

## Lifestyle Change as Climate Strategy

**Ecovillages represent living laboratories  
and innovative campuses for learning how to live well and lightly together.**

**Abstract:** This article describes the common lifestyle found in ecovillages and how it contributes to lower environmental impact and use of resources. It also looks at how the ecovillages cover basic needs and at the quality of life they create. Furthermore, it investigates what the academic world can learn from ecovillages when viewing them as centers of education in sustainability. Finally it looks at the role social capital and social experiments can play in promoting sustainable lifestyle changes in the greater society.

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### **Lifestyle changes are primarily about consciousness.**

The first step towards creating lifestyle changes is to awaken our consciousness about how interconnected everyone and everything is on this planet and in the universe. In other words, to reach the perspective from where we can fully see that the many crises we face—ecologically, economically, socially, culturally and spiritually—are all woven together. It is simply impossible to solve one problem without also having to solve the others.

We have to understand how the industrial lifestyle, which is rooted in increasing consumption, economic growth and fossil fuel energy, destroys the possibility of a worthwhile life for both the worlds' poor people alive today and for future generations everywhere. First then can we begin to seek alternatives.

In 2009 the UN General, Ban Ki-moon, said about the challenge we are facing: *“We have less than 10 years to stop the increase in greenhouse gasses, if we want to avoid catastrophic consequences for humans and the planet. It really is the biggest collective challenge the human family has ever faced.”* (Ban Ki-moon 2009).

It is especially the people in the global north and the other rich societies that have to change habits. Currently, we act as if we had more than one planet earth from which to take resources. Our “ecological footprint”, a popular measurement of resource use, needs to be cut back 80% before 2050.

Former Danish Climate and Energy minister Martin Lidegaard describe the situation in this way: *“No matter how realistic we are, doomsday prophecies do not work sufficiently as political motivation. The nightmare simply does not scare us enough to change our behaviour. We need to be able to believe in the alternative and the road to get there, and both of them have to seem at least as attractive as the life we are living today. Therefore our task is not to tell each other what we should not do. The task is rather to describe what we are in fact capable of accomplishing together, and to do it so convincing, that the transition seems logical and irresistible.”* (Lidegaard 2013).

The results that ecovillages have accomplished over the last 50 years provide a good example of how lifestyle changes are both logical and attractive. *“The ecovillage movement has something to contribute that is quite unique, available for all to see on the ground, and not widely recognized, namely that a change in lifestyle can reduce CO2 emissions by more than half without any reduction in the quality of life, in fact, with an increase!”* These words are from the editors of a international issue the Danish Ecovillage Magazine *Creating Oneness* made for the COP15 Climate Summit in Copenhagen in 2009 (Jackson 2009).

### **What is an ecovillage?**

Ecovillages are settlements that try to integrate all aspects of living — homes, culture, businesses, institutions, local production, self-determination and much more. The aim of ecovillagers is to integrate human activity with the natural environment as gently as possible. Energy consumption and environmental impact tends to be continually decreased. A key purpose in their work is to insure good life circumstances for future generations, based on the philosophy that “The earth is not a gift from our ancestors, but a loan from future generations”.

Demark has 30-40 ecovillages, and new ones are in a planning or construction phase. They are not all alike by any means, but range from small co-housings (5-50 inhabitants) to larger ecological communities and villages (50-400 inhabitants). A few communities are centered on a specific spiritual practice (10-100 inhabitants).

The Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) has developed a tool for ecovillages to design, form, develop and maintain them, and not least, to teach others in their region. This is called the wheel of sustainability, a holistic approach containing four dimensions: Ecological, Social, Economic and Worldview (the cultural and spiritual aspect).



Figure 1: The wheel of sustainability is part of the curriculum of the Ecovillage Design Education, a living and learning education developed by Gaia Education (Gaia Education). The education is recognized and approved by UNESCO and UNITAR and is a part of the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014).

