INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the third edition of Ecovillages project newsletter. In this 3rd issue at project’s end, we would like to outline the greatest contributions to the fostering of ecovillages development as a sustainable way of living in the Baltic Sea Region that project has achieved during 30 months of its implementation.

This last issue contains the presentation and reflections on the final core project results. The project “Ecovillages for Sustainable Rural Development” financed by the EU’s Baltic Sea Region Programme 2007–2013 has launched 3 manuals on: eco-settlement practices and environmentally friendly technologies applied in ecovillages; socio-cultural aspects of ecovillage establishment and governance; and green business and entrepreneurship. By identifying and documenting many inspirational examples and case studies, the manuals aim at contributing to the further development, application and spreading of the sustainable solutions and innovations tailored in ecovillages and regaining the balance between the ecological, socio-cultural and economic dimensions of sustainable living on a broader society level.

Project team has also formulated a set of policy recommendations and will deliver it to the responsible EU institutions. The policy recommendations are to trigger public deliberation at national and EU levels on the policy implications drawn from the results of the Ecovillages project in order to facilitate the development of ecovillages as a sustainable way of living in the BSR.

One of the greatest contributions towards sustainable Europe that was not envisioned at the launching stage of the project is the formation of Baltic Ecovillage Network (BEN), which is a transnational umbrella of national ecovillages networks in the BSR. BEN offers a vehicle to continue the work started by the project towards the societal recognition of the values that ecovillages pursue and transition to sustainable living.

Ecovillages project has also contributed to the rise of other initiatives. One of them is recently launched REALS – Resilient and Ecological Approaches for Living Sustainably – project, the partnership behind which originates from Ecovillages project and extends the framework from focusing on ecovillages in particular to “sustainable life” in general in the BSR.

We hope that this newsletter will give you a comprehensive overview of the core results achieved by the project that take the Ecovillages project mission forward!

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REGAINING THE BALANCE – INNOVATIVE ECOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL SOLUTIONS FROM ECOVILLAGES

The project “Ecovillages for Sustainable Rural Development” has launched 2 case study-based manuals on

- eco-settlement practices / environmentally friendly technologies and
- socio-cultural aspects of ecovillage establishment and governance

that serve as the main outputs of the project. To achieve this goal, the project has involved a large and diverse pool of ecological expertise, including researchers, national ecovillage networks and ecovillage inhabitants. By identifying and documenting many inspirational examples and case studies, the manuals aim at contributing to the further development, application and spreading of the sustainable solutions and innovations tailored in ecovillages and regaining the balance between the ecological, socio-cultural and economic dimensions of sustainable living on a broader society level.

Manuals are available in English, Swedish, Finnish, Latvian, Lithuanian and Polish.
“INSPIRING STORIES FROM ECOVILLAGES: EXPERIENCES WITH ECOLOGICAL TECHNOLOGIES AND PRACTICES”

The manual presents a selection of inspiring stories about solutions for ecological living. These stories are told by the inhabitants of ecovillages around the Baltic Sea region. They present solutions to issues concerning planning, construction, energy solutions, waste and waste water management, composting and recycling, food production, and transport and commuting. They provide inspiration to readers already familiar with ecovillages and anyone willing to learn more about a variety of ecological living solutions.

The collection of examples and stories of technologies and practices presented is designed to cover essential themes and aspects relevant to ecologically sustainable ways of living:

- Planning and design of the ecovillage area
- Building
- Energy solutions for households and settlements
- Waste water management
- Dry toilets
- Composting, recycling and ecological consumption
- Food production
- Transport and commuting

“Inspiring Stories from Ecovillages: Experiences with Ecological Technologies and Practices” seeks to enable the reader to form a tangible and – hopefully – inspiring view of the Baltic Sea region ecovillages’ variety, particularities and creative innovativeness, on the one hand, and similarities, familiarity and respect for tradition on the other.

The manual is also written in a way that does not presuppose any previous knowledge or firsthand experience of the issues involved. Thus, the manual can also reach out more widely as a source of inspiration to anyone interested in searching for ecological solutions to housing and living issues, wherever they live.

