CHAPTER THIRTEEN
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# Creating Alternative Political Ecologies through the Construction of Ecovillages and Ecovillagers in Colombia

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## Ecovillages as Alternative Political Ecologies

Ecovillages are spaces and collectivities that are reinventing sustainability in its ecological, economic, communitarian, and worldview dimensions. They are experiences of life in community and in search of a more respectful relationship with the earth, others, the Other, and ourselves. Real and concrete paths for right livelihood and living well, now and in the future, they are pockets of hope. In this sense, ecovillages are laboratories for alternative political ecologies and their cultural and subjective underpinnings. They are experiments in alternative systems of relationships with the natural environment, human communities, productive processes, broader economic dynamics, and state structures. Global ecovillage movement supporters hope they will become lifestyle options "possible for everybody on the planet" (R. Jackson 2004: 2), and a broad range of actors have adapted the highly flexible ecovillage model to their local conditions.

In this chapter, we focus on two cases that highlight the wide range of ecovillage experiences in Colombia and, we hope, help advance the effort to make ecovillages a more widely accessible and realizable political ecological possibility. Beatriz Arjona's story exemplifies the most common ecovillage dynamic in Colombia—that of a disaffected middle- or upper-class urbanite seeking a more fulfilling life through new connections with nature and community. We especially examine the challenges she has faced in becoming an ecovillager, inspired by J. K. Gibson-Graham's assertion that "we must be ready with strategies for confronting what

forcefully pushes back against the discursive imaginings and practical enactments [of] building a different economy" or political ecology (2006: xxii). We then turn to the exceptional case of Nashira, an ecovillage of low-income single mothers (many of whom are victims of violence and displacement) to consider possibilities for developing ecovillages among structurally disadvantaged populations. We hope that these two examples will help combat facile stereotypes of Global North and South that impede a clearer analysis of the actual social conditions that give rise to and constrain ecovillage projects throughout the world.

The longing for more sustainable human settlements has grown in response to the amply documented crises of recent decades, such as: peak oil and human-exacerbated climate change; the exhaustion of natural resources and declines in species, top soils, forest cover, fisheries, and accessible clean water; desertification and deforestation; an ecological footprint that outstrips global carrying capacity; devastating inequality, with more than a billion people living without adequate food and clean water; wars, violence, and massive displacement; the extermination of peoples, cultures, and languages; and the disintegration of families and communities. These crises derive largely from the dynamics of capitalist (and in some cases communist) development, but they do not simply exist in a world "out there." Those of us who participate in these development projects also produce these crises—just as we produce capitalism—through our own actions based on learned and deeply engrained values, desires, and expectations about the material and social conditions in which we "should" live and the social and ecological consequences of "progress" that are visible and acceptable.

As responses to these crises, ecovillages become places for recreating both society and ourselves. Experiences from Colombia show that ecovillages partially deviate from the reproduction of capitalist development by permitting alternative systems of production, consumption, and distribution based on different economic and social logics. This is the source of their radicalism, but also their greatest challenge. The Global Ecovillage Network's Ecovillage Design Education program recognizes the connections between social and subjective transformations: "Amidst these intense challenges, and largely catalyzed by them, lies the prospect for tremendous growth in human potential and consciousness. People and communities all over the globe are coming together to reclaim responsibility for creating their own living situations. … In the process, they are overcoming prior limitations and developing new talents, skills, knowledge and approaches" (Gaia Education 2006: 2). In the stories of Beatriz and Nashira, with additional context from other Colombian ecovillages, we hope to describe some of the new knowledge that has arisen from experi-

**Figure 13.1.** Ceremonial planting of organic rice, beans, sunflowers, and other seeds at the fourth "Llamado de la Montaña," the annual gathering of Colombian ecovillages and alternative communities, in 2010. Photo courtesy of the Colombian Ecovillage and Alternative Communities Network.

ments with alternative political ecologies, communities, and the subjects necessary to give them life.

## Beatriz's Ecovillage Journey

Beatriz began her journey into ecovillages from a highly privileged economic position but with a profound and growing sense of discontentment. As she says:

> It started when I was young, and although I didn't know what was happening within me, it became clear that life should be more interesting, profound, holistic, and transcendent than what I saw in my social, family, and professional circles. Little by little, I felt an existential void growing within me, something I needed to find, something that affirmed my reason for being. By the time I was 38, this void, this imbalance between reason and heart, the growth of my bank account but not my stocks of happiness and fulfillment, provided the basis for my personal change.