### Why and how ecovillages are created

The people who create or move into ecovillages are all actively searching for a meaningful life. They have ambitions on a personal level and a desire to be part of a group that shares their vision. Often, they also wish to collaborate with the surrounding “conventional” local community and in a larger perspective affect the greater society to move in a more sustainable direction.

For people outside, it can sometimes seem like the ecovillages are closed up units who forget they are part of a larger society. But this is largely false for well-established ecovillages that are often teaching centers and well integrated into their local communities. It is my experience that an inward focus can happen in the beginning years, as the process of creating an ecovillage is very demanding. Before anyone has time to engage in the surrounding “conventional” society, daily living needs to be established.

Establishing an ecovillage involves many stages. Beginning with the “I want to make my dream real”, find a group of people who shares the dream, search for land, collaborate with municipality plans, buy land, install infrastructure like traffic, water, energy, a sewage system etc. and then a long process of building individual houses and a community house. Some of the social aspects of living in an ecovillage are community meals, different types of meetings and working weekends. Families with children are involved in the local kindergarden and later in the local school. And in general it happens that when the basic functions are in place, new energy is released to create bigger cultural events like Christmas market and music or circus festivals.

The instalment and upscaling of energy-saving solutions like windmills, solar-heaters, carshare systems, garbage management, local food production and more is an on-going task. And the fact that there is often a high level of vegetarian diet in ecovillages also helps to protect nature.

Some ecovillages strive to also be so-called “living and learning” centers, where people from both home and abroad come to participate in weeklong education and field work. Others participate in politics. One example is a person from the community Svanholm, Denmark who is part of the local political committee in Frederikssund municipality. And another is an inhabitant from Damanhur in Italy who is mayor in the local town of Vidracco. And then there is Dyssekilde, Denmark (founded in 1992) that is identified as the fifth strategic business area in Halsnaes municipality (Halsnes 2011). Findhorn in Scotland (founded in 1962) is a major teaching facility with yearly turnover of £5 million and with around 400 local jobs.

### **Social diversity and social capital**

One of the great qualities of ecovillages is that there is room for everyone. Young and old generations, couples, singles, families with children, collectives and more live side by side. One good example is Munksøgård, close to Roskilde. Here different forms and options for

owning and renting a house or apartment were already thought into the community design from the early beginning.

In an ecovillage, maintenance and development depends on everyone's involvement. Most tasks are done as volunteer work or as part of a local economic system, functioning parallel to the national currency. The aim is community solutions and local workplaces. Many ecovillages also have the ambitious dream of becoming self-sufficient in energy, food, waste treatment etc.

The structure of ecovillages creates possibilities for a life rich of meaningful relations. The elder people who are retired often are very active in the tasks of the ecovillage and they take part in the daily life of the children. Some ecovillages have a house specifically designated for elderly people, and in some communities three generations of the same family live together.

Growing up in an ecovillage has many advantages. As the outdoor space mostly is a carfree zone and green, it becomes a healthy and a safe space for children to play. The constant presence of other children and adults apart from the child's own family, gives easily many friends and also a healthy variety of adult role models.

Divorces also happen in ecovillages, but a nice thing is that there are many cases where the mother and father both stay within the community in separate houses.

Daniel Greenberg from Sirius community, USA, writes about social diversity: *"Ecovillages tend to be more heterarchical (yes, it is a word) and there is generally a wide diversity of relationships with members interacting on more or less an equal footing. Two people might cook a meal together one day, sit together in a budget meeting another day, and perhaps help harvest vegetables on yet another. These interdependent sets of relationships help members get to know each other on many levels and better understand the complexity of living systems."* (Greenberg 2011-5)

### **Welfare society tasks solved in new ways**

Hertha, an ecovillage near Aarhus with 130 inhabitants, is one of two Danish ecovillages that has a community of physical and mental handicapped people (20) integrated into the ecovillage. The place works with a term called "integration the other way around", as "normal" people are invited to come and live with and near the life of the handicapped. Houses are build taking care of the specific needs the handicapped. And protected workplaces created with the themes kitchen, laundry, bakery, weaving, agriculture, dairy

and horticulture. Some years ago the municipal of Skanderborg, where Hertha is located, decided that all the kindergartens should have a free lunch. Afterwards the community created a workplace for the handicapped, where they can make the lunch together with the kids in the kindergarten (Uggerby 2013).

