

# Ecovillages in The Netherlands and their socio-ecological transformability



Figure 1: Pacific Domes (2019)



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## Abstract

This bachelor's thesis explores ecovillages in The Netherlands as sites where counter-hegemonic narratives are created. Ecovillages, as intentional communities promoting sustainable living, challenge hegemonic capitalist, individualistic, and consumerist paradigms through their practices and ideologies. This research investigates how these communities embody and diffuse alternative socio-ecological narratives, putting emphasis on solidarity, community living, and ecological sustainability. The study analyses the ways in which ecovillages resist and offer viable alternatives to the imperial mode of living, which is characterized by exploitative and unsustainable consumption patterns. Through qualitative methods, a case study of six ecovillages in The Netherlands, the thesis examined the way ecovillages develop their narratives and their strategies for spreading those narratives. The socio-ecological transformation, according to Brand & Wissen (2021) is a precondition for a socially and ecologically just planet. Therefore, I have related the narrative creation and spreading processes of the ecovillages to conditions to be transformative in this regard. The results indeed show that ecovillages in The Netherlands, through holistic practices, develop counter-hegemonic narratives and attempt to spread their narratives to the outside of the ecovillages, and therefore indeed hold transformative potential.

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I would like to dedicate this thesis to my beloved grandmother, who passed away this year. She has always taught me to be curious and to keep learning. Something she was not privileged to, growing up during World War II. I will not take chances like this one for granted. Throughout this intense, yet fulfilling process, her loving memory immensely helped me to keep on going. I know she is proudly looking down as I write this. For her infinite inspirational force, I am eternally grateful. I will always keep her wisdoms with me, as life grants me more opportunities down the line.

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# 1. Introduction

Ecovillages increasingly appear on a global scale as communities that attempt to live sustainably both in a social and in an ecological context. In the wake of the multiple crises, they arose as offering alternatives towards addressing the crises in a more proper way than is currently done.

In the global North, daily practices rely heavily on unlimited appropriation of resources. Ulrich Brand & Markus Wissen have called this way of living the imperial mode of living. The imperial mode of living is a central cause for the global multiple crises. Yet, the imperial mode of living is normalized in the global North, therefore masking the destruction of resource exploitation in the global South (Brand & Wissen, 2021).

The popular paradigms Green Growth and Green Capitalism will not be sufficient to reach an ecological and equal world (Brand, 2012). Ecologically modernizing the imperial mode of living is not enough to battle the multiple crises. Society can rely less and less on the capitalist growth imperative which is based more and more on exploiting nature and increases social inequality. There is a need for more radical alternatives than have been offered thus far in mainstream socio-ecological politics (Brand & Wissen, 2021). A socio-ecological transformation is required (Hausmann, 2019).

Looking from Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony, the imperial mode of living is the hegemonic mode of living in the global North (Hausmann, 2019), and increasingly so in the global South (Brand & Wissen, 2021). A successful counter-hegemonic narrative is needed to offer an alternative mode of living that meets the preconditions for an ecologically friendly and equal world (Hausmann, 2019).

The ecovillage movement's ideas are related to concepts like permaculture, the Gaia hypothesis and Buen Vivir. Ecovillages are so-called 'intentional communities' that try to be sustainable on social, cultural, economic and ecological levels. They strive to have as little as possible negative impact on the natural environment (Global Ecovillage Network, 2024).

This thesis will focus on ecovillages in The Netherlands. More specifically, the narratives of the ecovillages will be studied and the attempts at spreading this narrative to gather insight into whether ecovillages can play a role in the socio-ecological transformation as sketched by Brand & Wissen (2021).

## **1.1 Problem statement, objective, research questions**

### *1.1.1 Problem statement*

Ecovillages have the potential of being socio-ecologically transformative. The socio-ecological transformation is a necessary revolution, in order to create a social-ecologically just world. The imperial mode of living, along with green capitalist discourses, are dominant in many societies in the Global North, and increasingly in the Global South as well (Brand & Wissen, 2021). This order of cultural hegemony poses some challenges and disadvantage in the war of position upon counter-hegemonic groups, like the ecovillage movement (Hausmann, 2019). Meanwhile counter-hegemonic groups on the right-wing side, that neglect the ecological crises are gaining more attention (Stegemann & Ossewaarde, 2018). An important condition to succeed in this struggle for hegemony is to create a powerful counter-hegemonic narrative that appeals to a wider audience (Hausmann, 2019).

### *1.1.2 Objective*

The objective of this thesis is to find out to what extent ecovillages in The Netherlands have socio-ecological potential. It is important to know how they are developing a counter-hegemonic narrative. What things they do to reach a wider audience, as well as sharing of experiences among ecovillages are important complementing aspects hereto.

### *1.1.3 Research questions*

The research question I will answer during the thesis is the following:

*To what extent do ecovillages in The Netherlands have socio-ecological transformative potential by developing and diffusing counter-hegemonic narratives?*

In order to answer this question, I developed two sub questions:

- \* *How do ecovillages in The Netherlands develop counter-hegemonic narratives?*
- \* *To what extent do ecovillages diffuse their counter-hegemonic narratives?*

## **1.2 Relevance**

### *1.2.1 Societal relevance*

The multiple crises are experienced on a worldwide scale, while taking on a diverse range of forms in different areas of the world. The crises vary from ecological, to economic, to humanitarian, bringing destruction to nature and human populations. The imperial mode of living is at the heart of the creation and development of these crises. A socio-ecological transformation, accompanied by a solidary mode of living would address the crises. The need for a socio-ecological transformation is thus in the interest of the largest part of the world's population, as the multiple crises are globally experienced (Brand & Wissen, 2021). In the wake of the multiple crises, right-wing alternatives that neglect the ecological crises are growing in popularity (Stegemann & Ossewaarde, 2018). This even more clearly shows the importance of a proper counter-hegemonic narrative on the solidary mode of living side.

Alternative lifestyles to the imperial mode of living, like the way of living in ecovillages, should emerge and gain more practitioners. Ecovillages are like living laboratories that need researching, for them to gain more attention and improve their strategy (Fonseca, Irving, Nasri & Ferreira, 2022). Research like this will gather insight in the current ways in which ecovillages try to achieve more mainstream attention and be an appealing alternative to people. It will furthermore give ecovillages recommendations on how to create a more powerful narrative for this transformation.