“LIVING IN HARMONY: INSPIRING STORIES FROM ECOVILLAGES”

The manual is designed as a virtual tour of European ecovillages. Here you will find a collection of short ‘how we did it’ stories that describe different ecovillage models and the main elements of their design and governance. The stories represent the most interesting and effective best practice to be found in the ecovillage movement in Europe, particularly in the Baltic Sea region.

The manual consists of four chapters. Each chapter explores a different stage of the ecovillage life cycle, starting from the establishment stage, when the main characteristics of the ecovillage should be decided, and finishing with the stage when the community becomes stable, has its own traditions and well-functioning governance, and can become a center proliferating knowledge about the ecovillage movement, based on its own experiences.

This life cycle approach helps us to understand the specific problems faced by the ecovillage and gives new founders a sense of perspective, because ecovillages go through different lifecycle stages just as people do. As a baby’s life is different from a teenager’s life, the challenges that a new ecovillage faces are usually markedly different from the challenges being met by older ecovillages.

The ideal ecovillage does not exist. However, thousands of partial successful solutions do exist. Learn from the experience of existing ecovillages and design your own model that is the most suitable for you.

If you are looking for particular solutions, please feel free to treat the chapters of the book as Lego bricks: read the paragraphs covering specific topics you are interested in and select the solutions that best fit your needs and values.
CAN GREEN BUSINESS TRANSFORM SOCIETY AND CREATE ETHICAL JOBS?

By Robert Hall, project partner and founder of Suderbyn Permaculture Ecovillage, Chairman of Baltic Ecovillage Network

Goat cheese, vegetable boxes, freshly baked bread, or ecovillage consultancy? There are many possibilities that people in Suderbyn Ecovillage are now looking at as potential livelihoods. Recently three Suderbyn ecovillagers attended a Youth in Action training course in Bulgaria from 28 October to 6 November labeled “Environment, Sustainability and Youth - entrepreneurship and development in rural areas”. While a number of interesting projects and businesses were visited (particularly eco-tourism businesses), the three ecovillagers returned home without a clear roadmap to achieve their own future livelihoods.

Jesus Pacheco, who was appalled by the municipal representative’s desire for a big foreign factory to solve local unemployment, was impressed by the local cohesion and cooperation rather than competition. “The local business community made sure that no new enterprise would threaten the existence of an existing business and that all companies tried to collaborate and help each other.”

The course participants saw a presentation on a Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) and then visited a local venture similar to a CSA scheme which Sonia Cropper found interesting. “I have been involved with similar businesses in the UK and found the Bulgarian farm project to be a good example of how a local community can benefit by such a scheme”. Perhaps the greatest learning brought home from the training was the insight of what Suderbyn Ecovillage already possessed but did not realise. “The other participants had not heard of many of the systems we take for granted in our daily lives at Suderbyn” said Kalle Randau. “There is obviously a growing demand for know-how on starting an ecovillage”.

The growing attraction of ecovillages brings with it the demand to create ethical and sustainable livelihoods in semi-urban and rural environments. Such demands for new livelihoods are best met by the creation of green businesses. However, many ecovillagers and potential ecovillagers are leaving (or have left) mainstream urban living with a reluctance toward business. Thus starting a business can feel tantamount to joining the “misguided” mainstream that ecovillagers are feeling. For this reason the Ecovillages for Sustainable Rural Development project has worked for nearly three years to “take back” entrepreneurship as a tool for sustainable livelihood. The main effort has been to create the Ecovillage Road (www.ecovillageroad.eu), a virtual platform for ecovillage-based businesses to showcase their products and services as part of the effort to transition society towards resilience. To take the Ecovillage Road venture a bit closer to the reality of many ecovillagers like Jesus, Sonia and Kalle, the project is now printing an Ecovillage Road handbook entitled “The Enterprising Ecovillager”. The handbook does not try to compete with the ocean of start-your-business manuals explaining how to do a traditional business plan. Instead the book focuses on creating green business as an instrument for ecovillagers to transform the society around them while at the same time creating livelihood. Starting a green business thus becomes a path to promote the ideas of the green movement, and not a compromise with them. But for this to be so, many considerations need to looked at before starting an enterprise so that the outcome is a transformative “part of the solution” rather than “part of the problem” we were trying to get away from.