A group of teachers living in Hallingelille Ecovillage near Ringsted have created a foundation with the purpose of *"creating greater understanding of how we can live in more healthy, sustainable, humane, and meaningful ways as co-responsible and co-creative individuals who take part in a great variety of natural ecosystems, groups and communities, local and global societies"* (Mimundo). Other inhabitants of the ecovillage can participate in the courses in exchange for helping with the practicalities. And at the same time as the ecovillage shares its knowledge with the visitors from outside, both the teaching and the visitors bring in new knowledge and ideas.

### **Recognition and empowerment**

In the winter of 2011-2012 I initiated an Ecovillage Design Education (EDE) inspired course running over 6 weekends, and from that experience came two results that I find worthy of mention. First, a group of the participants still keep in touch as an educational group that continues to inspire and support each other in creating transition at both the personal and community level. Secondly, some of the people involved came from the fringe of mainstream society but found with the help of the course an improved self-esteem and a way back to becoming a part of society again.

In 2013 I was facilitating a 6 weeks EDE inspired course for unemployed people. A comment from a participant expressed what many others in the group also shared in their evaluation, *"Transition and sustainability is not only about the environment, but it is also about oneself. I have learned a lot about my self and about group dynamics, including new knowledge about sustainability, such as cradle to cradle, permaculture, matrix agriculture and much more. Most important, I learned that when we unite, much is possible"* (Omstillingsagent 2013).

### **Create community and value diversity**

Ecovillages have many types of organizational structures and dynamics. One type is driven by a strong idealism and powerful individuals that most often focus on the ecological and economical dimensions. That kind of commitment can be inspiring and

motivating, but if it is an inflexible “my way or the highway” approach, it creates conflicts and separation in all relations: couples, families and the community.

In other ecovillages they build a management team where idealism and strong individuals, go together with common purpose, values and a conflict resolution policy and practice. Here, conflicts are met with a willingness to listen and turn the conflicts into learning experiences for the whole community. An example is Sieben Linden, an ecovillage in German where they work with attentive communication: *“Early we realized that for the community to be a success we need a high degree of transparency. Only when we know about each other and what is on our minds, can we assess and appreciate what the others are doing. For showing the others who we are and to get to know each other and solve conflicts, we use beside the direct face-to-face approach: Forum, Nonviolent Communication, and mediation, to name a few. Thus we can grow together in living together.”* (Sieben Linden)

To implement this awareness, they have three types of decision making processes:

- 1) Meetings where feelings are shared: It can be about conflicts, unemployment, divorces or more joyful circumstances. The aim is to strengthen love, compassion and confidence.
- 2) Meetings where worldviews are shared: it can be about values, opinions and belief systems. The aim is to awake consciousness, find and strengthen common values.
- 3) Organizational meetings: Big community meetings as well as meeting in smaller work groups. The aim is to implement and make the vision real.

A part of the common ground in Hallingelille Ecovillage (Hallingelille) is to bring attention to everyone’s well-being, to care for one another and to include all. Some of the practices and principles they use are:

- To prioritise personal check-in and check-out at common meetings
- To use “heart keepers” - people who have the function of being specially aware of the emotional atmosphere.
- Have children’s meetings (different age groups).
- Deal with conflicts in the beginning instead of allowing them to grow.
- Use a constructive conflict resolution method with internal or sometimes external mediators.
- Remind one another to speak respectfully about everyone.
- A well-being group that organizes different types of events.

Finally there are communities founded on a spiritual idealism. In my experience they seem to have a more solid and more grounded development. This is probably due to the spiritual work, which focuses on self-reflection and how to mindfully and without defensive ploys, confront and avoid conflicts.