### *1.2.2 Scientific relevance*

Ecovillages in the Netherlands are still quite under-researched. Many aspects of ecovillages are still relevant to be investigated (Marselis, 2017). De Kraker posed some recommendations for further research in his master thesis (2015). He acknowledged the importance of the collective nature of ecovillages for their success. Meanwhile he said that more research is needed on the social processes within ecovillages. The role of network capital for example, which is part of my research, would be interesting (De Kraker, 2015). The potentials and struggles of the socio-ecological transformation still also requires more empirical studies (Krüger, 2020).

Inspiration for the specific research question I am exploring, comes from a master's thesis from Roman Hausmann from the University of Vienna (2019). He researched an ecovillage in Germany called Schloss Tempelhof. I chose to apply parts of his research on ecovillages in The Netherlands, as theories like Gramsci's have not been used to analyse Dutch ecovillages. As opposed to Hausmann's research, I will look at multiple ecovillages and their interrelatedness.

## 2. Theoretical framework

In this chapter I will elaborate on the central concepts and theory that I will use in my research and explain them and their relevance.

## 2.1 Theory of cultural hegemony & counter-hegemonic narratives

### 2.1.1 Overview of Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony

Antonio Gramsci was an Italian philosopher. He wrote most of his work while imprisoned by the Fascist regime under Mussolini in the 1920s and 1930s. These works are referred to as the Prison Notebooks (Cikaj, 2023). The origins of the concept of hegemony can be traced back to the writings of Gramsci (Brand & Wissen, 2018). Gramsci first used the term hegemony in 1926. He used the term to explain the relation between culture and power in capitalist systems (Jackson Lears, 1985). He developed the term to explain the dominance of a certain social group over others (Glassman, 2009). The domination of the ruling class is accepted by most of the dominated (Brand & Wissen, 2018). This dominance results in a shared system of norms and values within a society. The culture of an otherwise culturally diverse society is shaped and dominated by the ideology of the ruling class. The worldview of the dominant class becomes the accepted norm (Glassman, 2009).

The way in which Gramsci moved away from traditional Marxist theory is in the fact that he thought the ruling class did not only dominate the subjects through material power, but as well through cultural, moral and political values. These values of the ruling class constitute hegemony. They are carved in the subjects. To the subjects it seems that they have free choice, whereas their choices are in fact limited within borders. Without using violence, the state keeps its subjects under its thumb. Hegemonic rule is thus a rather invisible and embedded mode of oppression in civil society (Cikaj, 2023).

Central to Gramsci's theory is consent of the subordinates of the state. Consent means that the subordinates accept the worldview of the dominant group as their own worldview (Kurtz, 2001). This consent is quite a spontaneous affair. Domination is not only achieved through coercion, but also through consent. The dominant groups enjoy their dominance through their position in the production world (Jackson Lears, 1985).

Gramsci sketches not a fixed static society of ruling class domination. On the contrary, society is a process of continuous creation, associated with a constant struggle between the oppressor and the oppressed (Jackson Lears, 1985). Resistance happens when subordinates don't abide by the dominant group's worldview and go against it. They develop counter-hegemonic narratives (Kurtz, 2001). Alternatives, however, remain marginal. During crises, they may gain popularity (Brand & Wissen, 2018). Followers of the alternative worldview may engage in a war of position. What Gramsci means by this is the attempt at undermining the legitimacy of the dominant ideology. This war is different from the war of manoeuvre, which is the attempt at seizing state power. In this context, Gramsci made the distinction between traditional intellectuals and organic intellectuals. Traditional intellectuals are linked to tradition and therefore to past intellectuals, not clinging to a certain social class. Typically, the expertise of traditional intellectuals lies in convincing people of the legitimacy of capitalism and to gain their consent to the capitalist system and hegemony (Lipsitz, 1987). The task of organic intellectuals on the contrary, is to make the people aware of their position of domination and exploitation within the capitalist system. Together organic intellectuals try forming alternatives to the destructive hegemonic system (Kurtz, 2001). They give a voice to the needs and ambitions of the oppressed groups of society (Lipsitz, 1987). The notion of intellectuals is highly relevant in the case of ecovillages. The organic intellectuals are the ones that should help spread the alternative narratives ecovillages develop, towards a broader scale.

### *2.1.2 Counter-hegemonic narratives*

The traditional intellectuals are highly skilled in manipulating subordinates. They control institutions that shape the public opinion (Hausmann, 2019). As long as power-over is maintained through persuading and coercion by traditional intellectuals, the hegemonic order remains intact. Counter-hegemonic struggle happens when aspects of capitalist hegemony are starting to be rejected by people. This aversion of the hegemonic worldview might lead to counter-hegemonic groups to organize themselves and form a counter-hegemonic narrative and get involved in a war of position (Carroll, 2006). Together, they create and promote ideas and discourses to counter the hegemonic normalized practices, assumptions and beliefs (Hausmann, 2019).

Because the dominance and power of the hegemonic class, counter-hegemony are disadvantaged in this war of position. In order to challenge the hegemonic worldview, a good counter-hegemonic narrative is thus necessary. Narratives relate to stories, discourses and perspectives. A counter-hegemonic narrative, therefore, holds stories, discourses and perspectives that oppose the hegemonic narratives and ideologies. Social movements use this narrative in the war of position against pre-existing dominant narratives. It is a story that they want to spread, which is deeply embedded in their practices and minds (Wittmayer, Backhaus, Avelino et al, 2019). A narrative encompasses the worldview and values of people (Hausmann, 2019). Narratives can play different roles in social change processes. Firstly, they can trigger the imagination of people. Secondly, they can be expressions of a counter movement. Thirdly, they have the ability to empower this counter movement (Marselis, 2017).

Practices, as collectively shared types of behaviour, play an important part in the creation of counter-hegemonic narratives. New practices can themselves establish new narratives or shape existing narratives. As little as one action by one individual can already have the power to fuel the emergence of other new practices, also ones that become shared by large groups of people. This recruitment of new practitioners is very important in kindling a transformation (Hausmann, 2019; Ekins, 1992). That is why experimental practices are so vital in the creation of new alternative narratives (Schneider & Nelson, 2018).

However, narratives can in turn also stabilize hegemonic practices and at the same time undermine public legitimacy for alternative narratives, due to their dominance (Schneider & Nelson, 2018). It is thus important for counter-hegemonic narratives to be effective and appealing to people. This is a precondition for the narrative to spread in society and stand its ground against the dominant narratives. Constant interaction between the movement and the outside, through workshops, social media or conferences is vital for this. Communication to the public they want to reach has great importance (Wittmayer et al, 2019). Herein, a limitation of counter-hegemony becomes clear. Political elites have a much wider reach and are more skilled in generating consent. This again shows the importance of narrative construction in counter-hegemony (Hausmann, 2019).

