
Sustainable Living in the City

The Case of an Urban Ecovillage

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Abstract

On December 2015, heads of states from all over the world got together at United Nations Climate Change Conference in Paris where they agreed that climate change is not only an unprecedented challenge for humanity but that it requires urgent global agreement for action. Urbanization is particularly relevant to the implementation of the Paris Agreement as of 2007 the majority of world's population lives in urban areas. In 2016, the world's cities occupied just 3% of the Earth's land, but accounted for 60–80% of energy consumption and 75% of carbon emissions. While on one hand the rapid urbanization is exerting pressure on the living environment and public health, on the other hand high density of cities can bring efficiency gains in solving those problems.

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Ecovillages are intentional communities whose members holistically integrate ecological, economic, social, and cultural dimensions of sustainability. An urban ecovillage situated in the heart of a Western metropolis is taken as a case study to present how its members strive to lead more sustainable lives in the city by altering their consumption practices and adopting more sustainable ones. Specific examples of more sustainable solutions are given to some consumption practices that can be implemented in an urban setting.

Keywords

Ecovillages · Intentional communities · Sustainability · City

Introduction

The 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Paris, France, “was the largest UN conference ever seen, with 37.878 participants, including 20.000 government/parties representatives, 8.000 IGOs/NGOs observers, and 3.000 media” (UN-Habitat 2016, x). It was deemed to be an historical event not only due to its size but also because 175 parties (174 countries and the European Union) all agreed that “climate change is a real and unprecedented challenge for humanity” that requires an urgent global agreement for action (UN-Habitat 2016, x).

Urbanization is particularly relevant to the implementation of the Paris Agreement (also known as COP 21) as “human activities in cities, are in large part responsible for the current climate change trends and dynamics” while at the same time, urban populations are vulnerable to the increasingly negative effects of climate change and air pollution mainly generated by greenhouse gas emission of transportation and heating/cooling systems (UN-Habitat 2016, 3).

In 2016, the world’s cities occupied just 3% of the Earth’s land, but accounted for 60–80% of energy consumption and 75% of carbon emissions (World Bank 2009). This reality poses many threats and many opportunities simultaneously. While on one hand the “rapid urbanization is exerting pressure on fresh water supplies, sewage, the living environment, and public health,” on the other hand “high density of cities can bring efficiency gains and technological innovation while reducing resource and energy consumption” (UN-Habitat 2016, 1).

The United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) estimates that by 2030, almost 60% of the world’s population will live in urban areas and 95% of urban expansion in the next decades will take place in the developing world, adding an estimated 70 million new urban residents each year (UN-Habitat 2016). This will result in more people living in urban, rather than rural areas in all developing regions, including Asia and Africa (World Bank 2009).

Increasing urbanization has acute environmental, economic, and social implications for the world’s future (Wu 2010). It has a direct impact on climate change as “it creates major producers of greenhouse gases and air pollutants; and it is the most drastic form of land transformation, devastating biodiversity and ecosystem

services” (ibid). Yet, “[c]ities have lower per capita costs of providing clean water, sanitation, electricity, waste collection, and telecommunications, and offer better access to education, jobs, health care, and social services” (ibid). The high population density of the cities makes them much more cost-effective in terms of implementing more sustainable processes. Wu (2010) strongly believes that “urbanization offers a number of things that are critical to achieving sustainability” as “cities epitomize the creativity, imagination, and mighty power of humanity. Cities are the centers of socio-cultural transformations, engines of economic growth, and cradles of innovation and knowledge production.”

Among the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) set by the United Nations which are part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is “Goal 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities” (UN 2015). This goal aims to “[m]ake cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.” Among its 11 goal targets are reducing “the adverse per capita environmental impact of cities, including by paying special attention to air quality and municipal and other waste management” and providing “universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces, in particular for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities” by 2030 (UN 2015).

It is evident from these reports that as the majority of the world population is moving to urban areas and contributing to negative environmental impact, cities play an important role in the future of our planet regarding the implications of climate change. Therefore, the question arises: Is it possible to lead sustainable lifestyles in the city that are respectful of the ecological environment and human relations? According to John Wilmoth, Director of United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs’s Population Division, “[m]anaging urban areas has become one of the most important development challenges of the 21st century. Our success or failure in building sustainable cities will be a major factor in the success of the post-2015 UN development agenda” (UN 2014).

