

# Transformative Social Innovation Narrative of GEN, the Global Ecovillage Network



GEN-Europe Conference, July 2014, in ZEGG, Germany; Photos: Iris Kunze

By Iris Kunze and Flor Avelino – 2015-03-31



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## About TRANSIT:

TRANSIT is an international research project that aims to develop a theory of Transformative Social Innovation that is useful to both research and practice. It is co-funded by the European Commission and runs for four years, from 2014 until 2017. The TRANSIT consortium consists of 12 partners across Europe and Latin America. For more information, please visit our website: <http://www.transitsocialinnovation.eu/>.

## About this Document/ Disclaimer:

This report provides a very short summary of a full case report that includes in-depth case-studies of the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN). Both, the full case reports and this summary, were guided by four empirical research questions based upon a preliminary conceptual framework of the TRANSIT-project. The four questions concern:

1. the overall development of the local cases and the transnational network(ing);
2. how they relate to different types of change and innovation (incl. social innovation, system innovation, game- changers, narratives of change and societal transformation);
3. how actors are empowered and/or disempowered in and by the local cases and the transnational network(ing), including topics such as governance, learning, resourcing and monitoring;
4. what are other relevant emergent issues with regard to understanding the dynamics of transformative social innovation.

This summary document focuses on the first three questions. It presents – in a highly reduced and generalised format – the interpretations of the researchers, and does not necessarily reflect the views and nuances of the initiatives and respondents themselves. For a full account of each transnational network and local case, including interview quotes and expressed nuances by respondents, we refer to the full case report, which is available via the contact person indicated below or via [communication.transit@ihs.nl](mailto:communication.transit@ihs.nl) Both the full case report, as well as this summary document, are the basis for future research activities and publications.

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# The Global Ecovillage Network (GEN)<sup>1</sup>

## 1 Development of the transnational network

The ecovillage movement emerged in the 1980s/90s in response to ecological and social challenges in modern societies. Their historical roots reach to older communal movements, especially the intentional community and the co-housing movement<sup>2</sup>. In combination with ecological movements the first ecovillages were found by people who were motivated to live ecologically and social cooperatively. These pioneers further started experimenting with not only eco-technology but also new ways of community living. It holistically includes all areas of life from consumption, production, economy, and infrastructural planning, to organization, governance and also social relationships and education. The intention of ecovillages is to create a resilient, human-scale, and full-featured settlement that is rather independent from the incumbent system and the global economy which ecovillage activists perceived as intransparent. Ecovillages are founded with an ecological and often also socio-political or spiritual intention and experiment with new forms of living that respond to the contemporary ecological, economic and social crises (Kunze 2009, 2012).

As visualized in graph 1.1, in 1987 the GAIA trust in Denmark started to network internationally and founded the Danish ecovillage network in 1993. The second international meeting of ecovillages from around the world was held with more than 400 participants in Findhorn ecovillage, Scotland in 1995. It was decided to formally establish the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) with administrative centers at The Farm (USA), Lebensgarten (Germany), and Crystal Waters (Australia), and with an international coordinating office at Gaia Trust, Denmark. At this time the website was launched.

A milestone for GEN popularity and dissemination was its participation in the UN Habitat II conference in 1996. Since then numerous collaborations with the UN started; for instance that GEN received consultative status of UN-ECOSOC (UN economic and social council). Since 1996 the international GEN board met biannual combining the meetings with international conferences to host and present ecovillages or give permaculture courses. Since 2001 a number of books on the ecovillage movement was published by GEN and GAIA trust (Jackson, Svensson 2001, 2003). In 2005 at the GEN+10 Conference in Findhorn the ecovillage design GAIA education was launched; a program that came out of GEN to educate fundamentals of ecovillage building in four week courses in different ecovillages around the globe.

GEN started off with three sub-networks: Ecovillages of the Americas (ENA), GEN Asia, and GEN Europe & Africa. Today there are two networks of Northern (GEN-NA) and Latin America (CASA), GEN Africa became independent in 2012, plus NextGEN (the youth network of GEN). GEN Europe has become stronger in networking and has worked for GEN international especially in terms of fundraising. These networking activities are moving to GEN international now. Since February 2013 GEN is a charity in the UK. More regional active networks of GEN are appearing recently.