## **2.2 Hegemonic narratives**

### *2.2.1 Multiple crises, the imperial mode of living and its false alternatives*

“It is only possible to live ‘imperialy’ because others and the biophysical environment bear the brunt of it.” (Eversberg, 2019)

The imperial mode of living is a term to describe the dependence of the way of living in the global North on luxury production and consumption. The imperial mode of living has become generalized after World War II. During the Fordist phase of capitalist development, the spread of the car, industrialized food and packaging accelerated. This all happened at the expense of social equality and the relations between society and nature. In academia, the current many ecological, economic and social crises caused by capitalism and the associated imperial mode of living are conceptualized under the umbrella term multiple crises (Brand & Wissen, 2018).

The concept ‘imperial mode of living’ has first been introduced by Ulrich Brand & Markus Wissen in 2012. The imperial mode of living is dominant in global North countries and explains the “persistence of resource- and energy-intensive everyday practices and their social-ecological consequences”. The imperial mode of living is achieved through a seemingly unlimited exploitation of resources and labour and a disproportionate usage of natural systems. In capitalist development, products must become ever increasingly advanced, cheap, or convenient, regardless of social or ecological costs. These costs are externalized (Brand & Wissen, 2012). This is problematic as social inequalities and ecological disasters are severe consequences thereof, which are essentially hidden. The externalization of these consequences creates the illusion that endless production and consumption is possible, without consequence. For the imperial mode of living to be sustained, the ecosystems need to be healthy, but also exploited. The imperial mode of living can thus not be sustained if we want to solve environmental problems (Brand & Wissen, 2021).

Apparent in lifestyles of people in western countries, the imperial mode of living is expressed in everyday practices. Automobility is an important example of the imperial mode of living that is discussed in Brand & Wissen’s 2021 book. Especially private car ownership is where the imperial mode of living becomes evident. The production of cars is a very pollutant industry, let alone the use of cars. Especially the recent trend in SUVs (Sports Utility Vehicles) is remarkable. These vehicles are extremely resource- and emission-intensive, much more so than regular cars. Brand & Wissen argue, next to the ecological impact, that SUVs also are a symbol for economic inequality, as they are driven mainly by the high-income class. Furthermore, ecological modernization is also starting to play a larger role. Electric vehicles are framed as being ecological alternatives. However, the batteries involved are depending hugely on extraction of rare metals in the global south. This is a clear example of an attempt at ecologically modernizing the imperial mode of living. Furthermore, the normalcy of air travel for weekend trips in the west is an exemplary case, as it is another greatly polluting transportation sector (Brand & Wissen, 2021).

Of course, there are many other types of consumption that are dependent on extracting resources in the Global South, often in combination with cheap labour in the global south. Another example is the normalized consumption patterns of many people, accompanied by planned obsolescence, i.e. the deliberate designing of products so they break quicker or become obsolete on the short term (Hickel, 2021). This makes people to have to consume much more products, than is actually necessary. Furthermore, the fast fashion industry, from which stores are present in any major city in the west has a great share in the multiple crises, being both ecologically destructive and dependent on cheap labour from the Global South. Waste generation, like single-use plastics and

e-waste, also a cause of planned obsolescence, are furthermore consequences of the western lifestyle. This pollutes ecosystems and waste is oftentimes exported to countries in the global south. The imperial mode of living also becomes apparent in the food industry. High consumption of meat is responsible for extensive land use across the globe and also this sector is responsible for large amounts of carbon emissions (Brand & Wissen, 2021). It should be clear that the combination of extensive energy use, resource exploitation and the reliance on cheap labour are necessary elements of maintaining the imperial mode of living, while being terribly destructive in ecological and social sense. Brand & Wissen state the following about the habits, routines and rules that embed the imperial mode of living into everyday life: “unsustainability is a very practical fact that is mostly lived unconsciously.” (Brand & Wissen, 2021)

With the imperial mode of living, Brand & Wissen provide a critical analysis of the social causes behind the multiple crises. They recognize that the mainstream sustainability paradigms like ecological modernization will not change the core destructiveness of the imperial mode of living (Brand & Wissen, 2021). The strategy of ecological modernization is aimed at harmonizing ecological improvement with economic development. Ecological modernists believe in the green growth paradigm (Dias, Seixas & Lobner, 2020). Ecological modernization is a prominent example of a neoliberal theory in environmental sociology. Instead of focusing on what and how much is produced, it focuses solely on how it is produced. It relies heavily on technological fixes and efficiency improvements as solutions for the multiple crises. Economic growth, they believe therefore, is the best way to mitigate climate change and other environmental problems (Dauda, 2019). Brand & Wissen refer to paradigms like this as false alternatives, as they will not be capable of solving the multiple crises (Brand & Wissen, 2021).

Furthermore, the problem of externalizing social-ecological costs of production remains intact with these models. These are still in their core very much capitalist development models. Overcoming the imperial mode of living and social-ecological restructuring are necessary measures for a more just and ecologically friendly society (Brand & Wissen, 2021).

However, current politics, whether left or right, are stuck in the growth paradigm of capitalism and do not address the imperial mode of living as a problem. They are still rooting for neoliberal strategies like green growth and ecological modernization of the imperial mode of living (Brand & Wissen, 2021). It is paradoxical that on the one hand, the ecological crisis is so evident and awareness omnipresent, on the other hand social change remains insufficient (Brand, 2016).



Figure 2: Illustration of the workings of the imperial mode of living (KAUZ, 2022)

### *2.2.2 The hegemonic character of the imperial mode of living and its discourses*

The imperial mode of living has become hegemonic in many societies across the world. It has become the broadly accepted, as well as an institutionally secured norm of living, especially in states in the global North. Brand & Wissen argue that the mode of living in the global North became imperial - based on “principally unlimited appropriation of resources, spaces, labour capacity and sinks elsewhere” - during the colonial era. However, during these times this particular mode of living was not yet hegemonic. It was the way of living in the upper classes. The minority of societies in the global North. Only centuries later, during the rise of Fordism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, did the IML spread and become hegemonic. Now, the capitalist ways of treating nature were becoming rooted in everyday life of the majority of people in the global North (Brand & Wissen, 2012).