This chapter looks at ecovillages as one way of tackling the complex phenomenon of sustainability, especially in an urban setting. The chapter begins with a definition of ecovillages and the core practices and values shared by ecovillages around the world. This section is followed by a case study of an urban ecovillage in the western United States which describes ways in which the members of this intentional community strive to achieve and maintain a lifestyle that is sustainable in ecological, economic, and socio-cultural ways in the heart of a metropolis. Specific examples of more sustainable solutions are given to some consumption practices.

What Is an Ecovillage?

Ecovillages are models of sustainable living. They are a grassroots movement of cohousing projects where its members live in intentional communities. Global Ecovillage Network (GEN), founded in 1995, defines ecovillages as “an intentional, traditional or urban community that is consciously designed through locally

owned, participatory processes in all four dimensions of sustainability (social, culture, ecology and economy) to regenerate their social and natural environments” (GEN n.d.). There are over 1000 ecovillages in rural, suburban, and urban settings around the world that are part of GEN which works as a hub to share and disseminate information to ecovillages around the globe. In 1998, the first ecovillages were officially named among the United Nations’ top 100 listing of Best Practices, as excellent models of sustainable living.

Karen Litfin, a political scientist who specializes in global environmental politics and has visited and studied over a dozen ecovillages around the world, characterizes ecovillages as “emerging in an astonishing diversity of culture and ecosystems, as a planetary knowledge community grounded in a holistic ontology and seeking to construct viable living systems as an alternative to the unsustainable legacy of modernity” (2009, 125). Ecovillages show diversity according to the cultural and ecological context they are part of, but what unites them is their “members’ commitment to a supportive social environment and a low impact of life” (Litfin 2009, 125). What distinguishes ecovillages from mainstream neighborhoods, towns, and cities is that its members intentionally become part of a community that has shared ideals and goals with emphasis on ecology (Van Schyndel Kasper 2008).

Ecovillages vary in many ways, as they are shaped by the particular objectives, values, belief systems, and cultures of their founders and members as well as local laws and geographic contexts among other variables. Despite their differences, GEN outlines the following as three core practices shared by most:

- Using local participatory processes
- Integrating social, cultural, economic and ecological dimensions in a whole-systems approach to sustainability
- Actively regenerating natural and social environment. (GEN n.d.)

The principles of permaculture overlap with the ecovillage ideology. Initially developed in the 1970s in Australia by Bill Morrison and David Holmgren, the permaculture movement advocates creating virtuous circles rather than vicious ones within any community. Permaculture can be described as a “creative design process based on whole-systems thinking informed by ethics and design principles” including land and nature stewardship, health and spiritual wellbeing, education and culture, finance and economics, and tools and technology (Permaculture Design Principles n.d.). Many permaculture principles are adopted by ecovillage communities as they both advocate to reduce waste, store energy, use small and slow solutions, use and value diversity, and integrate rather than segregate (Litfin 2009).

There are many reasons people choose to join an ecovillage or an intentional community. Among those are the desire to move away from consumerism and materialism (Cunningham and Wearing 2013; Bang 2005), to achieve sustainability, and lead a transparent, low-key, low impact lifestyle (Hong and Vicdan 2016), search for a more spiritual life as part of a community (Cunningham and Wearing 2013), and longing for a safe environment to raise children (Van Schyndel Kasper 2008). As

Litfin puts it “ecovillagers see themselves pioneering an alternative socioeconomic system to the unsustainable legacy of modernity” (2009, 132).

The extant literature on ecovillages spans a wide range of academic disciplines (See Kunze and Avelino 2017 for a rather comprehensive list of publications). These include human ecology (Van Schyndel Kasper 2008), anthropology (Chitewere 2006; Chitewere and Taylor 2010; Holleman 2011; Standen 2014), environmental psychology (Kirby 2003), public policy (Sherry 2014), and ecopolitics (Kirby 2004; Cunningham and Wearing 2013) focusing on the human relations in communal settings, issues of social justice, and role of boundaries. Others include urban planning (Whitfield 2001), environmental governance (Gesota 2008), environmental studies (Breton 2009a, b), sustainability studies (Miller and Bentley 2012; Winston 2012; Dawson 2006), and practical guides to living in sustainable communities (Bang 2005). Finally, some scholars also approached ecovillages as utopias posing the question whether they are modern utopias (Andreas 2013; Bossy 2014; Hedrén and Linnér 2009; Meijering 2012; Sargisson 2012). As can be seen from these examples, an interdisciplinary approach is necessary to understand the full scope of issues surrounding ecovillages and for developing solutions.