Several experiences illuminated my path: living in the Israeli Kibbutz and Moshav and with indigenous communities in the Colombian Amazon, and meeting the Rainbow Caravan of Peace, a nomadic ecovillage that traveled for 13 years around Latin America. Through them, I learned of ecovillages, permaculture, barter, consensus-based collectives, nomadism, pilgrimages, and the return to the simple and natural, spiritual ecology, deep ecology. I learned that it is possible to take a deeper and more holistic approach to life, where everything can be more interrelated, less fragmented and compartmentalized, where my approach to being could be deeper and not only based on reason. I learned that I wanted to walk in peace, with more consistency among thoughts, words, feelings, and action, being more conscious of my ecological footprint, my energy footprint. I learned that part of my mission was to light a beacon in the darkness of the generalized despair of a country with more than 50 years of civil war, with 18,000 violent deaths a year, with 30 children dying each day from malnutrition, with high rates of corruption and impunity, with extreme deterioration of natural resources, deforestation, waters and soils. I wanted to live a way of life centered on good-being (*bien-ser*), good-feeling (*bien-sentir*), and good-living (*bien-vivir*) more than on well-being (*bien-estar*) and well-having (*bien-tener*).[1]

Beatriz was struggling with a cultural or psychosocial contradiction of capitalism: achieving the economic advantages of a good job and a growing bank account pressured her to sacrifice fuller self-realization. Her economic self progressively colonized the intimate, spiritual, and social selves integral to holistic development. Achieving a more balanced life and new consciousness therefore required both internal and external changes. It is not surprising, then, that Beatriz found inspiration not only in spiritual possibilities, but also in political-ecological transformations (ecovillages, permaculture, alternative economies, consensus processes) and alternative ethical frameworks like deep ecology. The new self to whom she aspired was simply inconsistent with participation in the conventional capitalist political economy.

Beatriz was overcome by excitement when she discovered the liberatory possibilities of these alternatives, but her first attempt at change met with resistance:

In 1997, when I shared my ecovillage dream, I found neither understanding nor interest. For everybody in my social world it was just another expression of utopian idealism, of altruism impossible to imagine and bring into being, especially in Colombia. Later, when I tried to buy a small farm where I could begin to live in the countryside, I came across a contradiction: the financial obligations of buying a farm would tie me even more to the work that was hampering my full self-realization. To free myself from the system, I would have to involve myself even more in it.

This is an important lesson about "the things that push back" against change. First, Beatriz encountered resistance even to creatively imagining

other possible worlds. Her utopian thinking was cynically dismissed as an exercise in futility rather than celebrated as a valuable activity with revolutionary potential. This attitude shores up the status quo by stopping change before it starts; it creates an intellectual inertia that reinforces the idea that There Is No Alternative (as Margaret Thatcher famously put it), especially not here, not for us. Brushing aside the lack of support and continuing with her vision, Beatriz encountered a second problem: while she had overcome the intellectual barriers to imagining change, she still had to confront the economic barriers to materializing it. As an intermediate step, she bought an apartment at the edge of the city where she could enjoy the country while working and waiting for the seed of her ecovillage dream to germinate.

Two years later, inspiration struck again when she shared experiences with the Rainbow Caravan of Peace as co-organizer of the Bioregional Peace Gathering. As soon as this event ended, Beatriz threw the European ecovillage directory into her backpack and headed to the beach, full of hope. Unbeknownst to her, this trip was a rite of passage. She had to retreat from her daily life, her usual activities and relationships, and travel page after page into alternative worlds, in order to be reborn:

> There, supported by the immense force of the sea and the full moon, even though I didn't yet know the power of ceremonies, I did a little ritual to consecrate my life to ecovillages and commit myself to realizing my dream. And that's how I sealed my transformation into an ecovillager. And I asked the Great Spirit and the Universe to give me the tools and the wisdom necessary for my work.

