

Report

ecovillage researcher meeting

Feb. 25 in Rotterdam at DRIFT

Moderation & Minutes: Flor Avelino and Iris Kunze¹

The goal of this meeting has been share insights of academic research on ecovillages conducted so far, provide a good basis for more research cooperation, and to share dreams and strategies for future ecovillage research. We used the occasion that the ECOLISE network of European sustainability initiatives (ecolise.eu) had its meeting in Rotterdam at DRIFT where some people had come anyway. It was a relatively informal and small meeting (11 people).



Gil Penha-Lopez*	University of Lisbon FCULL (PT)
Robert Hall*	GEN EU/ GEN international (E)
Tom Henfrey*	Schumacher Inst./ TRN (UK)
Thomas Meier	Schloss Tonndorf/ GEN EU (DE)
Iris Kunze*	BOKU/ GEN research (AT)
Flor Avelino*	DRIFT/ GEN research (NL)
Steffan Maschmeyer*	DRIFT (NL)
Fredjan Twigt*	GEN NL, Ecodorp Bergen
Paul Hendriksen*	Transition NL, GEN NL
Koen de Kruif*	GEN NL
Lidewij Tummers*	TU Delft, NL

1.1 Database discussion

The intention and purpose is a inventory of publications and making literature (lists) accessible online to connect the existing literature and have an overview. Goal would be to make the research visible as a new research field.

We discussed how to build on existing databases e.g. from RIC research in community), Permaculture and Transition Research Networks. There was no concrete outcome so far.

¹ Flor Avelino, DRIFT <http://www.drift.eur.nl/>; Iris Kunze BOKU <http://www.community-research.eu> co-funded through the EU-project TRANSIT <http://www.transitsocialinnovation.eu/>

1.2 Update GEN research working group

Iris told on activities and goals:

- **Networking** between GEN, ecovillages and academic researchers requires different forums:
- Platforms (on academic and EV conferences) on what ecovillages want from research and how they want to deal with research requests
- → plan: academic advisory board in GEN
- **Integration & Dissemination** is to acknowledge and bring into awareness how much research has been already published on ecovillages:
- using existing platforms (e.g. researchgate.net and academica.edu)
- **Setting standards, values & goals** refers to a 'code of conduct' (or code of research practice) that will set guidelines for researchers: 1. give something back to the ecovillages

Services: newslist: research@ecovillage.org including a newsletter, exchange on publications, calls, finding collaborations, list of researchers, Bibliography

1.3 Outcomes of the Questionnaire: the Challenges

Concerning research on ecovillages, the people of this meeting indicated their lack of and/or need in the questionnaire for more:

- Connectedness: separated disciplines, publications
- Appreciate holistic nature of ecovillages
- Integral, respectful and constructive (action) research
- Effective feedback/story telling/inspiration to ecovillages
- Deal with research fatigue amongst ecovillages
- Comparative research / beyond N=1 generalizations
- Transcend academic regimes and disciplines
- Fair & sustainable funding
- Balance involvement, advocacy and critical distance.
- Acknowledgement by government of initiatives
- Mediate tensions short-term projects vs medium/long-term

1.4 Three working groups

1. Iris: Ethical guidelines (code of conduct),
2. Stefan: Mainstreaming, methodology, co-production of knowledge
3. Gil: Connecting science to practice

Feedback Group 1: Ethical guidelines (Iris)

The need to make principles aware for researchers and ecovillage people. Most universities have code of conducts for social empirical field research, incl. e.g. rules on anonymity. Some points that occur:

- Also for journalists!
- Transparency on research ambitions in advance

- The researcher should come as a normal paying guest.
- Sometimes dilemma regarding privacy
- Disciplinary background
- Right of data: ecovillage people have the rights on their interviews and the right to receive the (un)published study
- Goal of research should be somehow related to sustainability values
- Prevent economic spying
- Limited access to intimate spaces: preferably asked in interviews
- Protecting the ecovillage concept/ Prevent misuse of the term ecovillage

Process how to build these **ethical guidelines**:

- Was started at GEN+20 in Findhorn
- Facilitation for ecovillages to formulate their research questions.
- Space on an ecovillage conference: board to pin and write and questions
- More active positioning of ecovillages towards external research
- Pin the research questions of ecovillages to a website and offer it to external researchers (on GEN research website) → communicate it to professors who offer MA topics. Have an document online where everybody can put their research questions
- Aims: the ecovillage people should get something in return, clear exchange. It can be just a reflection from outside, till financial payment for interviews etc.
- ➔ Maybe a session around this at the next GEN and ICSA conference

Feedback Group 2: Scientific methods, co-production of knowledge (Stefan)

