

Shell's Deepening Impasse at Corrib

Christopher Hall

The ECCR-sponsored shareholders' resolution at the Royal Dutch Shell AGM in May received scant notice in the press. ECCR and Shell then failed to find an acceptable date to meet to discuss the Niger Delta. Following press coverage of BP's pipeline difficulties in Alaska, I thought that the *Independent's* business correspondents might be interested in the photographs I had been sent from County Mayo, Ireland, of the visibly corroding pipes waiting to be installed to bring gas ashore from Shell's Corrib gas field.

With the photos, I attached a copy of the letter I had received from Shell Ireland's managing director reassuring me that all was well. The *Independent's* business pages, short of news on the Tuesday after the August Bank Holiday, gave the story 85 column centimetres including the photos. That triggered an email from Shetland reporting that Shell had had severe pipeline problems at Sullom Voe. It also motivated Shell in The Hague to want to meet ECCR almost any time and any place.

Alternative route

So the Vice-President Policy and Issues from The Hague and the External Affairs Manager from Dublin met three members of Oxford ECCR on 20 September in north Oxfordshire. At great length we were assured that Shell wanted to explore with the local County Mayo community an acceptable alternative route to bring the untreated gas ashore from the Corrib field, and then to get an environmental impact assessment approved before starting work, even though this would further delay production until 2009/10.

This was exactly the procedure our shareholders' resolution had requested, though Shell would not admit that. We were also told of their corporation-wide plans for 'project academies', at which their engineers would meet with fence-line community members to learn how to win hearts and minds.

'Technically right and legal does not add up to all that is necessary for a project to go ahead,' we were told.

Meanwhile the removal of 560,000 cubic metres of peat from the Bellanaboy processing site to another location, along a 11 km road which had been upgraded at a cost of €6 million, would be suspended until the spring. The only continuing work on the site would be on the water treatment plant to avoid pollution to the Carrowmore Lake, the major local source of drinking water.

Worldwide experience

Shell Ireland is not willing to consider a close-to-shore platform which would make the high-pressure pipeline unnecessary. They told us that no gas company would choose any other option now other than a landfall site, given the purity of the gas, as little treatment is needed. Platforms introduced unnecessary risk. Shell's partners in the Corrib project, Statoil and Marathon, like Shell, have worldwide experience in such developments.

We were told that many errors and mistakes had been made in regard to consultation and engagement from the beginning with local people. Shell had been humbled - and apologised.

Had Shell learnt their lesson? Two weeks later the news broke that the Irish police were in force confronting protestors at dawn at the Ballanaboy site, and the External Affairs Manager was present. The protestors claimed that they were not stopping contractors entering the site, which is disputed by Shell.

Asked if Shell had sought the agreement of the local community for the work to proceed, the company's response was that all these matters had been covered explicitly in literature distributed widely to the local community, of which they had left copies with us. This demonstrates that Shell understands 'consultation' to be a one-way street.

This seems to be a public relations disaster deepening the impasse. Shell admitted to us that it was not impossible that the whole project might fail.

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