She returned a new person with a different role in society, free to begin transforming her world. A couple of months later, her dream clearer and more insistent, Beatriz quit her job and began assembling the group with whom she would start her first ecovillage. Her colleagues and friends responded differently this time. Most admired her decision to put her dreams and happiness ahead of her work and lamented that they could not do the same. Their response reveals another barrier to change. In addition to constrained imaginations and material concerns like salaries, pensions, and health care, many people's identities and social lives are constructed through their activities within the conventional political ecology. To leave one's job in pursuit of something radically different unfixes and threatens this identity.

Beatriz's ecovillage journey has consisted of four experiences that have taught her important lessons about building a utopian dream in our complex reality. Each one can be seen as an experiment with the community structures and human-nature relationships that move her toward the overarching goal of spiritual development and sustainable living. Her first

ecovillage experience lasted two years, during which she and her partner and accomplice Silvio lived with a group of four to seventeen people in Montaña Mágica, near the city of Medellín. They developed collective, egalitarian structures and activities—a shared house and kitchen; a common fund for expenses such as food, utilities, farm maintenance, and new projects; and the operation of a preexisting eco-hotel and small farm—in order to develop a shared commitment to a redesigned community. This was her first time farming and doing construction, but the biggest challenge by far was learning to live in community. The group found that they lacked tools, experiences, and wisdom to coexist in harmony, resolve conflicts, and make consensus an instrument of genuinely egalitarian, collaborative decision making.

When the collective decided to end the experiment, Beatriz and Silvio focused on developing a permaculture project on an adjoining property they had bought to expand Montaña Mágica. Amandaris ("Refuge of Peace" in Sanskrit) was their four-year project, a place to practice permaculture principles and ecovillage technologies. They built a home with traditional technologies, local and recycled materials, composting toilets, and rainwater harvesting; planted medicinal gardens; made wine and preserves from wild and organic fruits; participated in a barter/alternative currency group and the regional ecotourism network; and offered workshops on sustainability, ecovillages, permaculture, and nutrition. At Amandaris, they focused on ecological sustainability and personal growth, and their quick progress shows the relative ease of working in conventional family structures compared to larger groups. But there was something missing. They longed for the support and accompaniment of others and the growth that comes with sharing a life. Community was not just a strategy, a means to an end; it was also a central goal. So when they were ready and a new opportunity for communal living emerged, they left Amandaris and became founding members of Aldeafeliz.

Aldeafeliz began in 2006 through a visioning process led by Carlos Rojas. Out of the two hundred and thirty participants who shared their diverse dreams, twelve people, mostly urban professionals and academics, decided to test communal living on a rented farm an hour from Bogotá. Almost immediately they began developing strategies for the collective purchase of land, agreements for living together, and a membership structure that permitted different levels of involvement. They dedicated existing buildings to the community, forming a collective kitchen, dining room, laundry area, meeting pavilion, office, library, movie theater, and dressing room. Private spaces consisted of tents for the first two years, until some members began constructing their own houses. The community also began consolidating its economic base by planting gardens, improv-

ing coffee and fruit orchards, developing its own products (wine, granola, preserves, coffee, and soaps, among others), receiving visitors, conducting workshops on group dynamics and sustainability, and, recently, developing an eco-spa and offering eco-construction services.

During Aldeafeliz's subsequent productive but sometimes tumultuous years, its members have used a range of tools to develop a spirit of community and consensus processes, including discussion strategies (speaking circles, forums learned from the ZEGG ecovillage in Germany, and an indigenous technique called *mambeo*) and fun and spiritually rich group-building activities like sacred dances, dances of universal peace, yoga, and meditation. Like any collective, Aldeafeliz is growing and changing due to natural turnover of members, but also because residents themselves have developed new interests and capacities, new lifestyles and passions, and new tools for living together. The ecovillage now consists of twenty-nine members, eighteen of whom are residents. Beatriz's two years there were an opportunity for her to learn more about ecovillage living and work on her shadows and ego. In the end, however, she felt a growing distance from the community and realized that this was not the group that would best support her growth and personal journey.