### **Socially Engaged Spirituality**

An example of an ecovillage founded on a spiritual vision is Findhorn in Scotland:

*“The founding principles of the Findhorn Foundation and community have remained at the center of all our activities over the years, they are*

- *deep inner listening, and acting from that source of wisdom*
- *co-creation with the intelligence of nature*
- *service to the world.*

*How we express these principles through our activities, continues to change and grow, reflecting both the evolution of the consciousness of the community and the needs of the world around us, locally and globally.*

*Meditation in its various forms – such as sitting quietly, singing, dancing, being in nature, working – is practised at Findhorn as a means to connect with and listen to our inner source of wisdom.”* (Findhorn)

In “The Song of the Earth – A Synthesis of the Scientific & Spiritual Worldviews”, one of the 4 KEYS To Sustainable Communities Everywhere on the Planet (Gaia Education) is a chapter about socially engaged spirituality which provides a “*summary of insights that have proven helpful to socially engaged activists who grapple with how to integrate their ‘inner’ spiritual values into their ‘outer’ practical work*” (Keepin 2012, p.214). To illustrate the dimension of this work, 6 of the 14 guidelines are:

- - Transformation of motivation from anger/fear/despair to compassion/love/purpose.
- - Non-attachment to Outcome.
- - Don’t Demonize your Adversaries.
- - Love Thy Enemy.
- - What You Attend to, You Become.
- - Take Sufficient Time for Retreat, Renewal and Deep Listening.

I have visited several ecovillages in Europe and I am impressed about how many places the spiritual aspect is integrated well into daily living and educational situations. The “living and learning” teaching method in complex ecological, economic and social themes combined with personal and spiritual aspects in a very diverse group of students (age, education, country) provides a very rich learning experience.

### **Lifestyle changes and environmental impacts**

So far there has not been a lot of scientific studies or research on ecovillages and their attempt to live more environmentally friendly, but the academic work that has been done looks promising. One piece of research, done in three Danish ecovillages by energy consultants in 2009, showed that CO2 emissions are 60 % lower than the Danish average.

Table 1: Average CO2 emissions for heat, electricity, transport, goods consumption and fresh water use, Danish average compared with citizens from the three ecovillages.

In tons CO2 per year	Heat	El	Transport	Goods/consumption	Fresh water	Total
Danish average	1.59	0.95	2.02	1.49	0.17	6.22
Munksoegaard	0	0.81	0.55	1.16	0.09	2.61
Hjortshøj	0	0.72	0.52	1.07	0.10	2.41
Svanholm	0	0.00	0.71	0.87	0.26	1.84
Eco-citizen average (weighted)	0	0.60	0.70	1.06	0.15	2.51

Jonathan Dawson is co-head of Economics at Schumacher College. He was until recently a member of the Findhorn ecovillage community in Scotland and the President of the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN). In STATE OF THE WORLD 2010 he wrote an article about Ecovillages and the Transformation of Values, where he referred to recent studies that confirm that the ecological impact of ecovillages is markedly lower than for average conventional communities.

*“A 2003 study by the University of Kassel looked at carbon dioxide emissions associated with two ecovillages in Germany. It found that per capita emissions in the Sieben Linden and Kommune Niederkufungen ecovillages were 28 and 42 percent, respectively, of the German average.”*

*“A study undertaken by the Stockholm Environment Institute found that the Findhorn ecovillage in Scotland has a per person ecological footprint a bit over half of the U.K. average, the lowest footprint recorded for any settlement in the industrial world.”*

*“A 2006 study comparing the contribution of built (economic), human, social, and natural capital to quality of life in 30 intentional communities with that in the town of Burlington, Vermont. The study found that the quality of life was slightly higher in the intentional communities despite the fact that average incomes were significantly lower because of a greater cultivation and appreciation of other forms of capital, especially social capital.” “It is especially interesting that many of the activities and design features that are responsible for low energy and resource use within ecovillages are also among the most important in contributing to a better quality of life.” “Many of the other footprint-shrinking design features—preparing and eating meals together, car clubs, community-owned renewable energy facilities, community currencies and investment, and so on—similarly engender a spirit of cooperation that builds community and contributes to strong feelings of well-being” (Dawson 2010).*

The Danish Ecovillage Network hopes that similar multi-disciplinary studies will be made in Denmark, as it will be very interesting to see the concrete results of 25 years of “bottom up” experiments.

