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Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society
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Anna Kovasna

Collaborative Research: Examples and Lessons from a Baltic Sea Project

“Ecovillages for Sustainable Rural Development,” or ECOVILLAGES, is a collaborative research project in which ecovillagers and academics, and ecovillager academics, aim to advance the political recognition, number, resources, and influence of ecovillages in the Baltic Sea Region. My role in the project is to represent the Swedish Ecovillage Network, which means I am involved mainly as an activist. I am, however, also a PhD candidate in social anthropology, researching alternative economics and culture in ecovillages. Here, I am writing neither as an official representative of the project nor of my own research, but as somebody who is trying to combine my roles as activist and academic within the ecovillage movement.

The ECOVILLAGES project builds on a proclaimed conviction that ecovillages are a solution to many problems facing society today. It also involves actors with different experiences and approaches to implementing and spreading that solution. As such, it highlights important issues and possibilities that emerge when academics, activists, and activist academics attempt to work together to change society. I will return to these issues, since I feel they are at the core of any collaborative project for social change. First, however, I will explain the origins, characteristics, goals, and accomplishments of the project so far.

ECOVILLAGES and ECOVILLAGESplus at a Glance

ECOVILLAGES is a three-year project funded by the EU Baltic Sea Region Programme and the European Rural Development Fund. Started in February 2011, it is a flagship of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region and a Baltic 21 Lighthouse Project. Connected to the project is ECOVILLAGESplus, which is funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency’s (SIDA) Baltic Sea Unit and enables partners from Russia and several Swedish organizations to also participate in ECOVILLAGES. I will from now on use the capitalized word ECOVILLAGES or “the project” to refer to both these projects, since, in practice, they function almost as one.

In total, the project involves 15 partner organizations, seven of which are academic institutions; seven are ecovillages, ecovillage networks, or thematically related organizations; and one is the Council of Baltic Sea States. The participation of two partners from Belarus is financed through the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument, although actual national permission for their participation has not yet come through.

Project Partners, ECOVILLAGES and ECOVILLAGES plus

Lead Partner	Lithuanian Institute of Agrarian Economics
Project Partners	Centre of Environmental Solutions, Belarus Latvian State Institute of Agrarian Economics MTT Agrifood Research, Finland Suderbyn Cooperative Society, Sweden West Pomeranian Business School, Poland
Associated Partners	Centre for Independent Social Research, Russia Council of Baltic Sea States Ecohome NGO, Belarus Forest Technical Academy, Russia Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) Europe Ekobyarnas Riksorganisation, the Swedish ecovillage network Permaculture Sweden Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences ZEGG Ecovillage, Germany

Origins

From its very origin, ECOVILLAGES has blended influences from the two initiatives from which it sprouted: one originating in the ecovillage movement, the other in an academic institution. The former was a project entitled Healthy Lifestyles in the Baltic Region, which was initiated by GEN Europe and financed by the SIDA Baltic Sea Unit. The lead partner was Holma Folkhögskola in Sweden (an adult education center). The

latter was an EU-financed project on the role of permaculture¹ in farming, planned by the Lithuanian Institute of Agrarian Economics (LAEI). Looking for potential partners, LAEI contacted Permaculture Sweden, which is one of the founders of *Holma Folkhögskola*. Within the framework of the Healthy Lifestyles project there were already plans for a regional meeting to bring together various actors in the field. The result was a gathering in an ecovillage in Estonia in 2009, where most of the partners, both academic and non-academic, of the current ECOVILLAGES and ECOVILLAGESplus projects were present.

After this gathering, LAEI reformulated their project to focus on ecovillages and invited various partners to join. At the same time, Permaculture Sweden, the Swedish Ecovillage Association, and the Russian participants continued their dialogue, which led to ECOVILLAGESplus, with Permaculture Sweden as lead partner. All members of ECOVILLAGESplus are associated partners in the larger project. As can be seen in the list of project partners, it proved quite difficult to find actual ecovillages willing to become main partners in the project, an issue further discussed below.

Goals

As stated in the project plan, ECOVILLAGES is aimed at “helping our society to get closer to nature again and to develop new ways of living together on the land in a genuinely more sustainable way.” This is to be done through promoting the ecovillage concept, which is seen as an innovation offering solutions to problems related to the distribution of resources, climate change, and the social life in the region. Ecovillages are presented as “an alternative to the individualistic, consumerist, and commodified systems many cities represent.”