Since 2008, Beatriz and Silvio have lived a fourth experience: a sustainability pilgrimage as volunteers for ecovillages, agroecology projects, and spiritual and alternative communities across Colombia. They are networking, teaching, living, and learning while representing Change the World Colombia and the Colombian Ecovillage Network. They have acquired new knowledge and experiences, woven community and strengthened their network, pollinated projects, and been pollinated in return by new places, people, experiences, and energies. Along the way, they have helped coordinate the Llamados de la Montaña, the annual gatherings of the Colombian Ecovillage Network. Their pilgrimage will continue until their path shows where and with whom they will live the next phase of their journey.

Beatriz's experiences show how personally fulfilling the ecovillage experience can be, but also how difficult it is to step onto this path and find one's home in an alternative political ecology rooted in community. One of the greatest challenges—and one of the biggest concerns of prospective ecovillagers—is to unlearn the sense of privacy and autonomy that seems so "natural" and adopt a new attitude that allows collectives to flourish while accommodating autonomy and individual needs. Challenges arise not only in big decisions such as ecovillage design, but also in the everyday realms of what to cook for dinner, how to wash the dishes, what color the communal house should be, and what music to listen to. Colombian ecovillages have found diverse ways of balancing the personal and the collective—ranging from the collectivization of almost all spaces, times, and

decisions to near-total autonomy in a network of mutually supportive, privately owned, neighboring ecological projects. Some have also found the need to renegotiate this balance as communities mature, families grow, and members' desires change. There is no doubt that, in addition to formal structures and strategies, making ecovillages work depends on bonds of affection, solidarity, and a sense of common purpose.

## The Nashira Ecological Community

While Beatriz began her ecovillage journey from a privileged economic position, many people in the North and South struggle to meet their basic needs. If ecovillages are to be a possibility for humanity, we need to examine the experiences and dilemmas faced in the most difficult conditions as well. What might motivate structurally disadvantaged people to adopt ecovillages, and how can these alternative political ecologies benefit them? How can vulnerable populations manage the economics of the ecovillage transition and ecovillage living, themes that have been challenging even among more privileged people? By examining the significant social, economic, and ecological successes of Nashira, we hope to show the importance and the potential of ecovillages in this context and examine how to make an ecovillage transition viable for people with few economic resources.

The women of Nashira began from extreme underprivilege created by violence, displacement, and urban poverty. Unfortunately, their experience is not rare. Colombia has between 3.9 and 5.5 million internally displaced people (the largest number of any country in the world) who have fled rural areas made increasingly uninhabitable by physical and psychological violence, forced recruitment, land expropriation, and livelihood unsustainability due to illicit crop eradication and effects on nearby licit crops (Reyes Posadas 2009; Ross 2003, 2007).[2] The national consequences of such high levels of displacement include rural depopulation and the restructuring of land tenancy, urban expansion and related problems of service provision and public order, changes in the electoral map, and problems with free expression and political organization (Conferencia Episcopal de Colombia 1995). Displaced families face numerous disadvantages. Almost half of displaced households are headed by single women. Dealing with trauma, lack of social supports, and high rates of illiteracy, they suffer from higher rates of poverty, inadequate housing, and poor health and nutrition than other subgroups among the urban poor. Studies show that 96 percent of displaced families in small- and medium-sized cities are vulnerable to food insecurity, and 76 percent are extremely vulnerable (Pérez

Marcia 2006); these families spend 50 percent of their income on food, often cheap and low-quality items, and 85 percent reduce the number of meals they consume for lack of money (World Food Program 2005).

Governments and nongovernmental organizations have responded with programs to return people safely to their home communities and conventional social supports for their lives in the city. Nashira offers a different kind of response to the physical, psychological, and structural violence experienced by displaced people and the urban poor more generally. Established in 2003 in Palmira, a town located thirty minutes from the city of Cali, the ecological development of Nashira grew out of the Association of Women Heads of Household (ASOMUCAF), an organization led by Angela Cuevas, a feminist, lawyer, and member of the women's peace network. ASOMUCAF formed in 1993 to support women heads of household with low incomes and no access to capital. The group ran a collective paper-recycling project, turning kitchens into workshops for producing paper cups, picture frames, and other decorative objects to sell in a collaborating store in Cali.

