

IEC Workshop – How the Profits are Shared

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So far in this workshop we have focussed on the way in which the EOC businesses put Gospel values into practice within the business. John and Paul have shared their experiences of how living out their faith in the business context has the power to change the business environment. They are strengthened and encouraged through their relationship with other EOC business people.

The EOC, however, is much more than a group of business people trying to live ethically – though this is a very important part of the project, especially in the current context. Donal pointed out in his introduction, the EOC grew out of the Focolare Movement, it has specific aims and it has developed a specific structure in order to deliver those aims.

The EOC businesses, like other businesses, seek produce profits and the aims of the EOC are reflected in the way the profits from the businesses are shared. The inspiration for the EOC is very much the first Christian community where communion was lived out in a very practical way, to the extent that “no-one was in need.” Likewise, the EOC is underpinned by a very deep culture of communion which also generates material sharing.

Chiara Lubich’s inspiration for the EOC was to generate profits which could be shared in communion. So the communion lived within the business would become communion outside the business, with those in need. The proposal is that the profits should be shared in three parts: one part to help those experiencing poverty, one part to build a culture of giving and a third part kept for the development and growth of the company. This sharing in three parts creates a kind of equilibrium where the need to invest for the future is balanced against the social responsibility of the business now.

In 2011, which was a very tough year financially, the EOC businesses redistributed around €1.5 million. The detailed accounts of the EOC are available to download from the website.

So how is this done in practice? Let us take the three parts in turn. The first part goes to help those living in poverty. It is used in a number of different ways. Some of the money is used to help people especially in the developing world with their basic needs – literally a roof over their heads or health needs.

Over time, however, the EOC has gained more experience in this field and a greater focus of this work has been on education and training projects, especially for girls. Through education and professional training it has proven to be a much more successful long-term strategy. In addition, another focus has been on helping people start up micro-enterprises, thus creating employment. This has proven to be very successful in Africa, where it has given rise to new EOC businesses. Examples of projects include the creation of apprenticeships in a textile workshop in the Philippines (Filo D’Oro) and the development of a women’s woollen cooperative in Uruguay.

One particular project which to me sums up the difference the EOC can make is called Della Strada (translated ‘from the street’). When I was in Brazil last summer I met many of the young people involved in the project. Della Strada started just a few years ago as an initiative in Recife to take teenagers off the streets. ‘Street children’ are still a major problem in Brazil’s cities, despite the rapid development, and the Focolare has been working tirelessly to give these children a better future. Joao Bosco Lima de Santana had the idea to involve these teenagers directly in the EOC. He offered them professional training in sewing. Trusting in ‘providence’ and using whatever was donated, they started to make handbags and other items. The result: a new EOC business which makes the most fabulous recycled, ethical handbags and at the same time, gives many disadvantaged young people a bright future.

This profit sharing is mainly done in collaboration with a Non-Governmental Organisation linked to the EOC called AMU or ‘Action for a United World’. AMU shares the same spirit of communion as the EOC and works in close collaboration to identify the right projects. Again, more information on AMU and the specific projects can be found on the website.

The second part of the profits is used to promote a culture of giving or communion. When the EOC started, this is perhaps the most far sighted and original aspect of the project. Not only does it address the needs of those in poverty today, but it also sets its horizons far through forming ‘new people’ as St.Paul says, who share a vision and culture capable of living out the Gospel in the business world. This part of the profits is directed mainly through the Focolare movement and supports the formation centres and publishing houses which the movement has all over the world. Again, a particular focus of this work is young people. Two major projects are currently funded by the EOC. The first is the Sofia Institute – a college which gives graduates an opportunity to learn about a culture based on communion. The second project which the EOC is sponsoring is the Genfest, which aims to connect young people all over the world to bring about a culture of fraternity and communion.

The second part of the profits is also used to fund specific courses and events to promote the EOC throughout the world, as well as the website edc-online.org. In 2011, there were over 20 major conferences related to the EOC, the largest of which was the general assembly in Sao Paolo, Brazil. This was attended by over 600 people from 30 countries.

The third part of the profits, as mentioned, is retained within the businesses to support the development of the business.

As well as sharing the profits formally with the EOC, many businesses also develop their own projects with those living in poverty both locally and internationally. In Ireland, for example, we are currently developing links with a youth centre for deprived young people in Dublin. Other businesses have built connections with EOC businesses in developing countries on their own initiative. In many instances, these relationships are not just about sharing money but really about sharing time and expertise. This is the experience of many pioneers of the EOC who have given everything to make the project a reality.

For all those involved in the EOC, it is about more than sharing profits or living ethically. It is a calling – a vocation – to bring the spirit of communion, which is at the heart of our faith, into the economic world. It is often a difficult choice, but like trail blazers or pioneers, it is an exciting journey into the unknown. Back in 1991, Chiara Lubich called the EOC ‘an appointment with history’. In many ways, her words were prophetic – it was long before the crisis we are now witnessing. Twenty years after the project was launched that appointment seems to have come of age.