### **Needs cared for in new ways / Influence and meaningfulness**

One major explanation of how the ecovillages are capable of having a high quality of life and at the same time a low environmental impact is that the social richness fills needs that in mainstream society often are satisfied with some kind of materialism. Examples can be having a spontaneous night with community friends instead of sitting in front of the TV or Internet. Or cooking for a big group of people, opposed to a small family, and sharing kitchen appliances also saves resources in the areas of transportation, food-making and cleaning.

Jeppe Læssøe, a researcher in environmental pedagogy and public information says: *“it not so simple that an ascetic, ecological sustainable life also will give a higher life quality. But slower living, stronger social relations and richer experiences in the near environment will be able to care for many more of people’s needs, than a continual acceleration of the daily routine” (Læssøe 2000, p, 234).*

In modern society, governance and implementation often seem out of reach for normal people. At the same time, everyone is absorbed in individuality and self realization. Some people can, by living in an ecovillage, fulfil the search for identity and accomplishment. Here, the highest authority is the community meeting, and all members have the possibility

and expectation to participate in both decision-making processes and their realization. Active participation can give a feeling of influence, responsibility and creation that is very life-affirming.

Another quality is the caring aspect in community. First of all, people just know each other better than in most other neighbourhoods in general, and if you are close with somebody it is natural to care for them, because the mutual dependency is more obvious. If one person is suffering, the whole community will be affected in small and large ways. This feeling and experience that the others care for you enriches your life.

### **Competition vs. Collaboration**

Another important value in ecovillages is that collaboration becomes more important than competition. Otto Scharmer, the creator of Theory U, helps groups of diverse stakeholders from business, government, and civil society innovate at the level of the whole system. In his blog he writes about “how individuals relate to each other and to the whole system”. He quotes a participant from an event with different stakeholders: *"I was so surprised by the quality of awareness and connection in the room. It happened very naturally. I have never seen anything quite like it." "There was very little ego in the room. The ego-awareness was gone, and the eco-awareness was activated in just about everyone. It was quite a natural process. Very different from what I experience otherwise. As if a dormant collaborative gene has been switched on..."* (Scharmer 2014).

The kind of quality present in the event mentioned is equal to experiences I have had in meetings and gatherings in the ecovillage movement, especially when hosted by communities that put an emphasis on the social and worldview dimension. Scharmer talks about “Activating the Field of the Future” where seven tools and practices are used by the facilitators and the participants to co-sense and activate the best future potential:

- 1) A core group that “holds the space” with a common intention
- 2) Mindful methods and tools.
- 3) Experiential labs: storytelling and theatre.
- 4) Connecting to source.
- 5) Awakenning the undocumented part of our story.
- 6) Prototyping the new.
- 7) Weaving the field of the larger eco-system.

## **Actions to improve well-being**

Another part of the transition is about well-being. A British study, *Government's Foresight project on Mental Capital and Wellbeing*, has developed a set of evidence-based actions to improve personal well-being. *"The aim was to analyse the most important drivers of mental capital and well-being to develop a long-term vision for maximising mental capital and well-being in the UK for the benefit of society and the individual. The concept of well-being comprises two main elements: feeling good and functioning well. Feelings of happiness, contentment, enjoyment, curiosity and engagement are characteristic of someone who has a positive experience of their life. Equally important for well-being is our functioning in the world. Experiencing positive relationships, having some control over one's life and having a sense of purpose are all important attributes of well-being."* As an output of the study they mention five actions in our daily living that are important for well-being (Neweconomics.org, 2011).

