

Ecovillages, a social alternative

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The term “Ecovillage” has had great fortune since it was coined during the convention of sustainable communities held in Denmark, 1991, by the Gaia Foundation. Thanks to the support of important ecological and alternative experiences like that of Findhorn in Scotland, The Farm in the United States, Chrystal Water in Australia, and others, the Global Ecovillage Network(GEN) was formed in 1995.

The network now is recognized officially by the United Nations and collaborates with the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) It also has a consultative status at the UN-Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) commission .GEN is divided into continental organizations that include thousands of communities around the world as well as many national networks.

RIVE, (Rete Italiana dei Villaggi Ecologici) the Italian network is a member of the European chapter of GEN. It has existed since 1996 and now includes 23 communities as well as 11 new projects that are distributed throughout the nation, but this does not comprehend all the experiences that can be defined as ecovillages. Most Italian ecovillages are of a relatively small dimension, generally including about 20 members. Notable exceptions are represented by the Federazione di Comunità di Damanhur, near Ivrea in the north-western region of Piedmont, which has about 600 residents and the Popolo degli Elfi , in the Tuscan Apennines, near Pistoia, which includes about 200 people.

Italian ecovillages are based on diverse philosophical inspirations and are organized according to different lifestyles, but they all adhere partially, or totally to the principles which are expressed in the Manifesto of RIVE.

(www.ecovillaggi.it)

What is an Ecovillage?

It is an intentional community which aims at reaching numerous goals which can be thus summarised: a) to restore and protect the health and integrity of the environment by

changing our lifestyles both as individuals and as groups; b) to favour caring, respectful social relations and to strengthen trust among members through the use of facilitation and various conflict resolving communication methods; c) to defend human rights d) to protect the environment by using various methods to maintain the ecosystem (for example organic and synergic gardening, permaculture, biodynamic agriculture, ecobuilding, wildlife preservation); e) to maintain a holistic, pacific and non violent vision of one's existence and a social , cultural, educational commitment towards the territory; f) to be self sufficient in the production of food and alternative energy; g) to use decision making processes that encourage democracy and consensus.

How do Ecovillages contribute to transition?

The exponential growth of ecovillages in the last few years in Italy and throughout Europe can be considered the result both of the grass root response of mainly youthful environmentally conscious groups, and a sign that a cultural awareness has broken through the confines of a marginal interest group. For this reason ecovillages wish to be seen as models of social organization and interpersonal relations that objectively are alternative to the one and only type of mentality imposed by capitalistic globalization. The mainstream view is based on the unrestrained exploitation of natural resources and consumer goods, on mass consumerism and on the alienation of work and creativity.

The EV movement, however, does not assume an antagonistic approach nor does it seek refuge in the Utopian paradise, but it constructs in different ways other concrete forms of economy, decision making processes, mutual solidarity, social and even political commitment in the larger community.

Some ecovillages are present in institutions such as municipal administrations and they promote initiatives like zero kilometre markets, organic food shops and consumer groups, holistic health practices and products while others support or are active in environmental., pacifist or national and local associations for the integration of immigrants and other social issues.

All ecovillages promote spiritual or highly ethical activities which tend to develop the inner growth of individual members and of those who are not necessarily residents but who share , at least to some extent, the same objectives.

Ecovillages implement internal divisions of labour without gender discrimination and usually on the basis of each individual's capacity to realize himself creatively in the job he freely chooses.

Often the rotation of duties and activities is put into practice so that each member acquires new competencies and independence as well a comprehensive vision of the economy of his community. This is furthermore, a way to prevent the formation of hierarchies or competitive leadership. Each member must know, through his activity or through the observation of others' work, what is happening in the various sectors of productivity and thus he is enabled to participate in the planning of the community budget.

In ecovillages material resources as well as income from external jobs or work within the community can be partially or entirely shared. Management of community finances, administrative functions and roles, when necessary are decided collectively.

The economic organization of an intentional community is also finalized to promote cultural, educational and environmental activities which tend to re-establish a balance with nature according to the principles of eco-reversibility, that is, the replenishing of what has been consumed in the environment. Each member is made more aware on a daily basis of how to reduce waste, reuse and recycle products. Self produced alternative energy, efficient use of water in domestic and agricultural systems, all contribute to this principle. Ecovillages serve as an example of good practices geared to reduce human impact on the environment.

Being present in one's surrounding area means promoting, or at least working together with movements that have the purpose of protecting resources (in particular water and land as public commodities). It is implicit that defending rights of citizens as well as initiating political activities that qualify the surrounding territory are fundamental aspects of ecovillage living and transition experiences. Outreach in the larger community is also achieved by extending the use of community structures and services, offering occasions for meetings and ethical, psychological and cultural growth. A didactic function is assumed by ecovillages, not only aimed at schools but for all those who intend to re-establish a correct relation to their own health and nourishment through alternative practices.

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Our ecovillages become places of attraction where a special type of energy circulates as a result of the harmony in the relations among members and the continual search to improve human interaction. Different techniques such as meditation, yoga, or reiki are practised in many communities for the well being and unity of members, even if they are not associated with a spiritual outlook.

Each ecovillage gives its own particular contribution to the movement and all serve as an example of how to contrast concretely, here and now, the destructive route of the current model of development.

We realize that ecovillages represent only a tiny reality in today's world, yet they are seeds of change which demonstrate that alternatives are possible.