The hegemonic character of the imperial mode of living is clearly visible through capitalist consumption in everyday life, advertisements and transportation patterns. This mode of living is deeply rooted in capitalism, political institutions, economy, culture and mentalities of people. It is established in worldviews and discourses, and it is cemented in practices (Brand & Wissen, 2021). The hegemonic character of the imperial mode of living becomes clear when looking at certain narratives. ‘Ecological’ and ‘sustainable’, are for example very popular discourses used in advertisements and other media to frame products as being good for the planet. The terms lose their meaning when modern technoeconomic agents give new definitions to the terms from an ecological modernist perspective (Dias et al, 2020). Another example of a dominant narrative is the ‘sustainable energy transition’ paradigm. Stegemann & Ossewaarde (2018) go as far as to call this paradigm a myth, as it is rooted in the post-truth green growth strategy. Brand & Wissen (2021) call the use of this terminology regarding the imperial mode of living, ‘ecological modernization of the imperial mode of living’. The hegemons herein misleadingly attempt to make it seem like environmental destruction shall be overcome and shift the consumption patterns of people towards ‘green’ alternative products (Brand & Wissen, 2021).

There is a great emphasis on individualism in the imperial mode of living. An important discourse in capitalist societies is the focus on profit-making and capital accumulation as a condition for societal development by turning social relations and nature into commodities, instead of inherently appreciating it (Brand, 2014). Therefore, social inequalities remain unaddressed and are even normalized (Brand & Wissen, 2021). The efforts to ecologically modernize the imperial mode of living, heavily rely on individual actions, like recycling and buying different ‘green’ products. The underlying structures, which are actually the major causes of the multiple crises, remain unaddressed. This individualism is deeply rooted in capitalist societies and makes the struggle for collective, systemic change harder (Brand & Wissen, 2021).

### **2.3 The current need for counter-hegemonic narratives**

“In that mode, the global North is attempting to maintain something that cannot be maintained, and something that cannot exist on a universal basis is expanded and universalized in many countries of the global South. Therefore, in the face of growing upheaval and increasingly brutal externalizations, we recognize – politically and analytically – the urgent need for genuine alternatives that lead to a solidary mode of

living, justice (both social and ecological), peace and democracy.” (Brand & Wissen, 2021)

### *2.3.1 The threat of post-truth (counter-)hegemonic narratives*

In response to the failing ecological modernist strategy to combat the multiple crises, counter-hegemonic narratives have arisen. The green growth narrative is attacked from more than one angle. It has been on the one hand a breeding ground for populist narratives. Right-wing populist parties have developed a whole different definition to the ecological crisis in order to delegitimize the green-growth strategy that for example the EU has constructed (Stegemann & Ossewaarde, 2018). They do this by neglecting the severity of the ecological crisis, or even question the actual existence of it. The populist right-wing parties have been growing in popularity in the past years, gaining more and more followers and therefore more power. They are in quest for hegemony and doing so successfully, by propagating a strong and appealing narrative for people affected by the multiple crises (Worth, 2024). This is a growing concern, as their growing legitimacy is largely built on a post-truth narrative (Stegemann & Ossewaarde, 2018). Post-truth narratives refer to narratives that challenge facts or truths, such as climate change (Fraune & Knodt, 2018). Stegemann & Ossewaarde (2018), go even further, to say that even the hegemonic narrative of green growth holds post-truth tendencies. A ‘regime of facts’ that justifies the neoliberal model of economic growth is developed to exclude and delegitimize alternative sustainability pathways, like post-growth (Stegemann & Ossewaarde, 2018).

On the other hand, the failing green-growth strategy has also been fertile ground for left alternatives, as is central in this bachelor’s thesis. In the light of post-truth endeavors of both hegemonic discourses and counter-hegemonic right-wing discourses, as well as the intensifying multiple crises, these left alternatives are very important. In this war of position, they have to create a strong narrative to claim more public legitimacy (Stegemann & Ossewaarde, 2018). The rest of this chapter will explore this further.

### *2.3.2 Socio-ecological transformation & solidary mode of living*

The hegemonic worldviews around techno-economic progress that should overcome the multiple crises are offering false alternatives (Brand & Wissen, 2021). The individual crises within the multiple crises are interrelated. A solution to one crisis might worsen another. The challenge here is to find a way to tackle all multiple crises and to thus reconcile human wellbeing and ecological wellbeing (Hausmann, 2019). The socio-ecological transformation increasingly pops up in the literature as a necessary and proper alternative. For the multiple crises to be tackled, radical changes have to be made (Brand & Wissen, 2021; Diaz et al, 2020).

The socio-ecological transformation is an umbrella term describing social, political and cultural shifts as a response to the multiple crises. It rests on a consensus in academics that big societal changes are necessary to tackle the social-ecological crises (Brand & Wissen, 2017). The strategies that would lead to such a transition are targeted at tackling the crises around environmental destruction and social domination simultaneously (Eversberg, 2019). Transformation in this sense refers to the creation of a fundamentally new system, as the current system, due to failing ecological, economic or social structures, is no longer tenable (Walker, Holling, Carpenter & Kinzig, 2004). A radical change in the relationship between society and nature is central in the socio-ecological transformation (Brand & Wissen, 2018).

'Pioneers of change' are an essential part of the socio-ecological transformation. This is term collecting all actors that contribute the social and technological innovations necessary for the transformation (Brand & Wissen, 2018). Paul Ekins (1992) emphasized the importance of grassroots initiatives and movements in developing new social and ecological alternatives. He sees great importance in the potential of humans and the things they already know. This should not be underestimated. In fact, according to him, this is the foundation of a socially just, and environmentally sustainable transformation. To this foundation, their knowledge can be extended by science, if relevant (Ekins, 1992). The formulation of a counter-hegemonic narrative, as addressed in chapter 2.1.2, is crucial to fuel the socio-ecological transformation (Hausmann, 2019).

As mentioned previously, overcoming the imperial mode of living is essential to address the multiple crises. Brand & Wissen call the alternative mode to foster socio-ecological transformation the 'solidary mode of living'. This mode of living should recognize the fundamental vulnerability of lives of all humans and non-humans. Activities should be within the limits of the Earth's ecosystems to not throw them off balance and thereby worsen ecological disasters (Brand & Wissen, 2021).