By 2003, with the paper project safely under their belt, the women of ASOMUCAF began examining other ways to improve their lives. They were especially concerned with supplementing their incomes, addressing housing needs, and improving their families' health and nutrition. None of the women imagined creating an ecovillage, but as they discussed these three issues in tandem, the general contours of an alternative political ecology emerged. The experiment became possible when Cuevas donated three hectares (seven and a half acres) of her family's land, as well as an extraordinary amount of time and energy to help raise funds and design the project. With the land, their far-fetched idea became a real possibility, and the women of ASOMUCAF developed a clearer vision: Nashira would provide a space for eighty-eight member families to live and work together, improve their food security, and earn a minimum-wage income to complement earnings from other livelihood activities.

Today, they have fully designed the site and finished building the first forty-one eco-houses; they continue to raise funds for the remaining forty-seven. Each family works in one of Nashira's eleven agroecology production groups focused on raising small animals (hens, guinea pigs, ducks, rabbits, or quail), tending fruit orchards and making fruit products (especially derived from bananas, plantains, and noni), worm composting, agritourism, and a green market. These groups improve nutrition and increase self-sufficiency and sustainability while providing earnings that are reinvested and divided evenly among member families. With the help of Change the World, Nashira is also creating the first Colombian solar restaurant.

To a large extent, Nashira's members' principal interest is economic—not social, spiritual, or ecological—and the ecovillage structure provides a very different set of possibilities in this regard. Rather than depending entirely on competition in the wage labor market, they have re-appropriated the means of production and collectivized the work process. The women and their extended families helped build their own homes, providing "sweat equity" that reduced monetary costs. By ameliorating major sources of vulnerability like housing, nutrition, and income problems, these women have shown that ecovillages could be important elements of social policy for marginalized populations. As a fundamental reorganization of political-ecological dynamics, ecovillages address root causes of vulnerability and poverty while providing holistic solutions that incorporate economic, ecological, and sociocultural issues. In this sense, they offer a valuable counterproposal to conventional developmentalist "solutions" like economic integration, job creation, microfinance, and safety nets.

While the economy might have been their primary interest, some of the most important benefits for the women of Nashira have been psychosocial. Elcy, a mother of seven and former president of ASOMUCAF, explains that she joined the Nashira project because her housing situation was insecure and made it difficult for her to work and her children to study. But like many of the members, when she describes Nashira, she emphasizes how it taught her that she can face people and talk to them without fear, without a sense of inferiority, and that she does not need to depend on a man in order to live. As a woman she is able to improve herself, take control of her life, pay the bills, and even pick up a shovel to grow food or a hammer to build her own house. Although they are not collectivizing their daily lives to the extent of Beatriz and other ecovillages, they too have developed new skills for group work and solidarity. As Elcy states, "one can accomplish anything that one proposes" and "as a group we can do things even better and quicker." This new sense of capability and agency is a major triumph, as important perhaps as the economic security of a home and sustenance, because it interrupts the psychosocial effects of structural violence that tend to reproduce poverty across generations. Nashira achieved this by actively involving women in group work, dialogues, design processes, home construction, agricultural production, and a broad range of training courses. The material, psychological, and social benefits of Nashira's experimentation have combined to permit Elcy's greatest pride: all her children have completed university.

The ecological element has also not been ignored at Nashira, and goes far beyond gardening. The community designed and built prefabricated eco-homes made of recycled materials, including reclaimed concrete, industrial ash, and refurbished electrical installations. Also—with help from

Change the World, the employees' fund of Electricité de France, and a water resources research institute at the Universidad del Valle (CINARA)—they developed community-level sustainable infrastructure, including artificial wetland wastewater treatment systems, a solar restaurant, and dry composting toilets made of local bamboo and plastic bottles filled with reclaimed materials. The community also offers agritourism options to educate visitors about sustainability.