The following official definition by GEN is used for an ecovillage since 2012:

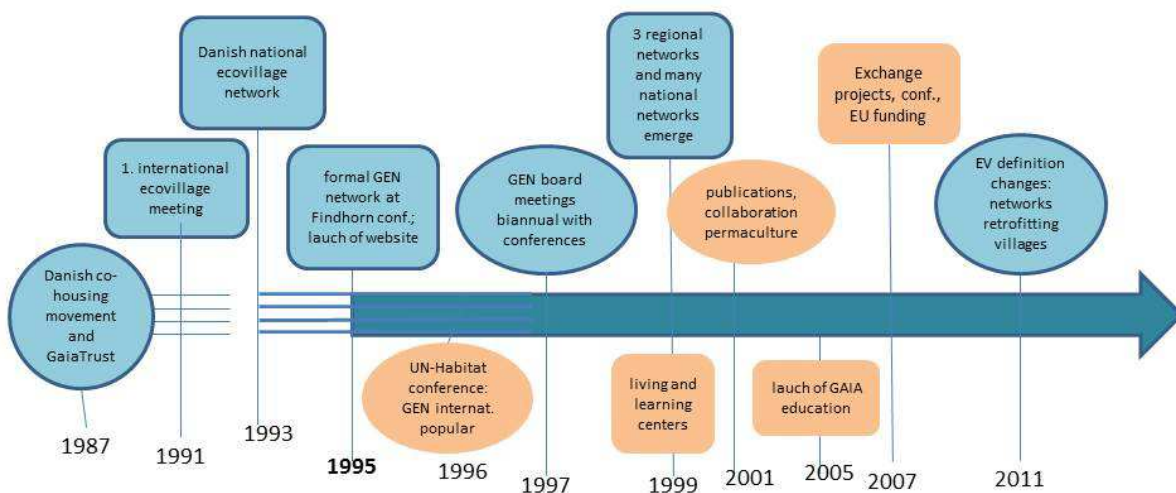
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<sup>1</sup> This report is a conclusion of an empirical case study of GEN conducted in 2014 by Iris Kunze and Flor Avelino.

<sup>2</sup> As an inclusive term 'intentional community' was first coined out in 1948 at a gathering of communities in Northern America. It covers many sorts of communities from monasteries, kibbutzim and (rural) communes, over **ecovillages**, to student cooperatives and cohousing groups. ("Fellowship intentional communities". [http://wiki.ic.org/wiki/Intentional\\_Communities](http://wiki.ic.org/wiki/Intentional_Communities) 15.01.15)

*“An ecovillage is an intentional or traditional community that is consciously designed through locally owned, participatory processes to regenerate social and natural environments. The four dimensions of sustainability (ecology, economy, the social and the cultural) are all integrated into a holistic approach.” (GEN int. board 2012)*

GEN international hosts networks as members while the regional networks contain ecovillages and networks as members or associates. GEN Europe opened its membership criteria recently. Today GEN approximately connects about 500 ecovillages worldwide<sup>3</sup> which are listed in the regional networks. GEN Europe has 57 ecovillages as members plus a number of networks like the Longo Mai movement. Other sources (Eurotopia, 1998-2009) reveal that there is high fluctuation and all together a quick growth in projects who call themselves ecovillage.



Graph 1.1: developmental line of GEN

## 2 Aspects of change and innovation in GEN

Innovation and change are major intentions of ecovillages. They often use the term of ‘a new culture’ rather than the term of innovation. Ecovillages follow very diverse aims for setting up this new culture for instance the slogan of ‘unity in diversity’ – embracing differences as enrichment. Ecovillages and intentional communities, including our two cases, create condensed fields and manifest their intentions by creating an experimental space – *heterotopias* (Foucault 1984) of a ‘new culture’ of creativity, experimenting, and collaboration.

In table 1.1 I list my conclusion of the five shades of change of GEN discussing them in a specific order adapted to the empirical observations. I start with narratives of change, because they seem to refer to the initial intentions of EV and GEN. They are followed by the game changers as the challenges and obstacles but finally the impetus of change. Further, I describe the social and system innovations and will end with the most fundamental aspect – the societal transformation.

<sup>3</sup> See on online web data base GEN sites: <http://gen-europe.org/ecovillages/find-ecovillages/index.htm>  
<http://sites.ecovillage.org/en>

On the base of the five shades of change I discuss the impact of innovation and change by GEN to society. The amount of ecovillages in the world is still quite small. It is difficult to measure how far they contribute to transform the ‘alienated’ society into a ‘new culture’. Indeed, we can observe long-term effects of changing the way of living through a ‘silent revolution’ by small scale resilience which we interpret as a contribution to societal transformation.