One of the most important elements of a solidary mode of living is the moving away from individualism of the imperial mode of living. The solidary mode of living is based on communal forms of living. More land should be owned communally, and individually owned property should be a rejected phenomenon (Brand & Wissen, 2021). Important values include caring for each other. Taking good care of nature is also vital, by acknowledging its intrinsic value (SOC21, 2021). There should be a provision of basic needs, as well as rights for everyone in the world, like a basic income. Social justice is thus an important aspect of this new way of living. The problematic parts of the imperial mode of living that create the unjust North-South relations, as well as environmental destruction, should be abolished (Brand & Wissen, 2021).

Brand & Wissen (2021) say the following about a solidary mode of living: "A hegemonic project for a solidary mode of living must draw from and combine many things; it must be tangible and attractive." Mainly lower- and middle-class people will carry this project. Experimenting with different alternative practices is an important part of the solidary mode of living project. The sharing of these experiences, whether they worked out, or not, are very important. The fundamental changes often come from the margins of society, although the experiments might seem niche at first. Brand & Wissen do also recognize the importance of progressive elites to eventually join in. Through their political or financial power, they can carry the transformation towards a more mainstream place (Brand & Wissen, 2021).

## **2.4 Ecovillages in the socio-ecological transformation**

### *2.4.1 Defining ecovillages*

The practical approach of the ecovillage movement is driven by the concept of permaculture and the Gaia theory. These theoretical roots cause for a specific perspective that binds ecovillages over the world (Mathu, 2023; Herkrath, 2017).

Permaculture is an approach to land management, which is focused on regenerative land use. Originally meaning literally 'permanent agriculture', the concept has become

more broadly used to describe the creation of a sustainable human support system that is in harmony with nature. Permaculture is the conscious designing of landscapes, imitating patterns and relationships that can be found in nature. Next to regenerative agriculture, it encompasses principles like rewilding and community resilience (Holmgren, 2007).

The other concept that has influenced the model of ecovillages is the Gaia theory, or Gaia hypothesis (Brombin, 2019). The hypothesis was proposed by James Lovelock (1919-2022). The word Gaia is the Greek version of Mother Earth. He believed that planet Earth is a harmonious whole. In his view Earth works like a living superorganism. Furthermore, the biosphere and physical geographical components on the planet interact within a complex system, which ensures stability for life on Earth. Feedback loops are an important factor in this system. A prominent example is that an increase in greenhouse gasses emitted leads to rising temperature, which impacts human and non-human life forms. All living organisms on Earth should thus regulate the whole world and take care of Gaia. Doing otherwise would make Earth uninhabitable (Lovelock, 1989). As a result, Lovelock recognized the catastrophes that we face with the current accelerating climate crisis, also recognizing the 'green scam' that relates to the false alternatives as posed by Brand & Wissen (2021) (Vince, 2009). Ross Jackson thought the ideas of Lovelock could be used to make the world an ecologically, socially and spiritually better place. In this light he founded the Gaia Trust in 1987 together with his wife Hildur. When the Global Ecovillage Network was founded in 1995, the Gaia Trust funded the network for the first five years. Ross Jackson had also been in the board of the Global Ecovillage Network for many years (Gaia Trust, 2024).

Worth mentioning in this respect is the ecovillage movement's relation to the Buen Vivir paradigm, translating to 'good living'. This is a paradigm developed by socialist indigenous organizations from Quechua. In this view, nature and society are inseparable and 'Pachama', translating, like Gaia, to Mother Nature, must be treated with utmost respect and gratefulness. It is therefore, similarly to ecovillages, based on social responsibility to nature and opposed to endless capital accumulation (Fonseca, 2022). The indigenous influence on ecovillages, like in the form of traditional rituals, is very visible and promoted by the Global Ecovillage Network (Wittmayer et al, 2019). It is interesting to see that cross-cultural interactions take place to create a hybrid culture between indigenous and western ideals. The influence of the Buen Vivir paradigm in a sense creates a Global North-South confluence within the ecovillage movement (Fonseca et al, 2022).

Ecovillages are thus a relatively young concept. Despite its youth, the ecovillage movement has rapidly spread across the world (Herkrath, 2017). Within the Global Ecovillage Network, ecovillages from all continents, except Antarctica, are a part (Global Ecovillage Network, 2024). GEN Europe lists more than 100 ecovillages on their site (Global Ecovillage Network Europe, 2024). An ecovillage does not have to be a 'village' per se. Aside from rural contexts, ecovillages also pop up in inner cities just the same (Jackson, 2004). To give an idea of the widespread nature of the ecovillage movement, below I added a map from the GEN website.



spaces” (Hausmann, 2019). Intentional communities refer to a community of people that live with a common purpose and cooperate to create a lifestyle which matches their shared values (Marselis, 2017). They attempt to construct an alternative lifestyle from the mainstream society. An important aspect of ecovillages is their function as ‘experimental space for a new culture’ (Kunze & Avelino, 2015). With these experiments, they gain more insights for the contours of a solidary mode of living (Brand & Wissen, 2021).

In the literature, ecovillages are also defined as grassroots innovations/movements. This means that the initiatives are started by citizens, rather than traditional developers. This is also called a bottom-up initiative. As community-led sustainability solutions, they have room for experimenting with alternative ways of production and consumption (Kolthof, 2020). Even though most ecovillages are grassroots initiatives, Ross Jackson from the Gaia Trust, already noticed an influence of ecovillage principles on town planners in 2004. Fonseca et al (2022) describe ecovillages as alternative development paradigm, comparing it to the hegemonic development paradigm.

The ecovillage has, since it has started to appear in literature, undergone many redefinitions (Fonseca, 2022). The most recent definition of ecovillage from the Global Ecovillage Network is as follows:

"An ecovillage is 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." (Global Ecovillage Network, 2024)

Ecovillages have a so-called holistic approach. This means that, rather than focusing on one aspect of sustainability, they focus on the whole picture, and thereby all aspects of life. They recognize the Earth as a system (Hausmann, 2019). This can be traced back to the Gaia theory and the Buen Vivir paradigm, which I mentioned earlier. This holistic approach is important in order to realize regeneration of social and natural environments. There are four dimensions of regeneration: social, cultural/spiritual, ecological and economic (Global Ecovillage Network, 2024). The Global Ecovillage Network have made a Map of Regeneration, which is a visual representation of the holistic approach of ecovillages, which can be seen below.