One of the most important questions we need to address to make ecovillages a possibility for all people is how to make them economically viable, particularly for people who lack start-up capital and economic cushions to sustain them during transition periods. Nashira represents a new current of ecovillages that do not aspire to autonomous self-reliance. In fact, with only three hectares of land for eighty-eight families, there is no chance of becoming food self-sufficient. Instead, ecovillage economies are increasingly designed as complementary economies, with links to government and the private sector as appropriate (Dawson 2006, Chapter 12, this volume). The women of Nashira have managed these alliances in very effective and creative ways, taking advantage of special resources available to marginalized communities. With the help of Angela Cuevas, they have leveraged finances from USAID and both municipal and state governments. Nongovernmental organizations like Change the World have provided training and advisory services. And the most innovative approach was a connection forged with the Fundación Pagesos Solidaris, an organization that linked Spanish agricultural businesses with migrant workers committed to social work in their home communities. Through this program, thirty-nine men and women traveled to Spain under an agreement that they would donate a portion of their earnings not to their own families but to the entire Nashira collective to help construct the first forty-one houses. Communities like the urban poor and displaced people certainly face economic disadvantages, but they can also make claims to state resources that are not available to other social groups. Nashira has shown that well-organized communities can take advantage of state resources and capitalist integration and collectivize the appropriation and distribution of surplus in a way that supports the development of alternative—and hopefully more ecologically and socioeconomically sustainable—communities.

## Discussion

One of the most important tasks before us today is to create more ecologically sustainable, socially just, and personally fulfilling communities.

Ecovillages stand at the forefront of this movement, providing valuable experiments in what alternative political ecologies might look like, what strategies might bring them into being and sustain them, and what types of personal changes we need to adopt to become subjects capable of enacting these alternatives. Although much of the ecovillage literature has focused on examples from the Global North, prominent authors have begun to recognize Southern ecovillage projects as well (Dawson 2006, Chapter 12, this volume). This is encouraging. To make ecovillages a possibility for all people, we need to analyze experiments from around the globe, considering how lessons from one context might be applied in another.

However, effective analysis requires that we describe non-Northern experiences without falling into common stereotypes of Southerners as either fully comprehensible via the lens of poverty or as idyllic villagers with a natural, intuitive, almost magical "traditional" knowledge of ecovillage living. Such essentialized preconceptions impede critical reflection on the actual lived experiences that give rise to and result from alternative political ecologies in the Global South. The same might be said for stereotypes of the North as a land of economic privilege, social alienation, and lifestyle-based ecological devastation. The truth is far more interesting and useful.

For example, Ross Jackson's argument that "people in the South grasp the revolutionary potential of ecovillages much quicker than Northerners" because "they still have their social fabric more or less intact and see the ecovillage model as fully compatible with their village-based culture" leads us to misunderstand the context for and challenges of creating ecovillages in the South (2004: 8). While some places match his description, many people in the South live in cities, having never known village life or having abandoned it long ago, and their social fabrics and cultural dynamics reflect this. Most importantly, many of these urban dwellers actively reject "village-based cultures" and ecovillage ideals of material simplicity, traditional/appropriate technologies, and food, water, and energy self-reliance in favor of hegemonic notions of wealth, development, and progress. Finally, the highly unequal (and worsening) distribution of land and the willingness of the elite to employ violence to resist redistribution pose serious obstacles to broad-scale ecovillage development. Far more than romantic stereotypes, we need honest discussion of the real challenges to imagining, promoting, creating, and maintaining alternative political ecologies such as ecovillages in the South.

In this chapter, we have offered a glimpse of the diverse ecovillage experiences in Colombia. Colombia has been a particularly fertile ground for ecovillage experiments. As of 2010, the Colombian Network of Ecovil-

lages and Alternative Communities includes fifteen active communities and several in various stages of development.[3] Together, they house fewer than two hundred people living on less than two hundred and fifty hectares. This group is small, no doubt, but hopeful that their experiments will generate a snowball effect of inspired thought and action.

Each community has devised its own approach to ecological, economic, social, and worldview transformations, and they have shared lessons through annual encounters and the wanderings of ecovillage pilgrims. Ecologically, they have advanced in eco-construction, food security and sovereignty, appropriate technologies and alternative energies, and biodiversity and watershed conservation. Economically, they have sought to support themselves by living simply and self-provisioning to the greatest extent possible, generating incomes through individual, communal, and mixed enterprises, developing commercial and barter relationships among ecovillages, and tapping into external resources (as illustrated by Nashira). Developing the social dimension of ecovillages has benefited from diverse communication tools and tremendous intention and energy dedicated to creating "community glue" through women's circles, group prayer and meditation, techniques for "emotional discharge," collective work, the assumption of big responsibilities like hosting the annual ecovillage gathering, and a very healthy dose of fun. This is certainly a revolution with dancing! Ecovillagers often begin with an unconventional worldview and seek to deepen their commitment to sustainability and justice through economic, ecological, and social life changes; many also pursue worldview changes directly through spiritual work, drawing on indigenous, alternative Judeo-Christian and Eastern traditions (Arjona 2010).

