggs’s* statement in *Vedanta*, that “there is no limit to the models of management and control which may be put in place within a multinational group of companies” (para 150). He equally approves of *Lord Briggs’s* considerations according to which “the parent may incur the relevant responsibility to third parties if, in published materials, it holds itself out as exercising that degree of supervision and control of its subsidiaries, even if in fact it does not do so. In such circumstances its very omission may constitute the abdication of a responsibility which it has publicly undertaken” (para 148).

Whether or not the English courts will ultimately find a duty of care to have existed in either or both of the *Vedanta* and *Okpabi* sets of facts remains to be seen when the law suits have been moved to the trial of the substantive issues. Much will depend on the degree of influence that was either really exercised on the sub or publicly pretended to be exercised.

On the same day on which the SC’s judgment was given (12 February 2021), the German Federal Government publicly announced the key features of a future piece of legislation on corporate social responsibility in supply chains (*Sorgfaltspflichtengesetz*) that is soon to be enacted. The government wants to pass legislation before the summer break and the general elections in September 2021, not the least because three years ago, it promised binding legislation if

voluntary self-regulation according to the National Action Plan should fail. Yet, contrary to claims from civil society (see foremost the German “*Initiative Lieferkettengesetz*”) the government no longer plans to sanction infringements by tortious liability towards victims. Given the applicability of the law at the place where the damage occurred under Art. 4 (1) Rome II Regulation, and the fact that the UK Supreme Court in *Vedanta* and *Okpabi* held the law of Sambia and Nigeria to be identical with that of England, this could have the surprising effect that the German act, which the government proudly announced as being the strictest and most far-reaching supply chain legislation in Europe and the world (!!), would risk to fall behind the law in anglophone Africa or on the Indian sub-continent. This example demonstrates that an addition to the Rome II Regulation, as proposed by the European Parliament, which would give victims of human rights’ violations a choice between the law at the place of injury and that at the place of action, is in fact badly needed.