The three main goals of the project are to create toolkits for ecovillage developers, to formulate and disseminate policy recommendations, and to strengthen the capacity of local ecovillages and ecovillage networks and their visibility in society. In addition, the project is intended to promote knowledge transfer between ecovillages and the general public, as well as between different parts of the region. These aims are to be reached through scientific research in ecovillages and through partnerships between

¹ The word permaculture is a contraction of “permanent agriculture” or “permanent culture.” Permaculture is concerned with the conscious design and maintenance of agriculturally productive ecosystems, which have the diversity, stability, and resilience of natural ecosystems. The aim is to integrate landscape and people, providing food, energy, shelter, and other material and non-material needs in a sustainable way.

researchers and ecovillagers. In this sense, academics are engaged in this project in order to support and collaborate with ecovillages in bettering society, not to conduct studies purely for the sake of research.

Expected Results and Outputs

In more concrete terms, the project will produce three manuals for launching and sustaining ecovillages: one about permaculture in the Baltic Sea region, one for sustainable housing and green architecture, and one covering guidelines for community living, including community planning and development, outreach and marketing, community businesses, consensus decision-making, and meeting facilitation. The focus is on spreading information about best practices and common pitfalls. It is expected that these manuals can be transferred to and used in many different contexts, not just in ecovillages, and not just in the Baltic Sea region.

The manuals will be based on a combination of surveys, case studies, and interviews that—together with analyses of the main political, legal, economic, and environmental challenges for ecovillages in the region—also form the basis of the policy recommendations on how to support and facilitate ecovillage life. The aim is, naturally, that these recommendations are put into practice.

To strengthen the ecovillage movement and awareness of it in the region, the project is also responsible for starting national and regional ecovillage networks, formulating and implementing an ecovillage internship program, constructing an online tool for ecovillages to assess their progress towards sustainability, and starting what is called the Ecovillage Road. This latter program is essentially an interactive online database for tourism, marketing, and networking, with the purpose of facilitating ecovillage visits, outreach, and knowledge exchange.

The Role and Nature of Research

Research plays a key role in fulfilling the aims of the project, since it provides the basis for both manuals and recommendations and, to some extent, for networking and the dissemination of knowledge. It consisted of an initial survey of all existing ecovillages and ecovillage initiatives in the participating countries, which was focused on actually

locating them and on collecting data on each, such as the age, size, and general characteristics. The survey was followed by a more in-depth study based on physical visits and semi-structured interviews covering social, cultural, economic, ecological, and technological aspects of ecovillage life. The questionnaire used in these interviews was constructed by all partners together, giving ecovillagers and related organizations significant influence over the information gathered and enabling them to adjust the questions to be more relevant for respondents.

In some countries, these interviews were carried out with all known ecovillages; in others, such as in Sweden and Russia, the total number of villages was too great, so a sample was selected. In total, interviews were held with representatives from 44 ecovillages: 12 in Sweden, 12 in Finland, six in Russia, seven in Latvia, and seven in Lithuania. While the results of the questionnaire are still being analyzed, it is already clear that the sample is too small and conditions too varied to draw statistical conclusions. Instead, the material gives a general overview of tendencies in the region and makes it possible to select especially interesting cases for further qualitative studies. These coming case studies will focus on specific aspects of problems, solutions, and innovations in various ecovillages.

Practical Notes on Collaboration

Finding Partners and Building Partnerships

Achieving many of the project goals requires close cooperation between researchers and ecovillagers. However, the makeup of the project partners varies by country. In Sweden, for example, one ecovillage and the national ecovillage network are project partners; whereas in Poland, the project partner, the West Pomeranian Business School, initially did not know of any ecovillages in the country. Other countries fall somewhere in between.

As mentioned earlier, it was difficult to find ecovillages and related organizations willing to become full project partners. One of the explanations given was that ecovillagers and people who spend a lot of time doing voluntary work in organizations tend to be very busy with their existing work and have little time for additional activities. Also, insecurity about workloads, requirements, and responsibilities, as well as a reluctance to

be financially responsible for a large project, seemed to deter potential participants. This was true even when there was sufficient funding to pay people for their time. Thus, this is clearly an issue to be reckoned with in planning similar projects.