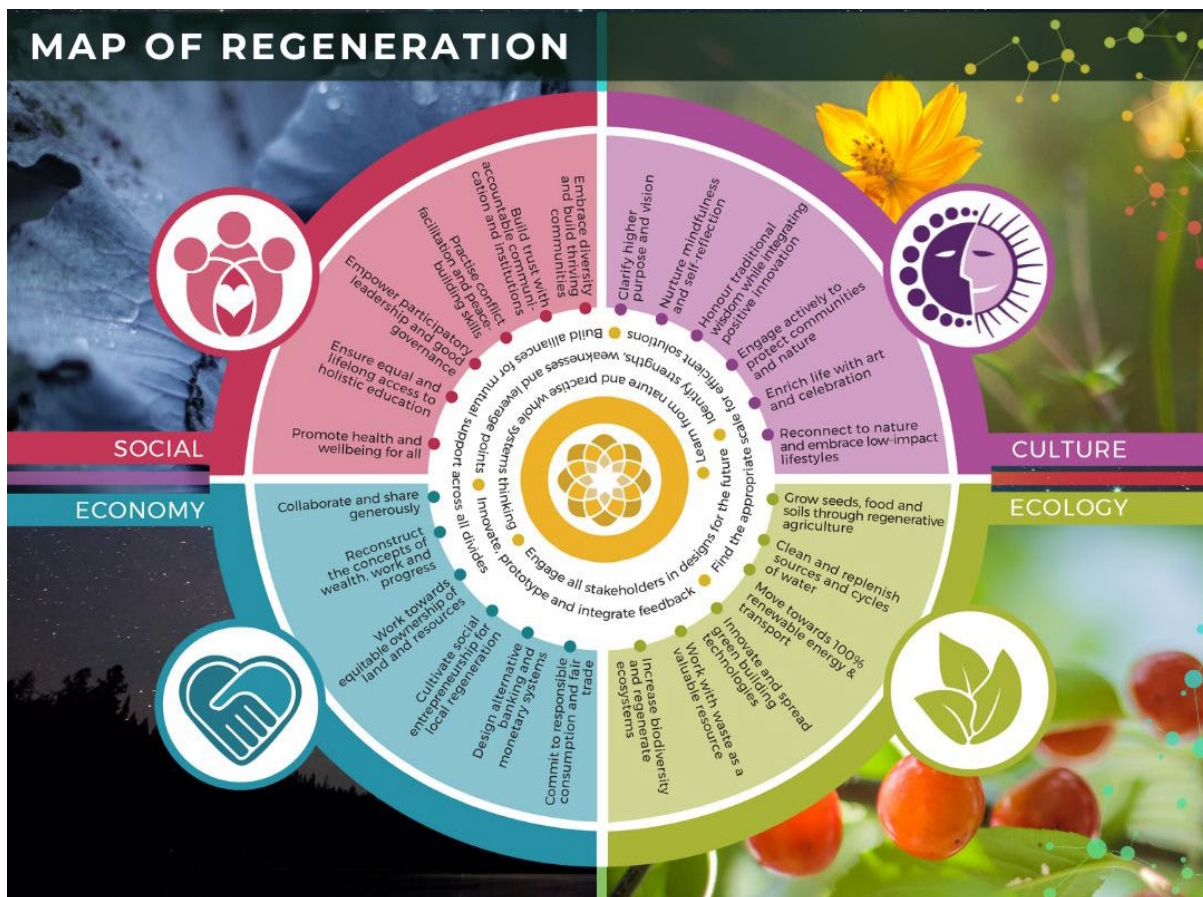


Figure 4: Map of Regeneration (Global Ecovillage Network, 2020)

Although there are some defining aspects, like lifestyle and philosophies, ecovillages can each still be quite varying in focus and practices (Kolthof, 2020). A lot of ecovillages are specialized and do not achieve self-sufficient food systems or are truly full-featured settlements. It takes time and resources to achieve this. Focusing on all dimensions of sustainability at once will be too much for some ecovillages, because of the available resources, number of people involved or the location (Gilman, 1991). Ecovillages are thus not perfectly definable when it comes to their practices (Brombin, 2019). Karen Liftin (2009) says the following about the ecovillage movement: “the ecovillage movement is remarkable both for its unity and its diversity.” What she means by this is that while ecovillages are united in their commitment to a supportive social environment and a low-impact way of life, because of the global character of the movement, there are so many different backgrounds and characteristics. The differences in ecological and cultural contexts caused the differences in practices (Liftin, 2009). David Orr (2004) argues that ecological design, like ecovillages are doing, is not as much about what people do, but more about how people think. If the human mind thinks more in line with the Gaia principles, the things we do will be guided by this philosophy (Orr, 2004).

#### 2.4.2 Ecovillages as transformative counter-hegemonic force

Up to this point, it should be clear that the ecovillage movement indeed has quite a counter-hegemonic philosophy. Ecovillages have emerged as a response to the growing problems regarding the status quo modern industrial society. Their holistic approach to community-building, related to permaculture, Gaia theory and Buen Vivir, is quite contrary to the dominant growth paradigm and the imperial mode of living, as we saw

in the previous paragraph. As mentioned in chapter 2.3.2, Paul Ekins especially recognized the power of people and grassroots initiatives when it comes to a socio-ecological transformation. The power of the people to battle what Ekins calls ‘the big battalions’ – “modern technology, and the institutions of world capitalism and state power” – is however conditional (Ekins, 1992). This conditionality then, becomes clear with the Gramscian theory of cultural hegemony. Through the hundreds of years of institution building, the ideologies and discourses of the hegemonic classes have become very much routinized in life in the Global North and increasingly in the Global South (Brand & Wissen, 2021; Gilman, 1991). Because of this hegemonic structure, people tend to stick to the unsustainable imperial mode of living that they are used to (Brand & Wissen, 2012). Because of these reasons, ecovillages must develop a counter-hegemonic narrative, including practices and values, that has the potential to gain popularity in society, and appeal to people, so that they might change their lifestyle (Gilman, 1991). Brand & Wissen (2021) say “the various alternatives to the status quo often lack an inner connection, a vivid narrative ‘from below’. It is thus also vital for ecovillages to connect among each other and formulate a common narrative, in order to generate acclaim within society (Brand & Wissen, 2021). GEN emphasizes that “ecovillages cannot be ‘islands’ but need to facilitate change“ (Global Ecovillage Network, 2024). A strong narrative is crucial for ecovillages in the war of position and to help foster the socio-ecological transformation (Hausmann, 2019).