Case Study: An Urban Ecovillage

Los Angeles Eco Village (LAEV) is situated in one of the most densely populated downtown neighborhoods of Los Angeles, California. Founded in 1993, the members’ original concept to establish an ecovillage in a rural setting was quickly abandoned in favor of creating an urban “demonstration project.” The ecovillage consists of three apartment buildings surrounded by garden plots, outdoor patios, a communal room, a bike room, and garages converted for other uses, such as a tool shed and an art studio.

LAEV “intends to demonstrate processes for lower environmental impact and higher quality of living patterns in an urban environment” by sharing its “processes, strategies and techniques with others through tours, talks, workshops, conferences, public advocacy and other media” (About Los Angeles Eco-village n.d.). The LAEV website describes the intentions behind its foundation and the practices of the community:

Approximately 35 neighbors from diverse backgrounds and income levels have moved to the neighborhood intentionally to learn, share their knowledge and to demonstrate EcoVillage processes. Many attend regular community potluck dinners, community meetings, workshops on permaculture approaches to sustainable urban living, community work parties, and provide a variety of public services to the neighborhood and the city at large on a broad range of sustainability areas [...] While 35 neighbors moved to LA Eco-Village intentionally, we share our buildings and the neighborhood with many pre-existing neighbors. (About Los Angeles Eco-village n.d.)

The data for the case study were collected as part of an 18-month long prolonged ethnographic study. The methodology consisted of long unstructured interviews with

20 LAEV members, participant observation of community events, potlucks, meetings, photographs of the ecovillage, and online archival data – video clips, news articles, blog posts, etc., written by and about the ecovillage and its members. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed by using a qualitative data analysis software program.

Sustainable Living Practices

Ecovillages strive toward increasingly sustainable consumption practices. Material goods are minimally consumed, shared, and recycled. LAEV residents make conscious decisions about their individual as well as communal consumption choices. A member explains:

I think we're better at waste reduction. We compost. We greywater. We've got a smaller trash bin. It's both giving ourselves limits and also showing that we don't need as much. There's a strong culture of non-consumption. We have clothing swap parties. There's a strong... thrift shop and used secondhand purchasing, whether it's through Craigslist or whatever. There's a strong culture around reuse and reduction. There's a lot more food growing that's happening.

A communal space in the literal and metaphorical sense of the word allows people who share similar values to gather under one roof. One member describes his worldview:

Well, I'm generally under the umbrella of sustainability. I think at that time [when he joined LAEV] that was big on my mind in terms of how I felt like I was spending energy. So like, choice of what products people consume or how they relate to materials over the course of the day... or how people relate to transportation over the course of the day. How people relate to energy-consumption over a few days. When it comes to my values I believe that the world has too many humans and at the average rate of consumption we don't have enough resources to support the lifestyle that the average human has. The way that impacts humans in the unjust society we live in is that there is a tremendous number of people that are suffering in an unnecessary way. There're a bunch of different things we can do to help change that. For me, it involves everything from, you know, having a perspective on population, having a perspective on...how we get around and what we value in society. I have a lot of issues with how people prioritize money-making and how making money puts pressure on people to make bad decisions that are not based on the larger good. I'm generally very left-leaning, politically, so I believe that we should be sharing resources and that we should be supporting each other and we should be making it easier for people to participate in political processes.

Another LAEV member explains how she desired to lead a sustainable lifestyle in a city like Los Angeles which is notorious for having a car-centric culture:

Just an interest in the concept of people doing something different, and doing something that was potentially beneficial both to the people who are part of it, but also a more sustainable way to live, in general, but also in LA, which can be very challenging because it's a car-centric city, and it doesn't really have much culture embedded in the city around ecological

sustainability practices. So it was like trying to figure out how to live in this city, how to find my place in this city. It sort of seemed like a bit of its own identity within a much bigger identity that I was worried about how well I would relate to this city in general.

It is not possible to distinctly separate the ecological, economic, and socio-cultural dimensions of sustainability one from another as they are closely intertwined and overlapping. However, to organize the various practices that ecovillagers adopt and ideologies for which LAEV advocates, these dimensions will be examined individually.