Will the “Enterprising Ecovillager” help people like Jesus, Sonia and Kalle create sustainable livelihoods in ecovillages? Not in itself. But it can be a first step to test ideas about potential businesses and select an operation or concept that really feels right in your mind, heart and gut. Hopefully the handbook, packed with information, checklists and references to other books and green concepts, can accompany every enterprising ecovillager on their path towards successfully creating their own personal green livelihood.
POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS
"ECOVILLAGES FOR SUSTAINABLE RURAL DEVELOPMENT"

Besides to producing and spreading of three books, consisting of inspiring ecological and social practices applied in ecovillages, an accompanying document with policy recommendations will reach out to politicians to support ecovillages settlements as a solution to the sustainable development of rural areas in the BSR.

The formulation of a set of policy recommendations to facilitate the development of ecovillages in the Baltic Sea Region is another core output of the Ecovillages project. The policy recommendations are to trigger public deliberation at national and EU levels on the policy implications drawn from the results of the Ecovillages project in order to facilitate the development of ecovillages as a sustainable way of living in the Baltic Sea Region. Reflections about policy recommendations have been initiated discussed and sketched by all project partners and associated project partners in collaboration with different stakeholders.

Critical reflection and formulation of policy recommendations are crucial also from the perspective of increasing the impact and potential of the main project outputs produced by the Ecovillages project. These are the manual on eco-settlement practices and environmentally friendly technologies, the manual on ecovillage establishment and governance, and the manual on ecological business cases practiced in/by ecovillage communities. The removing or flexibilization of some of the regulation- and policy-related obstacles that currently limit the further development, application and spreading of the solutions and innovations tailored in ecovillages would significantly facilitate the adoption, utilization and real potential of important eco-technologies and -practices as well as governance and green entrepreneurship as documented in the manuals. Thus, the policy recommendations should also be seen as a means to increase the impact of the manuals.

6 core issues have been identified that need to be addressed in order to improve the state of development of ecovillages and in order to utilize the full potential of ecovillages as drivers for sustainable development of rural areas:
1. Energy issues.
2. Land use, planning & building regulation (incl. sewage).
3. Public funding & support.
5. Education, training, information dissemination & exchange, publicity.
6. More R&D focus on eco-living, alternative food production.

All 6 areas need to be tackled through a number of reforms that are considered in the policy recommendations. The policy recommendations will be sent to all individuals that have an influence in the tailoring of the rural development policy measures at different levels of government and would be ready to contribute to the sustainable development of rural areas in the BSR.

The policy recommendations document will be available at project website www.balticecovillages.eu.

NETWORKING OF BALTIc ECovILLAGES
LANDS BEYOND EXPECTATIONS

By Robert Hall, project partner and founder of Suderbyn Permaculture Ecovillage, Chairman of Baltic Ecovillage Network

One of the greatest contributions of the BSR Interreg project “Ecovillages for Sustainable Rural Development” can be easily missed as it is not one of the main outputs. The project, directly through national workshops, but perhaps more indirectly has stimulated the creation and organisation of a Baltic Sea ecovillage cooperation that did not exist in one year prior to the project. At project start ecovillages were only really networked together in Denmark and Finland. Most ecovillages were “invisible” to society as well as to each other. In Sweden Professor Per Berg, himself an ecovillager estimated that Sweden had 20 ecovillages.

Now the number of Swedish ecovillages and initiatives known is almost 3 times that figure. The dormant Swedish eco-NGO Njord was reinvented as ERO and has changed its focus to a clear ecovillage organisation, very open to cooperating with other like-minded movements. A similar process is happening in Poland and the Polish national network PAS is scheduled to be established in July 2014. At the beginning of the project only one Polish ecovillage was initially identified, now they are been “discovered” on a regular basis. Germany, despite its leading role in the movement has lacked a national network. That may change at the historic gathering at Tempelhof Ecovillage in November, 2013. Even though Russia has only been an associate partner the project has indirectly transformed the Russian movement from a loose and withdrawn network to a registered and active national NGO, REEN. Ecovillages in Latvia and Lithuania have as well become more aware of each other. The informal network BELL has been created and a Latvian national ecovillage network is hopefully being established as I write. Even the Belarus ecovillages have been reached even if the time for their own network does not here yet.

