



A 'handmade' strawbale house in the Ecovillage of 'Sieben Linden'.

Taken from the 'In Focus' section of the publication 'LandInForm' Issue 4/2011, published by the German NRN, this article examines how communities interested in developing alternative lifestyles, such as alternative economic systems and communal living, constitute a counterweight to the trend of rural emigration. By Iris Kunze.

Communities Strengthen Infrastructure and Social Climate, in Germany

The migratory trend from the countryside to towns goes on. However, movement in the opposite direction has also been detected. It is not just 'drop outs' and nature lovers, but also people interested in alternative ways of life who see the countryside as somewhere they can realise their potential. The driving force behind this is, amongst other things, a desire for more community-based living.

Two opposing trends exist in western societies. On one hand, people (especially single people)

- seek fulfilment in technologically-advanced, densely-populated, big-city life. Since the green movement came to prominence, others - including the educated 'middle-class' - have gravitated more and more towards lifestyles, which offer possibilities to combine communal living with self-fulfilment. The countryside is becoming an ever more attractive place for this. One way this is reflected is in the growing number of alternative communities that have been set up, particularly in rural areas of Eastern Germany, thanks to favourable land and property prices. So what form do these communities take and can they be viewed as a homogeneous group?

More than 200 Communities in Germany

The Eurotopia directory (www.eurotopia.de) currently lists some 200 alternative communities in Germany, all of which have differing objectives. They are involved in ecology, culture, social issues and training and run activities in these fields, often related to agriculture. A common characteristic is their community-oriented lifestyle, which extends beyond the small family group. Many of the communities are interconnected and have set up networks with a view to exchanging experience. For example, the 'Global Ecovillage Network' (<http://gen.ecovillage.org>) has some 15 000 members, also organised on a regional basis. Through four-week courses provided by the Network's 'Ecovillage Design Education' training programme, interested parties can learn the fundamentals of how to make such villages economically efficient and equitable or how to maintain good neighbourly relations and a strong community spirit (www.gaiaeducation.org). Examples of good practice in these areas include rules for decision making and the common use of machinery, cars or communal areas. That such skills are indispensable is evidenced by the fact that only about 10% of these intended communities survive their first five years of existence.

Working towards the future at Klein Jasedow

In 1997 at Klein Jasedow in the Federal State of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, a community, which had originally been established in Bavaria, opened a media-production company, publishing house and concert and seminar facility. With financial support from the private sector, they bought three dilapidated residential houses, a former cultural centre, three out-buildings of an old manor house, as well as land for building and farming. Over time, the community also launched charitable initiatives, such as the 'European Academy for Healing Arts' who develop the "Zukunftswerk Klein Jasedow" regional network (www.zukunftswerk-kleinjasedow.de). Today, the community has an incredibly diverse range of businesses and charitable projects. One example is the 'Sona' gong manufacturer, which is currently in its start-up phase and consists of a gong-making workshop producing musical instruments for use in sound therapy. The Oya Media Company publishes 'Oya: Think Differently, Live Differently' a bi-monthly magazine on cultural and creative topics. The community also moved the "Kräutergarten Pommerland" or

Pomeranian Herb Garden into the area and has been producing teas, mainly using its own organically-grown herbs, since 2001. Furthermore, the community has a recording studio, musical projects and a sailing boat for hire. The "Maxwiesenhaus" inter-generational project provides accommodation for young and old people. Many more initiatives are planned, including a guest house and a restaurant. Apart from this, through the jobs created by their activities and their ever-widening range of services, the charitable organisations are revitalising the region by providing cultural and meeting places, as well as attracting tourists from elsewhere.



Growing vegetables organically in the community.

The latest joint-project saw the establishment of the "Lassaner People's Power-Station Corner", which takes the form of a cooperative with the long-term objective of transforming the area into a bio-energy region.

Life in the Steyerberg Garden

Since 1984, the Steyerberg Lebensgarten, or 'Life Garden', on Lake Steinhuder, in Lower Saxony, has transformed a former Nazi forced-labour camp, which had long stood empty - into an ecological settlement (www.lebensgarten.de). This community has also strengthened rural infrastructure by opening architectural and photographic studios and various medical practices. In addition, the construction of an independent school is currently at the planning stage. A seminar centre brings in visitors from outside the area, while cultural events and parties are well-attended by local people. Building projects, regular cookery courses and herb gathering are not just opportunities to share experiences,



Permacultural gardening and eco-restoration in the 'Steyerberg Garden' Eco-village.



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but also to develop friendships and business relationships, between long-standing residents and newcomers. In this way, the “Lebensgarten” has become a local meeting place.

Generating Economic and Social Profits

The rural population is heavily involved in agriculture and is also ageing due to the drift of younger generations away from the countryside. However, the communities provide villages with an influx of young, well-trained people. By using the possibilities offered by the Internet, these communities provide rural areas with independent, globally-connected service businesses and new job opportunities. In this way, they make a financially small but nonetheless important contribution to revitalising regional economic networks.

Along with concrete job opportunities and infrastructural improvements, these communities also bring other benefits and support. As well as providing general assistance for those living in the neighbourhood, they also organise events for young people and help to integrate older people into the community, all of which fosters an atmosphere of trust and openness that goes beyond commercial interests. In this way, the communities often improve the social fabric of rural areas that may otherwise have become dormitories for urban commuters.

Overcoming Prejudice through Openness

How are such community projects received by long-standing village residents? A research study (Kunze, 2009, see below) based on interviews and observations from participants, collected over a number of years, came to the following conclusions: At first, intended communities that do not, as a rule, follow traditional village values and lifestyles, encounter irritation and scepticism among local inhabitants. However, in most cases, mistrust and prejudice can be overcome by openness on the part of the community and a desire to work together to benefit the local economy. Indeed, it is precisely the differences between the local population and the newcomers that has given rise

to a fruitful exchange of ideas and the revitalisation of village life.

For further information, please see the NRN magazine ‘LandInForm’, on their website: <http://www.netzwerk-laendlicher-raum.de>.

For further information on the research, see: <http://Gemeinschaftsforschung.uni-muenster.de>

Further reading

Kunze, Iris (2009): *Social innovations for sustainable ways of living - Intentional communities and Eco-villages as experimental learning fields for socio-ecological sustainability*. Ecotransfer-Verlag, Münster.



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