Ecological Dimensions

I was looking for a place to live where I could continue to live my values, which was around an ecological approach to living, living lightly on the earth. And whenever I would calculate my carbon footprint, it would be very, very, very low until I added a trip to California [laughs] and then it went flying up the chart. So I decided that's not sustainable. I don't want to keep doing that. Plus it was tiring. So I went searching for intentional communities and found Los Angeles Ecovillage in the middle of Los Angeles.

This quotation is from an LAEV member who moved to Los Angeles from the East Coast United States to be closer to her son. Like many other members of the community, what attracted her to the ecovillage was the joy of finding a place in the city where she can continue to pursue her ideals living among like-minded people.

In the midst of one of the most densely populated neighborhoods of Los Angeles, as one enters through the gate of LAEV and moves through the lobby to the back yard, one finds oneself in a communal garden full of fruit trees, edible flowers and plants, and a chicken coop. The banana tree, among other plants, is irrigated with the discarded water from the washing machine located in the yard as part of a greywater system installed by one of the members, a prominent expert in the field of greywater studies. The community garden is tended by some members who have their own plots; the produce is shared communally and eaten at weekly Sunday evening potlucks where the residents share homemade food and stories. Members can choose to join the food co-op that delivers weekly fresh, organic vegetables, fruits, grains, legumes, and other food items. Food scraps do not go to waste but end up in the compost area where people experiment with different types of composting. A member describes her daily food source:

Our food systems are better in that we're growing more food. We have a food co-op that we get food from – a relatively local organic farm – and a bulk room where we can buy grains and dry goods. So most of my food comes from one of those. Almost all of my produce comes from either the garden or from the farmer, and part of the food co-op. It's a buying co-op. We buy inventory. We buy goods, like all kinds of grains and nuts and even soaps from [name of company], which is a natural food distributor, and we get a truck delivery . . . whenever we need more. We store it all in the bulk room, and we have that open two times a week, and I think it's going down to one time a week. Then we all take shifts. We all volunteer working, either the produce sorting – that's the weekly farmer's delivery. The

produce delivery, that's every week on Sundays, after they go to the farmer's market, they bring by a bunch of produce and we split it up in boxes. That's where we get a lot of organic produce. It's very inexpensive when you do it that way. It's \$10 a box, and it usually takes me two weeks to go through it. That's a lot of organic produce for \$10.

As described by this particular member, food co-ops and communal gardens can be both more economical and ecological methods of obtaining fresh, organic food in the city. Another area where these two dimensions of sustainability overlap is transportation. With twelve-lane highways weaving across the city like a webbed network, the prominence of car culture in Los Angeles is undeniable. Despite efforts to improve public transportation in the city with an expanded system of light rail and bus routes, adding High Occupancy Vehicle (HOV) freeway lanes to promote carpooling, and extending bike paths to encourage bicycling, car dependency is still high. Of the 10 most congested highway corridors in the United States, 7 of them are in Los Angeles (Texas A&M Transportation Institute 2011). Traffic is determined to be among the biggest contributors of urban air pollution in the Western world in some regions (EU Science Hub 2015). According to the American Lung Association's "State of the Air 2016" report, "Los Angeles remains the metropolitan area with the worst ozone pollution, as it has been for all but one of the 16 annual reports, despite having had its best air quality ever in the State of the Air report's history" (5). It is evident that air pollution and traffic are major points of concern for the environment in LA. It is this reality that has activated the ecovillage members to create an environment that would improve the city's air quality and make the environment more livable for all.

The apartment unit underneath the stairs at LAEV was turned into a room for people to store their bicycles. A monetary incentive, in the form of rent reduction, is given to members who do not own cars. However, living car-free in Los Angeles remains a huge challenge to some members, especially those with small children or whose jobs require them to travel around the city. These members try to carpool as much as they can or share one car among many members as explained below by one of the members who owns a car.

It's almost a community car at this point. There are about maybe six different households who use it on a regular basis. And it's a station wagon, so it's very, kind of, utilitarian for people who want to get whatever – gardening supplies or moving or whatever. Finding free things on the sidewalk [laughs] that are too heavy to lug by bike.

Economic Dimensions

LAEV offers affordable housing in a city where the median house price is twice the US national average (The Economist 2016). Los Angeles ranks number 7 in North America and number 17 in the world among the cities with the highest cost of living (Expatica 2016). Living in a community and sharing resources as opposed to a single-family house has many financial advantages.