- Connect – Building connections will support and enrich you every day.
- Be active – Exercising makes you feel good and enhances your level of mobility and fitness.
- Take notice – Reflecting on your experiences will help you appreciate what matters to you.
- Keep learning – Learning new things will make you more confident as well as being fun.
- Give – Seeing yourself, and your happiness, linked to the wider community can be incredibly rewarding and can create new connections with the people around you.

As I see it ecovillages have the perfect social and physical context to very naturally fulfil this list of actions.

## **What can the academic world learn from ecovillages?**

Daniel Greenberg (PhD) from Sirius Community, Massachusetts, USA, is founder of Living Routes, an organization that, until January 2014, has send almost 1500 American university students on "living and learning" courses in ecovillages all around the world. In 2011 he wrote a blog where he explored "education towards a sustainable future", and also wished to explain why the academic world needs to use the ecovillages as learning

centres. Below is a list where he compares the different paradigms of the academic world and the ecovillages:

<b>ACADEMIA</b>	<b>ECOVILLAGES</b>
<p><b>Conservative</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nothing will ever change anyway. We should just go on with business as usual.</li> <li>• We should trust the PhDs to solve these problems.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Experimental</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "The problems we have can't be solved by the same level of thinking that created them." – Albert Einstein</li> <li>• Let's just start and learn as we go.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Heirarchical</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I'm one person. What can I do?</li> <li>• It's the 'higher-ups' responsibility to figure things out. Not mine.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Heterarchical</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Everyone has a piece of the truth and nobody holds the whole truth.</li> <li>• Power with, not power over!</li> </ul>
<p><b>Competitive</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is this going to be on the exam?</li> <li>• How will this help me get a job/tenure/grant?</li> </ul>	<p><b>Cooperative</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We're all in this together. Let's act like it.</li> <li>• Many hands make light work.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Fragmented</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Where do we even start? It's too complicated.</li> <li>• This is a problem for &lt;another discipline&gt;</li> </ul>	<p><b>Transdisciplinary</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "For every complex problem, there is a solution that is simple, neat, and wrong." - H. L. Mencken</li> <li>• True solutions are integral &amp; integrated.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Proximal</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I'm just trying to live my life. I don't have time for this.</li> <li>• As long as it's not in my backyard...</li> </ul>	<p><b>Intimate</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We all breathe the same air and are fellow travellers on this Spaceship Earth. Relationships are key!</li> <li>• We need to think 7 generations ahead.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Theoretical</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Climate change is just a theory. We need more evidence before acting.</li> <li>• I think we have a subcommittee analysing the problem.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Applied</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Be the change you wish to see in the world." – Gandhi</li> <li>• "The only way to predict the future is to invent it." – Alan Kay</li> </ul>
<p><b>Secular</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We can fix the planet through bioengineering or nanotechnology.</li> <li>• The world belongs to Man. Oil is here for us to use.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Spiritual</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "I am part of the [planet] protecting itself." – John Seed</li> <li>• "We are on the brink of an evolutionary leap in consciousness." – Sri Aurobindo</li> </ul>
<p><b>Large Footprint</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I want my MTV and like my campus' &lt;favorite amenity&gt;.</li> <li>• "Living large' is a sign of having 'made it'.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Small Footprint</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Live simply so others may simply live.</li> <li>• Small is beautiful.</li> </ul>
<p><i>Notice that these comparisons are in each their extreme end of a continuum, but reality is not that black and white.</i></p>	

Greenberg finishes his blog with these words: *"We are living in an amazing moment, not just in human history, but in planetary history. We have exceeded the Earth's carrying capacity and must now transition to a post-oil world if we are to survive as a species. It is possible to live lives that are both high quality and low impact. I know this because I have seen thousands of people manifesting positive visions in ecovillages around the world. While not utopias, these communities represent living laboratories, beta-test centers, and*

*innovative campuses for learning how to live well and lightly together. We have so much to learn from each other. Building bridges between ecovillages and academia is literally building bridges to a more sustainable future.” (Greenberg 2011-11)*

Being an active person in the Danish Ecovillage Network since 1996, I have followed the development both locally and globally. And I agree with Greenberg, that ecovillages are living laboratories that voluntarily test alternative lifestyles, and many of their lessons learned and creations are of great value to the mainstream society.