Very rewardingly the end of the project also saw the involvement and reconnection with the Danish and Estonian movements, LÖS and EEN. Together all these national networks have formed a transnational umbrella, Baltic Ecovillage Network (BEN), registered as a Swedish NGO and already recognised by the Global Ecovillage Network and supported by the Nordic Council of Ministers. BEN offers a vehicle to continue the unfinished work the project started for the societal recognition of the value of ecovillages for transition to resilience. I am very proud of where we are now at project’s end, even if or perhaps because this great step forward for Sustainable Europe was not clearly envisioned just 30 months ago.
MARKING THE END OF THE PROJECT - THE FINAL ECOVILLAGES PROJECT CONFERENCE

In October an event of great importance for the Ecovillages project – the final international project conference – has taken place. The final conference was organized in Lithuania, where the project has started 3 years ago. The conference was designed to summarize the results of the project that has been achieved during 30 months of its implementation as well as to serve as a platform for gathering and exchanging of ideas and knowledge relevant to ecovillages development in the Baltic Sea Region.

The final Ecovillages project conference provided an opportunity for researchers, politicians, representatives of different organisations, initiators and residents of ecovillages to come together to share and listen to variety of approaches on ecovillage development and sustainability. The full day event brought together participants who share special concerns and challenges and allowed them to engage in shared conversations on common interests and build meaningful and mutually beneficial connections.

The conference was held in Druskininkai town on 17th of October, 2013, and consisted of three sessions, each dedicated to different aspects of sustainability models. The first session, named “Pathways to sustainable living”, had a focus on social aspects of sustainability and provided insights in the perspectives of community, health, architecture and economy. In the second session, project partners presented a wide scope of project results produced, while the third conference session was designed to share the experiences of ecovillagers directly. The project team would like to thank all conference attendees for their interest and involvement and invite to further engage actively in fostering Ecovillage movement and promoting ideas of sustainable development!

In order to spread the Ecovillages project results and ideas on sustainable living models, the whole conference was recorded.

[Links: PLEASE CLICK HERE TO SEE AND LISTEN TO THE PRESENTATIONS GIVEN AT THE FINAL ECOVILLAGES PROJECT CONFERENCE, GALLERY OF THE CONFERENCE, READ MORE ABOUT THE CONFERENCE]
The project REALS recently had a powerful startup where 35 representatives from project partner and associated partners contributed to 3 innovative days of workshops, lectures and project planning with a focus on small scale sustainable solutions. The partnership behind REALS originates from the project “Ecovillages for sustainable rural development” and extends the framework from focusing on ecovillages in particular to “sustainable life” in general.

Newly launched project goals are to increase learning, networking and access to information in relation to sustainable lifestyles, waste reduction, regenerative land- and sustainable resource management in the Baltic Sea region. Themes for activities are chosen out of the partners own interest and relevance to sustainable means in their local regions. The project aims towards creating a platform of intercultural co-learning and networking for sustainable life and resilience in the region. To underpin this, the project aims to generate cross-sector and international networks within the theme of sustainable living. Here it involves different movements as the Ecovillage-, the permaculture and the transition (transitionnetwork.org) movement as well as private and public sectors (mainly academia). Up to date, partners are Belarusian, Russian and Swedish. Project owner is Permaculture Sweden Partners are CEMUS at Uppsala University, SLU, Greenelizer (Sweden), the Russian “Ecovillage and Eco-initiative Network” REEN, Department of Sustainable Development at the St.Petersburg State University, as well as EcoHome and Eco-project, NGO’s with established networks in the Belarusian green movement. The project will promote the sharing of information between participating countries, especially around the practices and perspectives that highlight local resilience and emphasize the regeneration of the local ecosystems. REALS is a potential flagship project under the EU’s Baltic Sea strategy (EUSBSR). The project is approved and funded by the Swedish Institute (si.se) with 2 838 198 SEK.

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FAREWELL
Dear reader, thank you for your interest in the Ecovillage movement and sustainable development issues.
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