Annual Report 2017
GEN Europe
By Genny Carraro, Managing Director
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Introduction from the Managing Director

The year 2017 has been once again a year of growth, challenges, satisfactions, achievements and many new inputs have enriched the network.

GEN Europe's vision is of a widespread and vibrant network of urban and rural communities and ecovillages to support a humane, resilient and sustainable Europe. We currently count as part of our family over 110 member communities in 29 countries, as well as 20 national networks. Our mission is to build bridges between communities, creating spaces for education, exchange and networking; to inspire and enable new ecovillages to flourish; and to influence decision makers and public opinion to facilitate the development of communities as part of the transition to a more resilient society.

As is increasingly the case in the network, 2017 was a year of intense activity. As a network, we sharpened our focus on education and capacity building through a series of European projects, such as training in sociocracy, youth exchanges, and the community learning incubator CLIPS.

We have also seen the network grow and strengthen through the introduction of new members and forging of new connections, with the many projects being coordinated through the network, creating links between individuals and ecovillages across the continent.

At the Secretariat in Arterra Bizimodu, Spain, we have also witnessed welcome growth in 2017; introducing two new specialised members of staff in IT and Communications has been a support to the existing team and enables us to better focus and expand our activities based on the needs and wishes of the members. We also welcomed 3 European volunteers as part of the European Volunteer Service Program: thanks to several trainings organised by the network, many of our members now avail all the energy and the enthusiasm of European volunteers.

On the international level, we have also been hard at work to lift the voices of communities and engage policymakers on issues close to all our hearts: sustainability, climate action, enabling environments for community development. Our membership of ECOLISE is helping us direct this work and take steps to develop our advocacy: slowly but surely, as community-led movements connect and come together around common themes and messages, our voices are being heard by decision-makers and we are learning to leverage our experience and expertise as a group to make change happen. Discussions are happening at the national and European levels regarding the
creation of an enabling environment for ecovillages and community-led initiatives and we are seeking to gather and share case studies and best practice to strengthen this work in future.

As ever, the beating heart of our network is the communities on the ground living and breathing sustainability in all its dimensions, from the regeneration of wasteland, to solidarity actions with refugees and asylum seekers, to youth exchanges opening doors for new generations, and the simple yet vital act of sharing a daily meal in community. All these actions are weaving together a new society and a better world, and it is a privilege for us at the secretariat to witness them occurring through connection with our members.

While we cannot hope to capture here all the magnificent actions that happen every day across Europe, nevertheless, in this report we offer a snapshot of some of the actions we are proud of as a network this year, and our hopes for the year to come.

With thanks for your work and support,

Genny Carraro

Managing Director of GEN Europe
Chapter 1 Activity highlights from 2017

Events

NATIONAL NETWORKS MEETING
After Torri Superiore (Italy), Los Portales (Spain), Park Istra (Slovenia) the fourth venue for the GEN national network meeting was Lebensbogen (Germany). 17 representatives from 8 countries (Germany, Sweden, Estonia, Netherlands, Slovenia, Italy, France, Spain) gathered to review and celebrate activities in 2016, and to develop plans for 2017. Some members joined through Skype (Hungary, Finland, Switzerland and Russia). For the second year in a row many representatives could attend the national networks meeting with travel expenses covered through the Erasmus+ funded partnership SCIPP. The first day was dedicated to reporting and sharing news from all the twelve countries present on the meeting, and from GEN office. Many countries reported about increasing collaboration with familiar networks, particularly with Permaculture and Transition Town networks, as well as with other organisations, such as Facilitators Associations, universities and municipalities.

GENERAL ASSEMBLY
Once again, our members gathered during the GA, where statute issues have been discussed, working groups have been formed and a new council has been elected. Every two years, the baton is passed from one council to the next, and this year at our General Assembly held in Ångsbacka, Sweden, it was time to thank our outgoing council and elect new representatives to the roles. Through two days of sociocratic voting, a brand-new council began to form, this time of six members. The diversity of the new group reflects the reality of our network: intergenerational, some with years of experience and some just starting out, all representing different regions across the continent. We’re delighted to welcome our new councillors Riccardo (Italy - Comunità di Etica Vivente), Isabelle (France - Colibris), Ethan (Portugal - Tamera), Irene (Basque Country - Amalurra), Camilla (Denmark - Hallingelille), and to celebrate the re-election of Thomas (Germany - ZEGG) for a further term.
EUROPEAN ECOVILLAGE CONFERENCE

We celebrated our biggest annual conference yet in Ängsbacka, Sweden, welcoming over 600 attendees from all over the world. The conference is always a highlight of our year, and it’s a pleasure to hear feedback from participants that reflects its aim of building bridges between communities and opening ecovillages up to new audiences.

“It was a wonderful event to meet like-minded souls and make new friends”

“There was a palpable loving, caring and spiritual atmosphere which has brought profound change within myself.”

“A whole new world has opened up to me: realizing that people are actually living a sustainable life and seeing the possibilities! I want to try to take this ‘lifestyle’ with me in my city life”

EUROPEAN DAY OF SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES

As part of our membership of ECOLISE, the European network for community-led initiatives on climate change, we supported the development and celebration of the inaugural European Day of Sustainable Communities in September. Ecovillages from Ireland to Spain shared and celebrated their contributions to sustainability as part of the initiative, due to be repeated in 2018.
GREEN PHOENIX

Green Phoenix is a platform and think tank for the community of communities, in collaboration with GEN (Global Ecovillage Network). After 5 consecutive years of successful congresses, Green Phoenix has adapted its format in 2015 to serve as a vessel for in-depth exchange for a smaller group of participants. Last year again, participants from 20 communities and networks met to share and explore their most important questions and deepen the relationship and exchange between communities.

