

"We stand at a critical moment in Earth's history, a time when humanity must choose its future. As the world becomes increasingly interdependent and fragile, the future at once holds great peril and great promise. To move forward we must recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny. We must join together to bring forth a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace. Towards this end, it is imperative that we, the peoples of Earth, declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations."

- Preamble, The Earth Charter

Call for an international dialogue on the concept of 'Ecovillage'

Summary

This is a call for an international dialogue on the concept of 'Ecovillage' and on the role the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) can play as a platform for South-North and South-South exchange. Ecovillages are gaining global recognition for the innovative and practical tools they offer to simultaneously tackle the many social, environmental, cultural and economic challenges in the face of climate change. In the context of development cooperation, GEN is in an excellent position to establish partnerships between sustainable living projects in the North and South. The power of human communities to come together and co-design their own pathway into the future can be a major driving force for positive change. The good intentions and creativity of citizens, and their willingness to make a difference, is one of the most underutilised resources we have today. Through sharing of best practices within the wider network, while honouring deep-rooted traditional knowledge and local cultures, we move towards a diverse yet shared pool of wisdom for sustainable living at a global scale.

Background

The adverse impacts of globalisation are challenging. The land, air and waters upon which the livelihoods of millions of people depend are being privatised and appropriated, and eroded and polluted at a frightening pace. As a result, entire communities are being threatened in their survival. Thousands of traditional and indigenous villages around the world are currently in danger of losing their social, cultural, ecological and economic cohesion. Many villagers, and especially the younger generation, are rapidly moving into cities and urban slums. Sustainable lifestyles and cultural values are being lost in the process. These tensions are likely to increase as natural disasters, climate change, resource depletion and economic instability intensify.

As agreed in Copenhagen in December 2009, much of the climate change mitigation that takes place within Southern countries must be enabled and supported by the North. Analyses show that a major commitment to North-South cooperation - including financial and technological transfers - is an inevitable part of any viable climate stabilization architecture. Interestingly, in these times when all the governments in the North have signed up to an agreement to significantly lower their CO₂-emissions, some of the most promising actions being taken to meet these targets are coming not from the governments, but from NGOs and civil engagement. Amongst these are initiatives and practices born in the ecovillage movement.

What is the Global Ecovillage Network, and why 'ecovillages'?

The Global Ecovillage Network (GEN), set up in 1995, is an umbrella organisation working to support the experimental creation and preservation of low impact lifestyles across the globe. The philosophy behind GEN is that 'community' lies at the heart of all models for sustainability, hence the term 'ecovillage'.

GEN defines the village as a human-scale settlement, ranging from a hamlet through the conventional village to a small town or urban suburb. We envision *the village* to be a key-element in building solutions to the problems we face today. At the village level, we can more easily: step into responsibility for our future and the future of our children; oversee and express our concern for healthy relationships in and with our ecosystem; build community, and;

take action together. An 'ecovillage' can thus be of large or small, rural or urban, in the North or the South. Fundamentally, an ecovillage is a human-scale settlement consciously designed through participatory processes to secure long-term sustainability. All four dimensions (the economic, ecological, social and cultural) are seen as mutually reinforcing, and attention to each is essential for holistic and healthy community development.

Ecovillages are an outcome of citizens who prefer to 'walk their talk' in lowering their Ecological Footprint, while increasing their sense of belonging and purpose. Rapidly gaining recognition as demonstrations sites of sustainability in practice, ecovillages are increasingly also places of inspiration for the wider society, for they demonstrate that it is within human capacity and knowledge to consciously enhance and improve not only the environments, but also the societies, in which we live. As such, urban and rural villages alike are precious playgrounds for civil society engagement to come to the fore, and village networks can weave local solutions into a new tapestry for resilient societies.

GEN currently comprises of actors working in multiple sectors, ranging from individuals, communities, businesses and NGOs, to educational institutions and government. GEN-International works through three broad regional organisations: the Ecovillage Network of the Americas, GEN Oceania and Asia, and GEN-Europe/Africa/Middle East. The European branch of GEN (GEN-Europe) is currently assisting in the emergence of GEN-Africa as an independent branch of the global network.

What does GEN do?

One of the fastest growing initiatives of GEN is its educational program, with courses such as the Ecovillage Design Education (EDE) running on all continents, with the encouragement and promotion of local trainers. The EDE is a 4 week-long training that empowers communities to determine and consciously design their own course towards a sustainable future. The curriculum has been recognised and endorsed as setting a standard for the United Nations' 'Decade of Education for Sustainable Development - 2005-2014'. The EDE is universal in scope but local in application, directed towards honouring and drawing out valuable cultural diversity. Rather than losing valuable local knowledge in the process of 'modernisation', the aim is to honour and preserve local wisdom and sustainable traditions, while creatively merging these with innovative technologies, wherever appropriate.

Each regional organisation of GEN works as a platform for connecting projects and people working on sustainable and equitable livelihoods in the region. While in the North these tend to focus on a communal scaling down of ecological footprints, in the South the question may be more of a need to 'scale up' in order to meet basic needs. In contrast, while social systems of solidarity are still very much alive in many areas of the South, many individuals and communities in the North are looking to strengthen their social capital. We in the North have much to learn from the deep-rooted wisdom still alive within Southern cultures.