Table 2.1: the five shades of change: aspects of GEN

5 Shades of Change & Innovation	Aspects of GEN
Narratives of change	<p>GEN expects change to come by civil society active people empowering themselves in designing their own community and way of living. Their work consists of supporting local small scale initiatives by networking and education. Their narrative of change is told through the symbol of a butterfly they use as icon for GEN. A butterfly mutates out of a caterpillar because the new imago cells finally cluster and network. Aim of GEN is to build a network of resilient communities that is not easily affected or hit by negative developments of the macrosystems – the landscape, the society or game changers. They prefer to rely on micro- and mesosystems, because they can overlook, design and influence them.</p>
Game-changers	<p>The ecovillage movement is highly sensitive and aware of system instabilities in practically all areas: economy, ecology, climate change, politics, and the crises of the welfare state. Their approach is not just focused on one or several of these aspects. They turn the tables because they do not try to heal single symptoms, but by setting up their own resilient systems.</p>
Social innovation	<p>The reinvention of ‘community’ is innovative in ecovillages because it includes modern individualism. For them community is not about subordinating but based on unconditional tolerance and interest for others. A concrete expression is the atmosphere of trust and openness at GEN conferences that invites people to share their emotions. Intentional communities create communal organizations where people feel acknowledged and empowered to co-design their life. The additional social innovation of ecovillages is to improve the cooperation with nature by ecological ways of living, an emotional connection to the earth, and communicating with nature spirits.</p>
System innovation	<p>Ecovillages provide an experimental space in which numerous system innovations already have been created. System innovation has a special meaning in ecovillages. They intend to build a resilient and often self-sufficient community. If an ecovillage manages to do so, they have created a self-sufficient ‘system’ with autonomous infrastructure and basic services. They are small scale laboratories in all areas of life. GEN discusses, communicates and exchanges knowledge about these innovations. In the national networks of GEN ecovillages support each other in applying laws and system structures for implementing their innovations. GEN fosters the exchange of these innovations also between the Global North and South. System innovations have been invented or were further developed in a wide range of areas: There are social system innovations like tools for decision making, conflict resolution (The Social Forum from ZEGG), socio-economy (local currencies), education (village school in TH), as well as simple low-cost and low-tech eco-innovations for instance a waste water treatment system of plants in a green house, applicable in cities (Findhorn), compost heating systems (Schloss Tempelhof), permaculture in dry regions (Tamera) or straw bale house techniques (7Linden and Eco-Youff in Senegal).</p>

<b>Societal transformation</b>	Ecovillages transform society by a 'silent revolution' of changing the way of living. They contribute to transform the 'alienated' society into a 'new culture'. It starts holistically in daily life by reclaiming all areas of life like consumption, land tenure, economy, infrastructural planning, relationships, care taking, health, organization and governance. Spatial and regional transformation has happened in many cases of local ecovillages by transforming deserts into forests, military ruins into seminar centers and permacultural gardens, and abandoned rural villages into vibrating full-featured ecovillages with local enterprises.
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Ecovillages provide an experimental space for low-cost and low-tech innovations that are exchanged between the Global North and South through GEN. The most significant innovation of the ecovillage movement seems to be their space of 'holistic laboratories' because synergies between branches like ecology and governance, agriculture and community building, as well as personal growth and economy can create new innovations. The basis is a 'new culture' of cooperation, 'unity in diversity', and trust that can manifest in their organizational systems of full-featured settlements.

Ecovillages as a younger form of intentional communities have the approach to build living alternatives rather than just criticize or 'drop out' of society. Striving for more than a simple rural life close to nature, they want to include the best aspects of modern society, such as art, research, education, and the efficiency of technology (McLaughlin/ Davidson 1985). A major effort of GEN is about shifting the image of ecovillages as separate islands into vibrating settlements contributing to societal transformation. GEN's perception is that the ecovillage movement is increasingly contributing to a society wide dialogue and process of change and innovation: "There is a lot more openness now in mainstream, politics and academia. This openness was not there in the beginning" (Interview GEN5).

Over the years we observed three tendencies of mainstreaming or upscaling the ecovillage model:

- (1) Retrofitting existing villages is an increasingly popular approach for members joining GEN in comparison to the foundation of new intentional community projects.
- (2) Mainstream communities as well as professionals adopt tools like communal decision making or self-organized energy supply. Numerous ecovillages have created several small, rather unspectacular but practical innovations which have spread out and slightly changing some business sectors.
- (3) The 'new we-culture' of ecovillages is spread by regular streams of guests. The larger ecovillages host hundreds of guests per year. They come to inhale an atmosphere of appreciation and cooperation and to transform their own lives while spreading the tools of ecovillage culture to their work environments and social networks in cities. Some large established ecovillages even have their national networks and centers in numerous countries (like Auroville).