Using the ecovillage design cards at the Green Phoenix
ECOLISE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Meeting in Amalurra, Spain on 6-8 March, representatives of leading networks and organisations supporting community-led initiatives for climate change and sustainability called on policy makers from the local to the European level to recognise and support the vital role that grassroots organisations are playing in the transition to a healthy and sustainable zero-carbon society. During this GA, the second ECOLISE Council was elected: from GEN Europe, Robert Hall was elected as president, Genny Carraro and Nara Petrovic were reconfirmed.

COP23

In November, when governments, NGOs, and activists from around the world came together in the city of Bonn for the UN’s annual climate conference, representatives from all GEN’s regions and GEN International were once again present to advocate for sustainable solutions and showcase ecovillages as part of a transition to a more just and sustainable world.

Amongst a busy schedule of networking, interviews, press conferences and meetings, our delegates could present in two events that highlighted the work of ecovillages: Developing Ecovillages for Regeneration and Climate Action - Opportunities for Europe Inspired by Asia, Africa and Latin America and a Symposium on the Power of Community-led Action for Carbon Drawdown. Read the whole report here.
Projects and partnerships

We continued to apply for and receive European funding, including a major Horizon2020 grant for science and innovation – our biggest project to date. The BLOOM project sees GEN Europe working in a consortium of 12 partners to promote the bio economy in Europe. EVS projects continue to bring funds and the energy and enthusiasm of young people to ecovillages, while training projects are promoting exchange and upskilling ecovillage members.

Regional and national networks have been working on creating links with regional and national governments to promote ecovillage development. RIVE, the Italian ecovillage network, presented to the Italian parliament a proposal for the recognition of intentional communities, while the Iberian network, RIE, has begun work with local government on strategies to combat rural depopulation.

2017 saw the close of CLIPS I – our flagship community incubator project – and the start of preparation for further editions across the continent. Youth activity continues to grow, with youth exchanges bringing young people from across Europe into closer contact with ecovillage living. It’s often from these events that we hear the warmest feedback, and it’s wonderful to hear younger generations getting inspired and active thanks to ecovillage activities.

“I wish everyone to have the opportunity to live a Youth Exchange because it allows us young people to know that we are not alone in believing that another world is possible.” - Gaia, Youth Exchange participant

“I came back home very satisfied and with lots of friendships scattered around Europe, enriched with new knowledge and desire to do things, more than ever convinced that a more sustainable and community-based society is possible.” - Enrico
At the Secretariat

To support the ever-growing European ecovillage movement, we expanded our team capacity by hiring a permanent IT Manager, Angel Matilla. At the same time we hired a new Communications Manager, Francesca Whitlock. This brings our total staff number to 6. We also welcomed a new, sociocratically-elected council, who will steer the organisation for the next two years.

We welcomed three new full members and thirteen new aspiring members to the network, taking us to 122 members overall.
Chapter 2 Looking ahead

2018 had a promising start with a National Networks gathering at Amalurra community in the Basque Country, where representatives from across Europe came together to share and strategise. There was a strong feeling of connection and engagement, and our vision for more pathways for member involvement is taking off, with working groups around different focus areas beginning to emerge and support the work of staff and council, as well as bringing the voice of the members to new forums.

Our connection with international networks such as ECOLISE is getting stronger and more defined, and we will continue this engagement into 2018 and beyond. We also hope to engage ecovillages and ecovillagers further in international events such as the European Day of Sustainable Communities and World Clean-up Day, enabling us to attend COP24 in 2018 armed with stories and documentation of our achievements, showing that the ecovillage model and lifestyle is a sustainable, replicable and necessary option.

The 2018 Conference in Lilleoru, Estonia, is shaping up to be a very special event thanks to the hard work and dedication of the Lilleoru team that started even before last year's event.

At the Secretariat, we are preparing a long-term strategy in consultation with the council to guide us through the coming years – we'll be sharing more at the General Assembly in Lilleoru in July.

IT

IT has been strongly focused on appraising our current IT infrastructure, and much-needed fixing, updating and upgrading outdated and elements, and maintaining our systems, which has increased efficiency. With the new strategy will come new plans of how to move forward in our collaboration with GEN, our offer to members, and further improvements to our infrastructure.

Membership

Growing our membership base will continue to be a priority, but we will focus as well on increasing visibility and availability of information about GEN Europe member ecovillages, fostering a better understanding of the benefits
of being part of GEN Europe as a network, and increasing outreach to inhabitants of member ecovillages.

Communications

With a new Communications manager in place, the focus has been on improving our web and social media presence, creating and growing our lists, maintaining information flow in the network and promoting the conference. Looking ahead, there will be close collaboration between Communications and IT to create tools and infrastructure to facilitate member communication and sharing of news, images, documents and more.

Projects

Working with the Projects working group will give greater strategic focus to our projects work, choosing when and where we want to put our energy to achieve the greatest benefits from the network. BLOOM, our current major project, will continue over the coming years, and we are set to launch Ecogamer, another multi-year and multi-stakeholder project, as well as many other EVS and training projects.

Budget/Finance

This year we raised almost €12,000 in membership fees, and a healthy €38,000 from the conference. However, we remain reliant on large projects, such as BLOOM, to keep us financially balanced, and our costs are increasing as we hire new staff members. We continue to apply for European projects as part of our fundraising strategy.