How can GEN help connect between North and South?

The authenticity of actually walking their talk in lowering ecological footprints, and the experience of building strong relationship, attracts interest and respect to Northern ecovillages from projects in the South. The prospect of collaboration across many sectors of society seems particularly promising with GEN-Africa, due to the openness of many governments, universities, and NGOs in many African. EDE courses and other initiatives have sparked off several African ecovillage projects and networks. For instance, the Senegalese government, impressed by the simplicity and effectiveness of the approach to rural sustainability, has recently established a Minister of Ecovillages. In addition, the government is putting into practice a policy to transform a 14 000 traditional villages into ecovillages. Ministers from other African nation states have declared that they wish to follow the Senegalese example, and GEN-Europe and GEN-Africa envision continuing close-knit relationships of exchange into the future.

In the face of climate change and resource depletion, a network that builds bridges between North and South in a spirit of true collaboration and mutual respect deserves special attention. GEN works through promoting dialogue and exchange, building solidarity and partnerships across all borders. The global need and potential for North-South reconciliation work (with very practical implications) surfaces as soon as communication deepens in such contexts. GEN can build on decades of experience in building relationships of trust within groups of rich cultural and ethnic diversity - bringing core ingredients for fruitful international .

The main challenge for GEN continues to be the insufficient and irregular funding of its projects, which makes it difficult to plan for the longer term and to extend, scale up, and multiply projects. This is a call to connect to government projects and institutions working for the very same causes, particularly those working on development aid and cooperation. It is also a call for more development aid to be channeled into these kinds of initiatives, which empower local populations to take ownership of their future. Designing holistically sustainable ecovillages in a participatory way can synergistically resolve multiple problems and challenges facing both donors and recipients, and GEN can play a central role in strengthening equitable, effective, and long-lasting relationships in development cooperation.

The recognition of traditional and indigenous villages as 'ecovillages'

Grassroots leaders from both North and South recognise in each other a deep sense of responsibility for global environmental and social justice. In recent years, a growing number of indigenous and traditional villages have been approaching GEN with an interest in becoming part of the ecovillage movement. In response to this, leaders of village networks, NGOs, and government from India, Thailand, Senegal, Congo, Peru, Malawi, Sierra Leone, Ghana, Tanzania and South Africa met with GEN-Europe representatives from July to September 2010, to together formulate guidelines for the process of recognizing communities (including traditional and indigenous villages) as 'ecovillages'. GEN has now formulated a first draft of an internationally applicable framework of standards and guidelines, outlined below.

Guidelines and standards for 'ecovillage' recognition

The below are a set of drafted guidelines and standards drafted by GEN to assist in the process of definition and recognition of ecovillages.

Growing from a shared vision of our future, we - the community of inhabitants - raise awareness, build capacity, care for the Earth, and reach out to the wider world. In so doing, we:

- *Engage* in all stages of the process of design and implementation in our community;
- *Adopt* low impact, high quality lifestyles in harmony with nature;
- *Uphold* human rights, build trust among our members, and are open and inclusive of all, integrating the marginalised.
- *Support* solidarity with each individual finding his or her unique way of serving the whole
- *Work* towards economic justice and overcoming the divide between rich and poor

In following these general principles, we strive to raise awareness, through:

- *Promoting* cultural identity and respecting diversity
- *Learning of and opposing* the negative impacts of globalization and the privatization of the global commons
- *Honouring* the wisdom of all, irrespective of gender, race, ethnicity, or profession.

We strive to build capacity through:

- *Educating and empowering* all our members and wider networks to actively contribute to sustainable living
- *Revitalizing and archiving* traditional local wisdom and practices while integrating contemporary methods, technologies and insights where appropriate

Overall, we strive to care for the Earth through:

- *Providing* continuous access to clean water through sustainable water harvesting and careful use of water for all needs
- *Continuously engaging* in the sustainable use of natural resources, participatory restoration of eco-systems and conservation of biodiversity



- *Supporting* ecological food production for local and bioregional consumption
- *Implementing* appropriate technologies and producing clean renewable energy for local and bioregional use
- *Preserving and developing* the knowledge and use of traditional and natural healing methods
- *Using* local traditions and low impact, innovative techniques in green building to provide high quality shelter
- *Taking* all possible actions to minimise waste by reusing, recycling, and composting

We reach out to the wider world, through:

- *Functioning* as a community-based peace-building tool by promoting inter-village and inter-ethnic cooperation
- *Working* to strengthen locally grounded, globally connected community-based economies that are ethical and transparent
- *Being open to collaborating* with and accepting support from institutions, individuals and others, providing this does not compromise any of the above values
- *Building* a wider network of communities, projects and institutions with similar values

Thank you for taking the time to read this document!

These draft guidelines are open to all for feedback. We are enquiring into the existence of an internationally applicable framework and 'pattern language' while honouring the wide diversity and richness of local expression and cultural differences.

Please feel free to contact us with any feedback, questions or suggestions - we would love to hear from you!



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*"If one person dreams alone, it remains a dream.
If many start dreaming together it is the beginning of a new reality."*

- Dom Helder Pessoa Camara