### 3 Aspects of (Dis)empowerment

Individual empowerment is a main pillar of ecovillage philosophy. The approach of ecovillages is radically self-organized and built on self-responsibility of its members, and the community is based on individual empowerment. For them, empowerment goes hand in hand with self-

sufficiency, a certain independence of macrosystems, and local economy for being resilient to ecological or economic crises. Just last year, GEN Europe has changed its membership criteria making communal self-empowerment the main criteria for ecovillages. The GEN-President emphasizes a village is seen as an ecovillage and can become a full member “if its residents say: we do not want the future of our settlement or urban neighbourhood to be dictated by outside forces – we are going to co-design our own pathway into the future.” (Interview GEN1)

Ecovillagers perceive their initiatives as ‘spaces of empowerment’ compared to normal villages or cities. They can co-design for instance the buildings they live in, their employment, work and work-life-balance, how their food is grown and processed, the village school for their children, and they can experiment with new ways of living in areas like relationships, gift economy, and governance (Kunze/Avelino 2009).

The only inner aspect of disempowerment in ecovillages and also GEN seem to relate to power struggles. Ecovillagers have proofed innovative methods and mature personal competencies to work with and often solve these power struggles. Concerning disempowerment by external causes, GEN faces the difficulty to become a significant voice in political institutions. Also recruiting financial resources and hence qualified long-term people is a challenge for GEN. Local ecovillages rather perceive the main external obstacle in finding and financing real estate.

### *Governance*

GEN applies consensus decision making in its meetings. The single working groups are autonomous in choosing their method. The GEN council is the main body that is elected by the general assembly every year and also contains delegates from the working groups. Subsidiary structures manifest democratic networking: GEN started off with three continental sub-networks, today raised to five. Recently cross-national networks emerge and GEN Europe newly accepts cross-topical networks that have appeared mainly in connection with the permaculture and transition town movements (Interview GEN1). GEN Europe is organized formally nevertheless to charge membership fees and because of the state, government and funding structures in Europe.

GEN became a legal charity in the UK in 2013. Before, it was based in Itlay and run from the USA. Already in 1997 after presenting at the UN-Habitat II conference, GEN received consultative status with the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). Collaboration with like-minded networks and initiatives is also a part of external governance for GEN, namely the permaculture movement and the transition town network.

### *Social learning*

Empowerment is work – that was emphasized by the interviewees again and again. One needs to be active in getting informed for co-designing the village. More fundamentally people need to develop social competencies and emotional intelligence. Intentional communities provide fields of practical education for social competencies—something which is lacking in the education systems of individualized societies.

The approach of the ecovillage movement is to change the world by changing ourselves. This implies to learn a lot of new skills especially in terms of social competencies. In the ecovillage design education program (EDE 2005), conducted in several ecovillages around the globe, each of the four dimensions is taught in an interactive process: Cultural/worldview, social, ecological, and economic. On GEN conferences a lot of cognitive exercises are integrated in the work flow.

### Resourcing

GEN mainly depends on refunding travel costs and on qualified workers who need to be paid. Due to a lack of financial resources, the payments for GEN activists are low which is why most of them work on a voluntary base. In the first years GEN was financed by the Danish business couple having set up the GAIA foundation. GEN never received large amounts of funding. GEN Europe was funded by the EU and the German ministry of foreign affairs. Due to a lack of financial resources, the payments for GEN activists are low why most of them work on a voluntary base. The other big sources besides money and business contacts are members and social capital. Today GEN lists about 500 ecovillages and networks worldwide<sup>4</sup>.

### Monitoring

GEN does not have any systematic forms of evaluation or monitoring. Nevertheless it provides space in meetings to express reflections. Also the advisory board has a reflective and evaluative role. Evaluation sometimes comes in forms of external research projects. An important platform for exchange and also reflection and monitoring can be seen in the interactive websites and databases of GEN<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> See online web data base GEN sites: <http://gen-europe.org/ecovillages/find-ecovillages/index.htm>  
<http://sites.ecovillage.org/en>; 12.000 e-mail addresses worldwide receive the GEN newsletter.

<sup>5</sup> The online database and interactive map of GEN Europe: <http://gen-europe.org/ecovillages/find-ecovillages/index.htm> **Ecovillage Networking**, global platform: <http://sites.ecovillage.org/>