The project must also find organizations able to take responsibility for disseminating the toolkits, maintaining the Ecovillage Road database, and building networks once it is completed. In fact, in September 2011, the project goals were revised to include not only increased public and political recognition, but also increased sustainability of transnational cooperative structures in the ecovillage movement.

To achieve this, the project has begun encouraging the establishment of new national and regional networks, as well as strengthening existing ones. Also, it is now collaborating closely with the European ecovillage association, Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) Europe, which is part of GEN International, an NGO with consultative status at the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) commission and a partner of United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR). The collaboration with GEN also increases the chances of the results spreading beyond the Baltic region. The project will use GEN's database for its web platform and Ecovillage Road, and new networks will become members of GEN. The project also supports GEN Europe's declaration on the importance of low-impact settlements in the EU, and considers this a part of its work for political recognition. Hence, collaboration is beneficial for all parties involved, as well as crucial for the success of the project.

Who Does What?

Regarding the distribution of tasks, the basic idea is that academic partners are responsible for research, while non-academic partners provide the practical knowledge needed for implementing the project, a task ultimately carried out by all partners. In Sweden and other countries with strong movements, many activities are actually carried out by ecovillagers themselves. In other places, it is the academics who host the meetings, trying to motivate ecovillagers to organize themselves. The future will reveal the consequences of these differences.

In fact, the example of Sweden says a lot about how collaborative projects may potentially strengthen social movements. In Sweden, all local activities are carried out by the Swedish ecovillage network. Thus, Swedish ecovillage activists organized the national

network meeting required by the project and also gathered all data in the scientific investigation. Representatives from the Swedish ecovillage network thereby came into personal contact with all ecovillages in Sweden, visiting many and gathering extra data of specific relevance to the network's own work. Also, while only one ecovillage gathering was financed by the project to fulfil its goals, the overwhelmingly positive response to this meeting led to another gathering a few months later, as well as to plans for a third one to take place in the fall of 2012. In these meetings, the network has been able to discuss the data gathered by the project, enabling a quick translation of this information into practical tools for strengthening local initiatives. Of course, many of these things could have happened without the organization's involvement in the ECOVILLAGES project, but in this case the financial resources and expert help in both data analysis and political work have been crucial for the organization's rapid growth in size and activity. The strength of the Swedish ecovillages movement has, thus, already increased as a result of the project—a required outcome of the project in itself.

Challenges, Issues, and Promises of Collaboration

Who Owns the Project?

None of the aforementioned moves involving GEN Europe were uncontroversial. Some partners have expressed fears that control will slip out of the hands of those responsible when ownership of both the process and the product is handed over to the ecovillage movement. There are also concerns about for whom the project really exists and whether the main goal is to strengthen already existing initiatives or to inspire the public to follow their lead, thus expanding the ecovillage movement. Here, I see a dividing line between academic and ecovillage partners. While ecovillagers will more likely want to empower the movement to spread its own message to the public, some academic partners are more focused on using the project's research to reach the public directly.

This brings me back to the issue of social change and how it can be realized. Even though it is clear that collaboration between researchers and ecovillagers is both fruitful and necessary to realize the vision of this project, what that vision is, who owns it, and how it best becomes reality are still debated. Another example in the same vein comes from the project's kick-off meeting. One participant had come to research and implement large-scale solutions for the agricultural and rural challenges in one of

the countries involved. However, other participants expressed that their inspiration to participate stemmed from examples of deeply spiritual or experimental communities, to which the former participant replied exasperatedly, “but how can I go and tell the farmers of my country that they should be like Hare Krishna!”

How to Communicate and Create Trust Between Partners?

Luckily, differences such as these are being worked out as understanding and trust build up between partners, as well as between the project and the ecovillages participating in the research. Ideally, enough trust and understanding should be established to make questions of ownership obsolete. How long this process takes, however, seems to depend on the backgrounds and ideas of the various participants.

