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Research in Community: Collaborating for a Culture of Sustainability

Ecovillages are a perfect example of efforts to create a “culture of sustainability” (see “A Culture of Sustainability” on page 57 of this volume). To fully explore their potential, Research in Community (RIC), an inter- and transdisciplinary research network, was created to promote research on and education for so-called “pioneers

of change”²—in particular, those who integrate ecological, social, and economic sustainability into a communal lifestyle. RIC aims to motivate pioneers pursuing such goals to work more closely with scientists and researchers. At the same time, it hopes to bring this multifaceted and highly relevant research field to the attention of both students and established academics. Such transdisciplinary collaboration will enable the further creation and transmission of knowledge of and for social transformation.

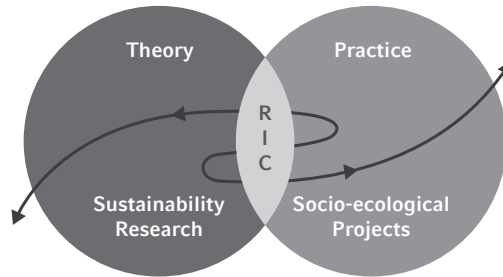


Figure 1: This diagram depicts the position and function of RIC, illustrating the so-far-small interface between pioneers of change and science, as well as their common potential for contribution toward social transformation.

History

We created RIC in 2007, as we began working on our dissertations about intentional communities, namely ecovillages. We found ourselves confronted with a research field that was still largely undeveloped and unstructured, in spite of the fact that ecovillages offer much potential for academic inquiry into how to achieve sustainability and societal transformation. We believed something had to be done to change this. Since then, RIC has been working to make processes of research on intentional communities smoother, more transparent, and more fruitful for all concerned.

This essay was originally written in German and has been translated for *RCC Perspectives* by Brenda Black.

- 1 Members of the Research in Community Executive Board.
- 2 German Advisory Council on Global Change (WBGU), *World in Transition: A Social Contract for Sustainability* (Berlin: WBGU, 2011).

In 2011 RIC acquired nonprofit status, further establishing itself as an institution. We have also broadened the scope and reach of our research network, extending our focus beyond ecovillages and incorporating other social and ecological projects, such as Transition Town initiatives.³

RIC's Work to Date

Since the network's establishment, meetings, colloquia, and workshops have been held regularly. Its first inter- and transdisciplinary research project was carried out in 2009 and 2010 in cooperation with the ecovillage Sieben Linden (see "For Whom? For the Future! The Ecovillage Sieben Linden as a Model and Research Project" on page 135). In 2010 and 2011, Andreas, representing RIC, served as an advisor for the "Transition Journey,"⁴ a partnership between five European ecovillages sponsored by the European Union with the goal of sharing knowledge and raising awareness to mobilize a social transformation in their respective regions. In addition, RIC researchers traveled around Europe, the United States, and Australia to collect data and to form ties between researchers and people from the global intentional community movement. In order to facilitate research efforts in this growing field, we created a database that includes all the ecovillage research that has been conducted to date, making it easier to access the results of existing studies.

In addition, to advance education in sustainable development, RIC has organized several public workshops and a class on ecovillages at LMU Munich during the 2009–2010 winter semester. Advising students and assisting with research projects are also regular RIC activities. Public interest in RIC is growing, as can be seen in the increasing number of invitations to conferences and requests to give talks and presentations. The highlight of 2011 was the workshop held in cooperation with the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society called "Realizing Utopia: Ecovillage Endeavors and Explorations," which gave rise to this *RCC Perspectives* issue.

3 Unlike most ecovillages, Transition Towns are not communities with the intent to create new settlements. Rather, they are existing communities that are trying to make the transition toward more sustainable lifestyles and resilience, especially in response to climate change and peak oil. The movement started around 2006 in the United Kingdom; see <http://www.transitionnetwork.org/> for more information.

4 See <http://www.siebenlinden.de/pdf/TransitionJourneyBookletFinal.pdf>.

Moreover, from the very beginning, RIC has stressed the relevance of scientific research to applied projects that are striving for a culture of sustainability, pointing out the advantages of transdisciplinary approaches. In Germany, sustainability has become an increasingly important topic in scientific and educational policy, at least since the above-quoted flagship report by the WBGU and the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research's declared emphasis on research in sustainable development through its initiative "Project Earth: Our Future."⁵ Throughout Germany the terms "pioneer of change," "research for transformation," and "transdisciplinary" are appearing more and more at conferences and in academic papers. It seems to be a particularly ripe point in time, as researchers in various disciplines and politicians of different parties are all in agreement about the need for a societal shift. They all emphasize the important role of citizens in making this happen. How this shift will happen is still unclear, and there are different assumptions about what the new society needs to look like. Even so—and this cannot be emphasized enough—people from all areas of society have come together in the discussion and the search for solutions.

Thus, we are in an exciting time: numerous pioneers of change have emerged and the call for research on these pioneers has been sounded. But, so far, few productive collaborations have been formed. To help remedy this situation, RIC has been an active participant in various events taking place across Germany.⁶ And we have already been recognized for our work. In 2009 we received some funding through the initiative "*Sei ein Futurist*" ("Be a futurist"), and we were nominated for the "*Ideen-Initiative Zukunft*" ("Ideas for a Better Future" initiative), a cooperation between UNESCO and the German drugstore company dm. Most significantly, RIC has been named an official project of the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005–2014) for the second time in a row.

Current and Future Plans

Together with the Heinrich Böll Foundation, we will be convening a symposium on pioneers of change in October 2013. Researchers and representatives of social and ecological projects, as well as politicians and research sponsors, will gather to develop concrete

5 See <http://www.bmbf.de/de/17858.php>.

6 See <http://www.researchincommunity.net/index.php?id=3>.

ideas for transformation and transformative research. The symposium will commence a series of additional events and research projects to further develop these ideas.

Also, RIC is in the process of designing and establishing a real world “laboratory” for a culture of sustainability,⁷ which has taken shape as a transdisciplinary collaboration with the *Projekt Lebensdorf* (Living Village Project), an intentional community that is inspired by ecovillage ideas, but is striving to reach a scale and level of accessibility much greater than is possible within the ecovillage model.⁸ This will be the first project to work closely with researchers from the very beginning.

Furthermore, the online presence of RIC will be expanded by adding an interactive platform, which will facilitate the exchange of information and arrangement of research projects. To this end, RIC encourages researchers to become informed about potential topics of investigation and to initiate projects with roots in a multitude of academic disciplines.

Today, RIC is an ideal meeting place for researchers, pioneers of change, politicians, and other members of the general public. For a “great transformation” to take place, all these actors must work together. We are looking forward to what the future will bring.

7 Uwe Schneidewind, “Stellungnahme für das Öffentliche Fachgespräch zum Thema ‘Nachhaltigkeit und Transformationsforschung,’” (Deutscher Bundestag, 2012), http://www.bundestag.de/bundestag/ausschuesse17/a18/anhoerungen/Nachhaltigkeits-_und_Transformationsforschung/ADrs_17-281_a.pdf.

8 See www.lebensdorf.net.