

## **ECCR's Oxford Group – the story so far**

*Helen Boothroyd*

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ECCR's Oxford Group was one of its first local groups and has been the most enduring. The group still meets regularly and works hard for corporate and investor responsibility fifteen years after it was founded. As with many local initiatives, it started with an informal conversation around a kitchen table. Several Oxford-based ECCR members decided to form an active local group and to encourage others to join them. They opened a bank account, elected officers and started to plan a training day.

### **Defining moment**

This first event focused on multinational companies. Its defining moment came in a workshop on the environment. Participants watched a slick Royal Dutch Shell promotional video depicting a pipeline in north-west England surrounded by sheep - a rural idyll. Then, in contrast, they viewed hand-held footage taken in the Niger Delta by a Roman Catholic sister showing the horrific effects on local communities of oil spills from Shell's pipelines. The anger members felt at this injustice sharpened their desire to use shareholder engagement to try to bring about change.

The Oxford Group started to research into Shell's activities in the Delta. ECCR's token shareholding in Shell enabled four members to attend the company's 1966 AGM, where they asked a question. Shell's Chair offered an open discussion on the issues, and the first breakthrough had been achieved.

The group built up community contacts in Nigeria, including with MOSOP, the Ogoni movement. Roman Catholic religious orders working there provided up-to-date and accurate information. Hearing real-life stories directly from affected communities gave the group legitimacy in their advocacy work and sharpened their motivation to keep going through setbacks and discouragement.

### **Rollercoaster**

The group's ongoing dialogue with Shell, supported in recent years by ECCR's secretariat, has been something of a rollercoaster. At times it has seemed that real progress was being achieved; at other times, forward movement has been completely stalled. Company policy on corporate responsibility has continued to develop in positive directions, but Shell's performance has generally lagged behind.

Group members say that they knew they were having an increasing impact on the company as their meetings moved upwards at the Shell Centre in London to higher and higher echelons of management. Careful research and constant willingness to continue dialogue have meant that company executives view the organisation's representatives with credibility.

### **Shareholder resolutions**

The first of two ECCR-coordinated shareholder resolutions to Shell AGMs was tabled in 1997, jointly with Pensions Investment Research Consultants (PIRC). Under UK law, filers of a shareholder resolution must either hold at least 5 per cent of total shareholder voting rights or number at least 100 holding a joint total of £10,000 in paid-up share capital. The Oxford Group secured 130 signatories with more than £11,000 share capital.

The resolution raised questions about environmental and human rights impacts of Shell's operations in Nigeria and was seen as a groundbreaking moment for shareholder impact on corporate responsibility. It was supported by large church investors and local authority pension funds as well as individual shareholders. Altogether 17.5 per cent of Shell's shareholding body did not vote with the company at the AGM, a considerable achievement. The *Chemical Engineer* commented: 'A new political era is emerging ... [The resolution] could signal a change in the way multinational companies ... do business.'

In 2001 two members of the Oxford Group visited the Niger Delta as part of an ECCR delegation, reflecting on their findings in *When the Pressure Drops*, published in 2002 as part of ECCR's research report *Telling Shell*.

For ECCR's second shareholder resolution in 2006, the Oxford Group used their shareholder database from the earlier resolution and worked with ECCR's national secretariat. This resolution had a wider focus, highlighting shortcomings in Shell's community and stakeholder consultations, risk analysis, and social and environmental impact analysis with regard to operations in Ireland (Corrib gas field) and Russia (Sakhalin Island) as well as the Niger Delta. The AGM vote was uncannily close to that in 1997, with just over 17 per cent of shares voted for the resolution or withheld.

### **Public education and partnerships**

Besides their work on Shell, the Oxford Group have held regular public education events, for example focusing on shareholder rights and how to be an active shareholder, aimed at helping others engage with large companies and recruiting members. The group has always looked to build partnerships with other like-minded organisations locally, such as churches and the Trade Union International Research and Education Group at Ruskin College. They have also encouraged Oxford colleges to consider responsible investment issues.

Many members of ECCR see the Oxford Group as a model and inspiration and a group of people always willing to share what they have learned.

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