



*Findhorn members can invest in onsite enterprise such as affordable housing, like these community members' homes.*

## How Ecovillages Can Grow Sustainable Local Economies

BY JONATHAN DAWSON

In contrast with most local economies around the world, ecovillages tend to display a distinctive and uncommon level of vitality. One sees bakeries, theatres, shops, and cafés that draw in visitors from far and wide. Local organic cheeses, wines, fruit, and vegetables combine great quality with low food mileage (meaning the food was sold to customers a relatively short distance from where it was grown). Crafts studios turn out beautiful ceramics, textiles, carvings, and candles. Schools and training centres for both children and adults flourish. Publishing houses, printing presses, manufacturers of solar panels, waste-water system designers, consulting companies...

everywhere there is evidence of economic vitality and diversification.

So far, so good. But this economic “success story” is a little more complicated—and perhaps also a little less impressive—than it first appears, for almost all ecovillages are inextricably tied into the wider and destructive global economy that surrounds them. Participants in training courses (and non-formal education is the largest source of income for many ecovillages) tend to leave large air-mile “carbon footprints” behind them.

Ecovillage enterprises, in common with all others in the capitalist economy, depend on a culture of consumerism that

far outstrips the meeting of basic needs. In addition, even though many ecovillages have lower than average ecological footprints, most continue to make fairly extensive use of industrially produced and mass-distributed building materials, clothes, computers, airline travel, and so on. Moreover, the rules of the market mean that it tends to be predominantly the well-off who can afford to participate in the courses and buy the beautifully hand-crafted cards, ceramics, and candles turned out in ecovillage studios, leaving behind an uncomfortable whiff of elitism. Even our community-based local currencies—the *Credito* in Damanhur, Italy, and the *Eko* in Findhorn, Scotland—are tied to the national currencies and ultimately sink or swim with them.

This hardly adds up to the breaking of the mould and the pioneering of a new paradigm of economic behaviour. It is unsurprising that this should be the case, for it is in the sphere of economy above all others that ecovillages and intentional communities will necessarily find it most difficult to buck the system. Here, their smallness of scale, such a boon in many other

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domains, is a severe limitation. In a global market so heavily skewed towards the interest of the large and powerful—Helena Norberg-Hodge’s memorable phrase “Small is beautiful, large is subsidised” springs to mind—and where mass-produced goods consistently cost less than those made by artisans using local materials to satisfy local needs (exactly what we are aiming for in a low-footprint, steady state economy), how are ecovillages to find a way of walking their talk?

The ecovillages that come closest to this ideal have turned their backs, as far as they can, on the global economy. Residents at Tinkers’ Bubble ecovillage in Somerset, England, limit their use of fossil fuels to kerosene for their lamps and fuel for two communally-owned cars (for a community of around 15 people), while seeking to be self-sufficient in food and building their own houses using local materials. Similarly, the Club 99 neighbourhood of the German ecovillage, Sieben Linden, is pioneering a very low-footprint lifestyle, minimising purchases from the global economy. Both these communities reduce their dependence on motorised equipment by using horses to help with energy-intensive tasks.



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*Members and supporters of Findhorn community have raised over a million dollars to invest in their various community co-ops, including the community store, the Phoenix, which sells local organic cheeses, wines, fruit, and vegetables (top); a wind turbine co-op (center); and its CSA farm (bottom).*

These are important experiments. However, they hardly represent a strategy for the evolution towards a steady state economy (unless one sees the collapse of society as we know it to be inevitable, with all survivors reverting imminently to a more or less fossil fuel-free lifestyles). For better or worse, we know that Tinker's Bubble and Club 99 don't represent models that many will buy into.

Of particular interest is the story of a group of weavers in the Lancashire town of Rochdale, England, in the 1840s. Facing a market no less distorted and damaging (albeit on a smaller scale) than that we experience today, the weavers worked long hours for little pay and were forced to make their purchases in the company store at inflated prices. The cooperative movement that they helped to create was based on

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So is there, then, no middle ground between integration into the global economy and cutting all—or most—links with it? Identifying such a path can be described as the economic Holy Grail for ecovillages and other related movements within the wider sustainability movement. The good news is that, new as the scale and nature of our predicament is, there is valuable precedent from which we can borrow.

the principle of *mutuality*—that is, support among groups seeking to break their dependence on the capitalist bosses. Successful worker-owned enterprises used their profits to start up and support other enterprises also owned by their workers. One hundred and fifty years later, the cooperative movement has a global membership of many millions enjoying mutual support within producer co-ops, consumer



JONATHAN DAVISON

*At Damanhur Community in Italy people use their local currency, the Credito, to purchase goods and services from each other, such as greenhouse-grown produce.*



*The Club 99 neighborhood of Ecovillage Sieben Linden in Germany is known for its low ecological footprint lifestyle.*

co-ops, credit co-ops, as well as co-ops for marketing, health, insurance, and many other necessary goods and services.

Two characteristics of the cooperative movement are especially important for current purposes. First, by granting one vote per investor (irrespective of the total invested by each), it conferred democratic rights in the economic sphere, which is generally dominated by speculative capitalists. Second, and crucially, the co-op movement enabled the owners of cooperatives to make decisions on the basis of considerations other than maximising short-term profits.

For the early co-operators, these concerns were predominantly social in nature—improving working conditions, getting access to better food, and strengthening communities. Today, we would add a strong emphasis on environmental protection and restoration.