The ecovillage movement is not alone in actively creating experiments and solutions. The movement is closely connected with groups of indigenous people who in their traditions have a fountain of sustainable philosophy and practice. There is the whole permaculture movement attracting many young people, there is the Transition Town and Urban Farming movement that helps making a thriving and sustainable living in already existing neighbourhoods, by re-awake community bonds and re-localize caretaking of needs.

### **What can the greater society learn from ecovillages?**

Experiences from ecovillages point in a direction where it is possible to have a lifestyle of high quality and at the same time low environmental impact. This doesn't mean that the ecovillage solution is for everyone everywhere. Ecovillages are future laboratories that give an idea of how we can design communities and neighbourhoods, design new kinds of local economies etc. with the purpose of developing a rich and sustainable lifestyle. To learn from ecovillages, we have to look at the positive experiences and see how they can be transferred to the rest of society, such as traditional villages, the cities and the suburbs. As I see it, there are two particularly important findings from the civil innovation that has happened in the future laboratories of ecovillages in the last 25-50 years:

- Social capital is more important than economical capital
- Social experiments can lead to constructive solutions.

### **Social capital is more important than economic capital**

A strong social capital is the most important condition for an ecovillage or other social experiment to succeed. Social capital is created when good and nurturing relationships exist between people. Relationships build on confidence and mutual values give the individual access to different kind of resources (e.g. help, caretaking, interchange of

knowledge, food and material things). When the relations and collaborations are flourishing, more social capital is created, projects inspire other projects and people find ways to benefit from each other. But if a negative energy, like mistrust, enters a network, it can quickly destroy the creating spirit. So in a community that mostly is based upon voluntary participation, it is very important to install a strong set of values and practices, e.g. communication structures, already from the beginning.

When people's needs for acknowledgement, participation and creation are met, they start to flourish and will be contributors to the community. Social capital depends on a feeling of trust. According to the American political scientist Robert Putnam, trust can best be created in face to face meetings. He thinks that the reason for low trust in the post 2nd World War generations in the US is that they use their free time in front of television screens instead of direct interaction with other people. He calls this phenomenon a "privatisation of free time" (Svendsen 2012, p. 42).

In the consumer society "human growth" is put into a pattern of continually consume, work, earn, consume – more and more. In an ecovillage, the "human growth" of each human's activity, work or "product" is channelled into social capital that can stay and enrich the community. Knowing this, we can start to prioritise and value more new social experiments and push for the kind of politics that supports them.

### **Social experiments can lead to constructive solutions**

In the Norwegian book "An experiment for change? Alternative routes to a sustainable society" Denmark is described as a society that can be viewed as a kind of "social laboratory" for experiments (Dahle 1997, p.96). In the beginning of the 1970's social experiments were influenced by a very wild and immature movement. The actors were the many new collectivist, feminists, the early environmentalist movement and many more. These bold experiments actually all became in one way or other cornerstones in important developments like the windmill industry and organic agriculture. And they played a role in the foundation of The Danish Ecovillage Network in 1993, which actually is the first national ecovillage network in the world.

Over the years, social experiments changed character. Ecovillages became a kind of "privatized life experiment", and the ideas took a new and holistic form. As I see it, the ecovillage movement is entering a new phase where ecovillages and other green

communities start to collaborate across borders, in a way in which economics and business development will be a dynamic part in that cooperation.

As I have described in this article, civil society driven social experiments have a substantial innovative power and can play an important role in the transition to a sustainable and thriving society. I hope that with this article perspectives have opened up to put Lifestyle Change as Climate Strategy on the political agenda - an agenda which aims to create a framework for a new, sustainable and thriving lifestyle characterized by a high quality of life in balance with nature.

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