In order to establish a counter-hegemonic narrative that has a transformative potential, there are some considerations. First of all, ecovillages and their inhabitants are pioneers of change for the socio-ecological transformation and there is no blueprint for this transformation (Hausmann, 2019). New practices might emerge in ecovillages, whereby they also recruit new practitioners, as we saw in chapter 2.1.2. These practices, in turn, are also shaping the counter-narrative of the ecovillages. The function of ecovillages as experimental space, as mentioned in the previous paragraph, is important in this regard. The pioneers experiment with both eco-technology as well as new forms of communal living that help them get closer to their holistic ideal state, as well as sharing the outcomes of the experiments within their networks (Kunze & Avelino, 2015). Karen Liftin (2009) argues that the power of example, through experimenting, is one of the ecovillage movement’s greatest transformative strengths. Furthermore, she gives ecovillages a new definition, namely ‘holistic knowledge communities’. What she means by this is that ecovillages, through knowledge generation and sharing, in combination with their pragmatic nature, have a great counter-hegemonic potential (Liftin, 2009).

Moreover, the diffusion of the counter-hegemonic narrative of ecovillages happens at two different spatial scales: the local and the supra-regional. On the local scale, ecovillages can influence their direct surroundings through good contact with neighbouring communities. The ecovillage might show them what they are doing and why they are doing it. This is a quite direct and more easy way of spreading the narrative. On the supra-regional level, it is a bit harder to do this. This level refers to conveying the counter-hegemonic narrative to the broader public. This requires network-building (Hausmann, 2019). Modern information and communication technologies play a large role in collaborative construction and global sharing of the narrative and experiences between ecovillages (Wittmayer et al, 2019). Through these attempts of spreading the counter-hegemonic narrative, it is crucial for the socio-ecological transformation to reach a large and diverse share of society. The more people know about and appreciate the solidary mode of living embodied by ecovillages, the wider institutional change is potentially induced (Hausmann, 2019). Mainstream

attention, and close connection to mainstream culture are thus crucial for the socio-ecological transformability (Tijhuis, 2021). Here lies a challenge, however. Ecovillages should preserve their community identity in the search for more mainstream attention. They must of course do some concessions to make their narrative more appealing and accessible, but not too much so their core values are distanced from (Siebert, 2023).

The Global Ecovillage Network has a large role to play in the creation and spreading of the narrative. While GEN expects transformative change to come from the grassroots level, from the people in ecovillages, the support of the network is vital. The network brings together ecovillagers across the world to share experiences and ideas. Furthermore, GEN is increasingly involved in cross-national, and cross-topical networks. They increasingly cooperate herein with the Transition Town and permaculture movements (Kunze & Avelino, 2015). Next to the global network, ecovillage networks on other levels like continental and national are at work (GEN, 2024).

Dias, Loureiro, Chevitaese & Sousa (2017) have argued that the societal influence of ecovillages mainly rests on diffusing their alternative narrative and practices. They are acting as nodes in sustainability networks, attempting to challenge capitalist ideals that are dominant. They also see that ecovillages are often geographically isolated. Nonetheless, through concrete practices and experiences, ecovillages have gained great social and scientific relevance for their construction of alternatives of society (Dias et al, 2017). Meijering (2012) argues that ecovillages can be seen as “eco-role models”. Through attempts of being an example, they would be able to influence mainstream society (Meijering, 2012).

#### *2.4.3 Ecovillages in The Netherlands*

In The Netherlands, the Global Ecovillage Network Nederland (GEN-NL) is operating to support Dutch ecovillages (GEN Nederland, n.d.). They themselves have even another definition of ecovillages, specified for the Netherlands. GEN-NL repeats the notion of the ecovillage being a ‘living laboratory’ but add ‘for a ‘verreikelijk life’’. The term ‘verreikelijk’ is a combination of the Dutch words for ‘expansive’, referring to the holistic approach of ecovillages and ‘delightful’. Also, GEN-NL acknowledges the importance of radical pioneers for the laboratory (GEN Nederland, n.d.).

This definition is a part of the source document of GEN-NL in which they have also set six key concepts. These have been formulated as core elements of the socio-ecological societal transformation, through which pioneers can innovate new practices (GEN Nederland, n.d.). I list and briefly explain the key concepts here:

##### **\* Key concept 1: The question of being – drivers for the ecovillage**

This question of being relates to the definition the ecovillage. To know what an ecovillage is, is important so one can act to get closer to this definition, as the ideal ecovillage does not yet exist, and probably never will. It is a continuous process. It is also important to determine what the ecovillage means to those involved and what they want it to be (GEN Nederland, n.d.).

##### **\* Key concept 2: Building connections**

People in an ecovillage are purposefully living in connection with each other. They respectfully and lovingly communicate. Self-development is important in this regard.

However, the people in the ecovillage should also be in connection to the outside world. The ecovillage can herein be a source of inspiration and knowledge (GEN Nederland, n.d.).

\* Key concept 3: Ownership and usage

Inhabitants of ecovillages also create and share communal facilities. Communal facilities could for example be common living rooms, kitchens, offices or cars. There should be a balance between private and common ownership (GEN Nederland, n.d.).

\* Key concept 4: Organization and decision making

Everyone has a role in ecovillages. They take roles that suit them, or they are specialized in. They hold responsibility for their jobs. When it comes to policy and decision making, everyone is equal, and everyone has a say. Transparency is key here. Implementation of policy should happen efficiently (GEN Nederland, n.d.).

\* Key concept 5: What is 'value' for us and how do we distribute it?

Ecovillages pioneer towards a new economic model. This also means that the current value-system should change. It should not be me-focused, but we-focused. It should not be profit-focused, but Earth-focused. Intrinsic value is created, which grant value to wellbeing of humans and non-humans. Taking food forests as an example, agriculture and nature are combined. This creates a sustainable food production method. An ecovillage should be financially healthy, but also in balance with nature. Supply and demand will be coordinated so that there is a win-win. The notion of 'enough' is central in the ecovillage (GEN Nederland, n.d.).

\* Key concept 6: The Earth

This last key concept is very much related to the Gaia theory. The Earth is an intelligent living organism. Every element is connected to the other elements. We have disrupted the balanced being that the Earth should be. Ecovillages want to restore the balance and have a regenerative society. Conscious consuming, reuse of materials, little energy consumption, living in smaller houses and eating local, biological food are examples of a regenerative lifestyle. Earth belongs only to itself. We are not its owners. The Earth cares for us, and humans should care for the Earth (GEN Nederland, n.d.).