The two experiences we have highlighted here are instructive for ecovillages in the North and South. Beatriz's story reveals the material and conceptual challenges to becoming an ecovillager, as well as several viable strategies for exploiting fissures in the hegemony of the conventional political ecology in order to liberate imaginations for the construction of alternatives. Resignation and fear can be overcome—and discontent made productive—through inspiring encounters with actually existing alternatives. Also, the threat of losing a (conventional) identity can be minimized by assuming a new and celebrated ecovillager identity. Ecovillage networks provide a community of dreamers to support this new identity.

The women of Nashira demonstrate how people around the world might overcome the economic limitations to ecovillage living. They took advantage of particular resources that are not universally accessible, but they also used bonds of trust and solidarity to effectively combine non-

capitalist labor (such as production groups and sweat equity) with capitalist (migrant) labor within a framework that collectivizes resources and surplus for common goals. Other ecovillages can also put the conventional economy to their service by participating in ways that meet community needs, generate and collectivize surplus, and enrich the commons (see Gibson-Graham 2006).

Finally, it is important to recognize that the challenges that ecovillagers face do not end once the village is up and running. As Beatriz explained, turning a utopian dream into a complex reality takes ongoing work that is both external—in the realm of community relations and ecological or productive projects—and internal and very intimate. Becoming an ecovillager is a commitment to working on one's ego and self-limitations, supported by the sometimes unflattering reflections shared by other community members and in light of the grand responsibility of living differently. It is a commitment to transcend jealousies, conflicts, and self-centeredness in order to develop a community that supports spiritual, social, environmental, and economic change and more profound self-realization.

In his "critical introduction" to political ecology, Paul Robbins mentions the need for more "political ecologies of success" (2004: 213). It is premature to treat ecovillages as successes; even loyal ecovillage promoters repeatedly emphasize that the ideal ecovillage does not yet exist (R. Jackson 2004; Gaia Trust n.d.; H. Jackson 1998). As Beatriz says:

> The road rolls on ahead of us, even after ten years of walking the ecovillage path, of learning and unlearning, of transforming difficulties into challenges, limitations into learning opportunities, relationships with others into growth in the deepest parts of my soul, and of searching for partners in a collective life that enhances our personal and spiritual growth, our service to Mother Earth and other humans.

Ecovillages may not be (finished) successes, but we like to think of them as experiments in alternative political ecologies, works in progress inspired by imagined possibilities. This very idealism may mean that "success" is never achieved—always lying ahead in a future that we will create through continued hard work and self-critique—but this constant ethical striving might just be the movement's true success. Ecovillagers in Colombia are walking toward a dream, toward diverse dreams, and learning to integrate economic, ecological, social, and cultural change as part of a greater transformation of both society and themselves. In the process they are demonstrating that "*sí se puede*!" It is possible to live more sustainably, reduce our ecological footprints, unlearn competitive and individualistic attitudes, and live in community. And through these communities they are trying to create a future of greater harmony, peace, and sustainability in a country—and world—in need.

# Notes

1. All extended quotations from Beatriz Arjona are from a series of conversations between the two authors during the initial writing of this chapter, 7–10 May 2010, near Pereira, Colombia.
2. Counting the displaced people in Colombia provokes heated debate, but the population is likely between the 3.9 million people officially registered with the government since 2000 and the 5.5 million counted by the reputable non-governmental organization Consultoría para los Derechos Humanos y Desplazamiento (CODHES) since 1985 (CODHES 2012; IDMC 2012). Displaced people comprise approximately 8–11 percent of the national population, the equivalent of twenty-six to thirty-six million internal refugees in the United States.
3. This is not meant to belittle other ecovillage and sustainability projects in Colombia, but rather to highlight those that self-identify as ecovillages and work to strengthen the Colombian Ecovillage Network. Other experiences include a number of ecovillages that have not joined the network and at least thirty possible ecovillages in formation.

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