So, how would an ecovillage economy that borrowed from the cooperative experience look? To some extent, it is already on the ground, with numerous cooperatively owned enterprises in existence within ecovillages. My own community, Findhorn, has created an Industrial Provident Society (a legal form established under the

earliest piece of cooperative legislation, in England in 1852) to permit members to invest in community-owned enterprises and initiatives. Over a million dollars has been raised in this way from community members and supporters for investment in community initiatives, including a buy-out of the community store, the purchase of wind turbines, and investment in affordable housing.

However, in today's globalised economy, this is no longer enough. A key additional step is to recognise that on their

own, individual ecovillages are much too small to escape the perverse gravitational pull of the global economy. The boundaries of mutuality must extend far beyond the limits of

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the ecovillage itself. This only becomes possible if ecovillages consciously identify themselves, in the economic sphere at least, as belonging to a family of initiatives significantly larger than themselves.

Let us explore how this could look by taking a couple of examples that illustrate the type of cooperative alliances being proposed. Two German ecovillages, ZEGG and Sieben Linden, are fostering the development of networks of organic food pro-



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*Findhorn residents grow much of their own food in greenhouses and fields.*

ducers and suppliers in their own regions. Rather than trying to achieve full food self-sufficiency within their communities, they have decided to use the surplus demand, created in part by the needs of the many visitors coming to participate in courses, to enhance the capacity of local growers. ZEGG is also involved in numerous other initiatives to strengthen the fabric of its own bioregion, including a local exchange trading system (LETS), campaigns to promote fair-trade products, a Community Supported Agriculture farm, a free school, an info cafe which acts as a centre for tolerance against right-wing extremism and violence, projects with refugees and asylum-seekers, a forest kindergarten, and all kinds of cultural activities.

The Centre for Alternative Technology (CAT), a Welsh ecovillage, is a key actor in a multi-faceted Welsh initiative, Ecodyfi, whose mission is “to foster sustainable community regeneration

in the Dyfi valley” in ways that build on local distinctiveness: “Food, holiday, and other products will all benefit from being associated with a clean, green image of the valley—where the Dyfi valley is a leader in sustainable community regeneration.”

A key goal for Ecodyfi is to work towards “greening” the local energy economy. Through an European Union-funded project in 1998-2001, Ecodyfi brought around \$600,000 into the local economy, raised local awareness of energy issues, and implemented a number of small community-based water, wind, solar, and wood-fuel schemes. These included the UK’s first community-owned wind turbine, a farm-based hydro-electric scheme, and solar water heating in ten houses. Some income from the community-owned wind turbine is diverted to the Community Energy Fund to benefit energy conservation initiatives for local people. There are plans for a second community-owned wind turbine and for the development of biodiesel locally. The Powys Renewable Energy

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Partnership, in which Ecodyfi is a central player, won the “100% Communities: Rural” category in a European Commission competition.

Ecodyfi is also an active partner in programmes to promote farm-scale horticultural production and marketing in the Dyfi Valley in partnership with the organisation Farming Connect; to strengthen community links through seed swaps, plant swaps, and garden visits in collaboration with Dyfi Valley Seed Savers; to reduce waste and increase composting; to promote community-based tourism; to manage a wildlife area; to improve broadband access for local people; and to involve young people in the planning, design, and fund-raising for a sports facility for skate-boarding, roller-blading, and bicycles.

One final example of an ecovillage engaged in cooperative, bioregionally based activity is EcoVillage at Ithaca in New York state. EcoVillage at Ithaca works closely on education for sustainability with both Cornell University and Ithaca College. Its partnership with Ithaca College includes the development of a curriculum on the “Science of Sustainability” and Ithaca College has made a commitment to become “one of the premier college campuses in the country, modeling sustainability in all its aspects.” EcoVillage at Ithaca is also a major player in the Sustainable Tompkins County initiative, whose aim is to make this the lowest per capita footprint county in the US. Committees associated with this ambitious project are working on a city car-share scheme, a green urban development, waste-management, and sustainability circles in the schools.

This is the way to go for ecovillages that would seek to attain greater autonomy from the global economy and to make a contribution to the emergence of steady state economies. The metaphor of ecovillages as yoghurt cultures seeking to inoculate their surrounding bioregions with the ferment of sustainability seems especially apposite. As we have seen in the examples above, first steps in this direction are already emerging: one, the need for ecovillages to identify themselves as belonging and of service to something larger than themselves alone; and two, the creation of alliances with partners with which they can work bioregionally.

The third step, currently less well developed, consists in developing ties specifically of economic mutuality. This is an important growing point for ecovillages and other intentional communities. We are constrained by a lack of resources and partners from taking on many of the noble community- and planet-serving activities that we could undertake. Yet, there are many individuals and organisations out there that understand that the allocation of investment capital as currently overseen by the global economy ultimately serves no-one.



*Creating alliances locally, EcoVillage at Ithaca hosts hands-on courses in sustainability like this one, partnering with Ithaca College and Cornell University.*

The mountain that faced the working men and women of Lancashire a century and a half ago appeared no less intimidating that that facing us today. We have much to learn from their example. Only by creating an alternative economy of solidarity within which we are able to take decisions on the basis of criteria other than increasing short-term profit can we break free from the gravity of the global capitalist economy. This takes a weight and a muscle that the intentional communities movement on its own does not come near to commanding...yet. Partnership and alliances define the way forward.

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