I feel that the model that is promoted here, and that we try to live by, is a very accessible one, economically. . . recognizing the links between ecology and economy. So, things from having a commitment to affordable housing, to understanding the benefits of sharing resources. So having the free table, if there are things that you don't need, somebody else can use. Also, just sharing basic tools, or things that are either expensive on their own, or just unnecessary to have. Everyone to have a vacuum cleaner, or everyone to have particular power tools [is not necessary] if you can share those things. You know, I borrow my friend's mop or whatever. Or they borrow my drills or whatever. It just seems to both economically and ecologically makes sense. I could probably go on much longer.

It was a conscious decision of the LAEV founders to establish an urban ecovillage as opposed to a more typical rural one. Even though they were initially looking for a plot of land to build a rural ecovillage like the majority of ecovillages in Northern America, they abandoned this idea in favor of an effort to create desirable living conditions in the city.

I think this community represented a lot of like-minded people who not only had those same concerns and some people had a lot of knowledge about one area or not. . . but it seemed like we had a lot of general agreement when we would have discussions. Okay, we're obviously preaching to the choir most of the time. Also, I felt like there were a number of people who were really willing to experiment with alternatives, and to do so with a consciousness. . . with a conscience about money. I felt like to try to do those things – part of what I thought was inspiring, which I think was. . . I don't know if it was necessarily what everybody thought, was that most of the global population doesn't have a lot of money. If we come up with – within an urban setting – ways to change the way that we live in a way that's sustainable with very few resources. . . that's replicable. Moving out to the farm and the country with a lot of money and purchasing your own land and buying solar panels like that and everything that's expensive. . . it didn't seem – it seems privileged from a class perspective. I felt like I wasn't as interested in that as I was for these other low-tech or low-cost alternatives. I was really interested in people who couldn't care less about the values of mainstream society, and here's what I'm going to pursue. I'm going to pursue this interest and I'm going to talk to these people that I think really need my help. I felt like there are people who are really giving a lot of themselves to change the system in a really consistent way. That was really inspiring.

Ecovillagers adopt different anticonsumerist practices to reduce their carbon footprints and to live more economically by utilizing alternative methods to money-based exchanges. Some examples include the free table at the lobby where people leave their unwanted goods for others to pick up, a street library where people can leave and pick up books from a shelf on the street outside the ecovillage, clothing swap parties, participating in trade school activities, and exchanging resources through a time bank. A time bank is a time-based exchange system where its members exchange their services for one-time credit. For example, a person can give one-hour guitar lesson in exchange for one-hour of house cleaning. No money is involved and regardless of the type of service, all services are treated equal. A trade school is similar to a barter system, but the exchange is not limited to 1 h of time. For instance, a person can teach a group candle making in exchange for food. Sharing individual skills on-site rather than paying “outsiders” to travel to the site is a key concept in cooperative living.

Socio-Cultural Dimensions

One of the main reasons people live in intentional communities is to experience the sense of being part of a larger entity, a collectivistic community, and surrounding themselves with people who share similar worldviews and values. Finding like-minded people can be a challenge in a city of four million individuals who come from all walks of life, educational backgrounds, income levels, ethnicities, and nationalities. This is also precisely the reason why LAEV becomes a meeting point for people from very diverse backgrounds but with one vision for the world: a more sustainable planet.

So I think that when people come to us, there's so much going on when people find out about us. This idea that, 'Oh my goodness, these values.' People come and they see the common values, and I could live out these values, and it's just, when people have never seen that before – I mean, I had that experience as well, 'Oh my goodness, I could actually live my values.' I didn't know that was possible. And not only that, living in LA is very expensive, and the chance to do that more affordably here.

Other things that I – like, I feel like living in an intentional community, and particularly an ecovillage, living with people with shared values. Feeling safe in the community that I live in. It's not necessarily – it wouldn't necessarily appear to be safe. There's certainly crime around the area, but I feel like knowing your neighbors and being. . . . When I first moved I was a single woman, so just being able to feel safe in a neighborhood I think is really good. Around the shared values, commitment and kind of curiosity and exploration around particular kinds of ecological living.

When LAEV was first founded, it had no members with children. Over the years, the members had children or families with children moved in which changed the social dynamic of the community noticeably. As the saying goes, "it takes a village to raise a child," and the parents experience this first hand. The community becomes their village in the middle of a city and acts like one big "extended family," where the availability of adults in the community at any given time helps parents with childcare, becoming a primary reason for them in choosing to live in the ecovillage.