In all cases, open communication and a will to meet and understand the other on equal footing seems important. What this project and others like it entail is a meeting of people with different worldviews, ways of life, styles of interacting and communicating, and, often, also social statuses and power within larger society. This meeting takes place not only during data collection, but is also at the heart of the project. In ECOVILLAGES, communication is made easier by the fact that some academics involved are also personally engaged in the environmental or ecovillage movements. There are also, naturally, project participants from the movement who are also academics. Although their position may sometimes be complicated, to me, these activist academics play an important role in harnessing the potential for the transformative action inherent to this kind of collaborative effort.

How Useful Are Shared Beliefs and Principles?

Another interesting question is how important it is to have shared beliefs. Does collaboration or research in a setting such as the ECOVILLAGES project require shared beliefs to create trust and enable cooperation, or does being motivated by one’s convictions undermine the validity and credibility of the research? In the case of the ECOVILLAGES project, I would argue that it helps to be enthusiastic about the aims of the project, especially for scientists. This is not the same as being uncritical. Critical research is necessary to improve both understandings and possible solutions in any situation. Just as a good friend is someone who knows you and allows you to grow by giving honest feedback, good collaborative research can unite different people under a common purpose to better understand and improve both themselves and what they do. Perhaps what is needed to

accomplish this is not faith in a specific model or solution, but a shared belief that another world is possible. Such a belief is sometimes considered naïve, but, as anthropologist and political activist David Graeber points out, it is as difficult to know for sure if another world is impossible as it is to know it is possible.² Being a cynic is easy, and perhaps researchers could be more daring in looking for ways to realize that other world. Maybe a good place to start is by researching and collaborating with existing attempts at finding alternatives.

What Are The Roles of Academics and Activists?

I think the ECOVILLAGES project demonstrates some of the benefits and opportunities collaboration between ecovillages and academia can provide in supporting the movement and in bringing about societal change. It also hints at the possibilities for anchoring research and achieving a real bottom-up perspective in research design, as well as the translation of results into action.

Some of the points I have raised here, however, highlight another interesting issue: what roles do the different actors in a collaborative project play? Are the academics working for the activists, or the other way around? How can we find a balance between a truly collaborative, mutually beneficial project and everybody's expectations and needs?

Another aspect of the same issue has to do with how to bring about social change. Should academics use their analyses and conclusions to lead people to a brighter future, perhaps through collaboration with politicians? Or, should academics use their skills to understand larger contexts and implications, but then offer their knowledge and conclusions to the public as suggestions for how to improve or change, while leaving the changing itself in the hands of people on the ground? In short, should science lead or support endeavours to change society in a more sustainable direction, and how can we find a way to avoid the science-society dichotomy altogether and simply stand together as people striving to improve our societies?

Lessons from the ECOVILLAGES Project

Does looking at ECOVILLAGES during its inception and first year provide any clues for how these questions may be answered? One thing that stands out is the importance

² David Graeber, *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2004), 10.

of the collaboration already existing in the project's planning stages and the research conducted within it. In this particular case, goals, outcomes, and focal points are still debated and sometimes revised, but the fact that both academic and ecovillage partners have been involved from the very beginning means both have a voice and there is a foundation for which all partners are responsible and that they support. It is important to remember, however, that from the beginning it was difficult to find ecovillages willing to become full partners in the project. Therefore, an important question that remains is how to make similar projects interesting enough to outweigh the costs of participation for those they primarily concern.

A second salient lesson is that the project description, quoted in the beginning of this paper, declares a shared belief in ecovillages as agents of positive change. To me, this seems to create a cornerstone of trust between different partners and a belief in the good intentions of all involved. It also allows arguments to focus on how to bring about that change in the most efficient way, rather than on whether ecovillages are good or bad models for the future.

Speaking of arguments, I must once again bring up the importance of open and clear communication. To me, it is obvious that, despite the collaborative planning, joint implementation, and shared beliefs, the partners and associates in ECOVILLAGES came into the project with different expectations, needs, and ideas about their roles and those of the others involved. To honestly explore these differences as they occur—or, ideally, even before they do—is important, as is the mutual willingness to find a common solution.

From the perspective of a member of the Swedish Ecovillage network, I think ECOVILLAGES has already benefited the ecovillage movement in the Baltic region. Moreover, it has done so without any major disappointments or conflicts that I am aware of, which might be a sign that it actually has something to teach about collaborative research projects. Still, the project is far from finished. What it will finally teach us and whether it manages to reach its goal of spreading the ecovillage idea to change wider society remains to be seen.