Connecting with science. Invite key people in project design, events, publications. Involving journalists to events. Tension between risk & innovation > evidence is an important force there. Reframing: e.g. cost-benefit analysis. The value of a relationship between ecovillages and research. Ecovillage residents hardly stop to reflect. Ecovillages as microcosms of wider issues, research sites. Bring culture of ecovillages to academic world. Need for comparative study > mapping of questions. Master student can follow up on questions. Ecovillages as microcosms of wider issues. Bring a bit of that culture to university settings. The need for comparative study, common set of framework, protocols (especially for MA researchers)

Feedback Group 3: Connecting science and practice (Gil)

The role of evidence in enabling policy-makers to take risks > important role for research is to provide such evidence on ecovillages. Inviting key stakeholders incl. researchers, policy-makers and journalists, to events. Inviting policy-makers and journalists to events rather than expecting researchers to also be journalists or lobbyists. Ecovillages as tools for reframing ideas (e.g. 'sustainability costs money').

1.5 Future ecovillage research

We shared dreams & ideas for future ecovillage research. Some essences were:

- Short term goals were, get funding for research projects, more universities courses with/in ecovillages (which is already done e.g. Iris)
- Mid-term goals: build transdisciplinary research methods (action research) and networks
- Long-term goals for some were an “ecovillage university”

1.6 Reflection on Funding Experiences

Sharing experiences regarding collaboration between academics and grassroots activists on high competition proposals.

We cannot deny that we are coming from mainly two different backgrounds that have formed our perspective, behavior and targets. It is necessary to be aware of it, work with it and collaborate from this base:

a. Academics

- have an affiliation to an academic research institute
- have a PhD or are PhD students
- work with participatory research approaches

b. Ecovillagers

- live in an ecovillage or start such a project
- want to conduct research, are willing to understand something more deeply

→ Collaboration needs a process of communication to find a common ground, language, patterns and working strategies

Lessons from Share the vision, TREE etc.

- There is a lot of translation that needs to happen
- Not sell our sole
- Danger: to focus on big funding, draw all the energy out of an initiative
- Grassroots weren't competent enough with call theme requirements and experience in employing, auditing, book keeping.: Capacity was a problem: scarcity
- Researchers have more experience on language > more than the activists, who felt a bit shaky about it > risk of researchers dominating rather than giving to the initiatives Too much money would have gone into the research world
- We started too late: Get the right partners is the longest preparation
- Start with smaller projects (Erasmus+) to get the machine functioning

Best practice experiences:

- Partner should have a European based legal structure
- Need to come together in person rather than just on phone and skype
- An intermediary step: involving initiatives in hosting project events and support them
- look for seed money funding.

- Use consultancy service of national offices for EU proposal writing
- Track record would be important
- Language need to fit the language and mind set
- Allow time for proposals and consortium building process: partnership is key
- we have a pool of people in the orbit now;
- the purpose of this meeting to build trust amongst us

→ Connect people for finding partners: GEN research group and e-maillist; ECOLISE is platform for researchers of alternative, sustainability movements.

1.7 Other important perspectives and goals

- How other initiatives and ecovillages exchange: seminars, conferences, Erasmus+ projects on themes, to get together
- Miss the economic topic: the economic value of ecovillages: What is the economic value of an ecovillage at this moment > new economy?
- There are two examples:
 - Erasmus+ partnership: LiFT (leadership for transition) (Iris): economic consultants, scientist and initiatives of different intentions (school leaver, university for the future, ecovillages): www.leaderhip-for-transition.eu
 - Living Utopia conference without any money Initiative of a money-free conference: <http://experimentselbstversorgung.net/living-utopia-ein-leben-frei-von-geld/>
- Knowledge sharing, we should not forget, what we are doing: we can do more than learn from one another
- Gil: idea of collective PhDs, enabling researchers to become more ecovillagers, embody what you preach and teach.
- Robert: this group is quite social science oriented: wants more for eco-technology > challenge to go for demonstration projects > interested to find partner in the Netherlands for closed-loop systems
- Gil: long-term monitoring > how to develop cheap monitoring systems, I would like this system to developing a monitoring system, involving MA, PhD, giving back to ecovillages
- E.g. PhD-students could be full-time/ part-time living in ecovillages, collective PhDs.
- Meeting was firstly planned as thematic meeting and turned up as strategic meeting.
- GEN research group as a platform for exchange;

Final inspiring input: TedX talk by Prof. Ralf Otterpohl

(Uni Hamburg) on urban rural linkage: He criticizes the unsustainable situation of urban life and abandoned rural areas: He concludes, what we actually need: ideal would be “new small cities” of 100-500 people, partly working in agriculture and computer work. Shared ownership, collective transport and working. Organic gardening. 100% regenerative energy. One aspect is often overlooked: personal growth; wonderful tools for this. 500% of production. Today many of the production processes can be decentralized. Amartya Sen: Wealth is freedom. Video can be seen at: <http://www.tedxtuhh.de/new-towns/>