So, for me, my perspective is that I think it would be really hard and isolating living alone – living in a single-family home with my partner [. . .] I feel like I'd be really isolated. For me, I guess pet – cat – care and childcare are very different but similar idea of, like, if I need to go away for work for a couple of days, it's so easy to find somebody to take care of my cats, or to water the plants or whatever. And I am available to do that for other people who are going out of town. So, it's just easy to have that kind of support. Also, there are projects that are just hard to do by yourself. Like, building raised beds or whatever. It's just like you can do a work party and you have a bunch of people to do something together. It's easy to have people over.

The community life is organized around several events such as weekly meetings with a largely administrative purpose, potlucks/social events bringing members together in a more informal setting, and work parties which require manual-labor as members work together to take care of the garden or renovate the building

facilities. Weekly meetings are held to discuss issues that the ecovillage needs to address. Communal decisions are made based on a *consensus decision making* process which requires a collaborative group unanimity that all members of the community actively support or at least can live with (Seeds for Change n.d.). This is significantly different from a democratic or nonconsensus voting systems where the majority rules. The meetings, facilitated by a moderator, create an arena for the members to discuss their concerns, share their viewpoints, and vote on accepting new members to the community.

The Challenges

Life in an ecovillage is not effortless, nor without its challenges. As one of the LAEV members puts it “it’s kind of like a big family with all its wondrous stuff and its difficult stuff. The arguments. . . the love. . . the gossip. . . a little bit of testing your own patience. The way that we can have this space in the middle of a rather unforgiving city is an amazing aspect of what we can have here.”

Individualistic personality traits, usually associated with Western cultures, can at times be at odds with the collectivistic demands of communal living and the notion of consensus decision-making. In fact, individuality and its contradiction with the ecovillage ideology is one of the most referred to topics in the ecovillage context (e.g., Holleman 2011). Moreover, the consensus decision-making process can be a hindrance to taking action in situations where there is no consensus, resulting in unresolved issues. Conflict resolution teams are not always successful in resolving conflicts between members, and conflicts may even cause members to leave the community.

While many members join ecovillages to escape from materialism and the dictates of capitalism, they may also continue to exhibit their old established habits of consumption. Boundaries, communication, governance, and consensus issues are reported as among the major challenges faced in ecovillages (Kirby 2003; Cunningham and Wearing 2013). As Litfin puts it “ecovillages are not utopias; they are living laboratories. Some experiments may be successful and others not, but they are all opportunities for learning” (2014, 18).

Robert Gilman, a pioneer of sustainable communal living, who was instrumental in the founding of Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) notes numerous challenges ecovillages face during the research and design, creation and implementation, and maintenance stages. He lists these challenges under the following categories of “the bio-system challenge,” “the built-environment challenge,” “the economic system challenge,” “the governance challenge,” “the glue challenge,” and “the whole systems challenge” (Gilman 1991, 10).

The “bio system challenge” poses difficulties in preserving the natural habitats on the village land while producing food on site, processing the organic waste produced on site and recycling the solid waste and processing the solid waste from the village. The “built-environment challenge” requires that the ecovillage is built with ecologically friendly materials using renewable energy resources and built in ways that

have a minimal impact on the land. The buildings should also encourage community interaction. The “economic challenge” includes finding answers to the questions such as “What are sustainable economic activities, both in terms of what will sustain the members of the community and what is sustainable in ecological terms?” “How can we be simultaneously economically and ecologically efficient, so as to reduce both expenses and environmental impact?” and “Are there useful alternatives and/or supplements to the money economy for facilitating economic exchange within and between ecovillages?” The “governance challenge” deals with conflict resolution, communal decision-making process, and leadership roles. Gilman views the “glue challenge” as the mechanics of holding the members together around shared values and vision. Finally, the “whole-system” challenge is described as “perhaps the biggest challenge” (Gilman 1991) given that during the formation of an ecovillage so many changes have to be made and so many factors have to be taken into consideration that the whole task becomes an insurmountable one. Therefore, he advocates that sustainability should not be a characteristic of the community, but it needs to be part of the design process from the very beginning.

Conclusion

A grim reality lies in the future of our planet and its habitants in the face of anthropogenic climate change. Urbanization plays a significant role in contributing to environmental damage and harmful impact on the quality of life for all. There is no denying the fact that the human population, especially in the Western urban areas, cannot continue to consume Earth’s limited resources the way they are being consumed today.

Ecovillages are in essence born out of pure and moral intentions to offer “small-scale place-based, yet tightly networked, collective efforts” (Litfin 2009, 124). As shown in the example of an urban ecovillage in this chapter’s case study, there are a number of ways in which economic, ecological, social, and cultural dimensions of sustainability can be achieved while in a city setting.

“While ecovillages may show that another world is possible on a very small scale, the question remains: can global systemic change come about through a network of communities committed to social and ecological sustainability?” asks Litfin (2009). She responds, “The short answer is we don’t know. There are good reasons to doubt it can, yet also countervailing considerations to all of these good reasons” and she continues to add “we must admit at least the possibility that the ecovillage movement could play an important role in transition to a just and sustainable society” (140). Despite various challenges ecovillages face and encounter, overall they are noteworthy examples of making cities more sustainable and livable, and in the absence of more viable alternatives they pose an optimistic possibility for living a more holistic life in the cities by leaving a lower impact on the planet. As former United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan so aptly put it, the “future of humanity lies in cities.”

Exercises in Practice

- (i) Start a communal edible garden at your school/university, workplace, or neighborhood. Organize a communal meal with the produce you harvest from the garden to gather around food to get to know your community better.
- (ii) Go to *Global Footprint Network* (<http://www.footprintnetwork.org/resources/footprint-calculator/>) or *World Wildlife Fund's* "footprint calculator" (<http://footprint.wwf.org.uk/>) or any other similar web site where you can calculate your ecological footprint and find out about your carbon footprint. What can you change about your consumption behavior that can lower your carbon footprint?

Engaged Sustainability Lessons

- It is possible to live sustainably in big cities.
- Living in ecovillages helps people achieve ecological, economic, social, and cultural dimensions of sustainability by making resources more readily available and shared by a close-knit community.
- Community gardens benefit the air, soil, animals, and the people around them.
- Composting helps reduce food waste that goes into landfills, and nourishes the soil compost is applied to.
- Car-dependency can be reduced by carpooling, car sharing, bicycling, and using public transportation more frequently.
- There are alternative methods of exchange such as time banks, trade schools, street libraries, swap parties, and bartering.

Chapter-End Reflection Questions

- (i) What are some of the sustainable consumption practices with which you engage? Does your household generally support those practices?
- (ii) Do you know where your clothes were made and who made them? Does the label provide information about the manufacturing process? Do you know if the workers had fair labor conditions?
- (iii) Do you know where your food comes from? Is it locally produced/grown or shipped from across the globe? Does it matter to you whether it is locally sourced or not? Is an organic tomato shipped from 8000 miles/kilometers away better than a nonorganic locally grown one?
- (iv) Do you frequently throw away food that has gone bad, that was bought but never eaten? What do you do to not waste food? What do you do with food scrapings?
- (v) If your city has a recycling center, visit the center and find out what type of materials are recycled, where these materials go after recycling.
- (vi) If you live in a car-dependent big city, are there ways in which you can still reduce your car consumption? Can you use public transportation or bicycles as

your main mode of transportation? If that is not a viable option, can you carpool?

Cross-References

- ▶ [Finding Meaning Through Environmental Stewardship: Achieving Purpose and Community Cohesion Through Purpose and Passion](#)
- ▶ [Smart Cities for a Flourishing Life: Leveraging Big Data for a Sustainable Future](#)
- ▶ [Smart Cities: New Urbanism – New Agrarianism as a Path to Sustainability](#)
- ▶ [Supermarket and Green Stuff: An Urban Sociological Field Experience in Brazil](#)
- ▶ [The LOHAS Lifestyle and Marketplace Behavior: Establishing Valid and Reliable Measurements](#)
- ▶ [The Search for the Good Green Life: A Personal Exploration of What It Means to Live Sustainably](#)
- ▶ [The Theology of Sustainability Practice: The City of the Future](#)
- ▶ [Transitioning a Local Energy System to Sustainability Through Community Engagement: A Qualitative Case Study](#)
- ▶ [Urban Green Spaces as a Component of an Ecosystem: Functions, Services, Users, Community Involvement, Initiatives and Actions](#)

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