Next to the national ecovillage network, a regional network exists for the province Gelderland. The 'Coöperatieve Vereniging Ecodorpen Gelderland' (CVEG) has been founded in 2015 "by a diverse group of people with big ideas that has grown into the largest ecovillages association in The Netherlands. We have a common goal: living together consciously in connection with each other, the environment and nature (CVEG, 2024)." They offer trainings, workshops and other events to help people set up an ecovillage or to inform people about the way of living of ecovillages. Besides the educating role they play, they themselves have realized an ecovillage called 'Ecodorp Zuiderveld' (CVEG, 2024). I have visited and interviewed an inhabitant of this ecovillage. This will be elaborated on in chapter 4.2.

## **2.5 Conceptual model**

In order to sketch a more schematic and summarizing overview of the theoretical framework, I created a conceptual model.

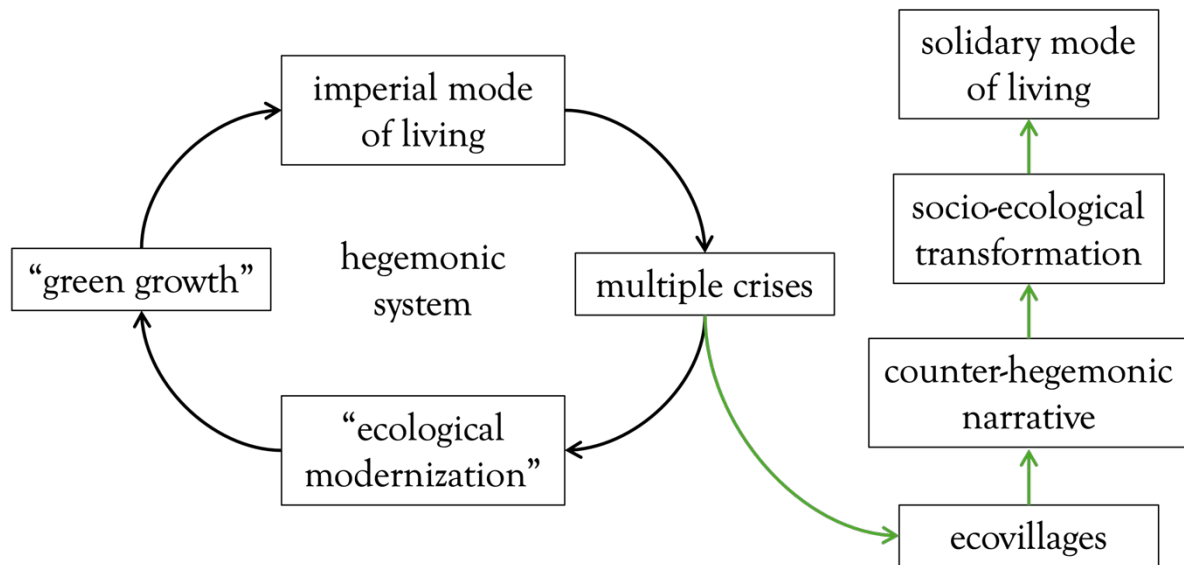


Figure 5: Conceptual model (van Doorn, 2024)

## 3. Methodology

In this chapter I will elaborate on the methods I have used for collecting and analysing data.

### 3.1 Research method

This bachelor's thesis is based on a qualitative study. Qualitative research aims at providing an in-depth understanding of research participants' experiences, perspectives or histories. The samples of qualitative studies are smaller scale than in quantitative research. Samples are furthermore carefully selected on the basis of criteria. Data collection often requires close contact between the participants and the researcher. Furthermore, the collected qualitative data is very detailed and elaborate (Moriarty, 2011).

The type of qualitative design I have chosen is a multiple case research design. The advantage of a multiple case study over a single case study is that data across different situations will be collected and analysed, instead of one situation. Each case is studied to gain understanding in its unique context and dynamics. The situations can be compared with each other to get more reliable evidence (Gustafsson, 2017). In combination hereto, I chose to perform a cross-case analysis in addition to the individual analyses of the cases. This allows me to more consciously compare the data and is crucial for answering the research questions at hand. Patterns commonalities and variations can be explored (Stake, 2006).

Both primary and secondary data will be collected. This combination of primary and secondary data enhances the depth of the analysis, as well as leads to a more comprehensive data analysis (Johnston, 2017).

### 3.2 Primary data

The data collection will be done through semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews are a very common data collection method in social sciences. It is a mix between both unstructured and structured interview methods (Alsaawi, 2014). The semi-structured interview, as the name suggests, should have a degree of structure in order to keep a thread and to make sure that the interviewer and interviewee stays relevant to the research topic and wanted outcomes (Carruthers, 1990).

So, the data I used is from interviews performed at the ecovillages. When conducting interviews, it is very important to record the audio, due to the large amount of data received. By transcribing the recordings of the interviews and taking notes during the interviews, one has tangible data to work with for the data analysis (Alsaawi, 2014). The qualitative data will result in a more in-depth type of data analysis, which is fitting for my research question.

For every ecovillage, I spoke with one or two initiators. I found the interviewees by sending them an e-mail or message them via LinkedIn. I selected six ecovillages in The Netherlands. Five of them are situated in the Dutch province of Gelderland. Ecodorp Boekel is the only one outside of Gelderland. This ecovillage is situated in Noord-Brabant, not far from the border with Gelderland. Below, I added a map to show the geographical locations of the cases I chose.



Figure 6: Overview map of the cases (van Doorn, 2024)

### 3.3 Data analysis

I analysed the primary qualitative data by coding the transcripts of the interviews in the program Atlas.ti. Applying codes helps structuring the transcripts and pick out relevant parts. A code is a word or small phrase that represents a portion of a text. It could have multiple purposes. The codes I will be using will relate the raw data to the theories and concepts from the second chapter. They also help structuring and highlighting the most important parts of the transcripts (Saldaña, 2009).

Within the analysis process, multiple steps of coding have to be undergone to do it properly. The first step is 'open coding'. In this initial phase, the transcripts are closely examined for the first time. Relevant parts of the text, which refer to concepts, characteristics or themes, are labelled by codes that represent the piece. It is based on a quite open-ended approach. From there, more connections will be made to the theories and concepts from the theoretical framework, research questions and objectives. This phase is called 'axial coding'. In this stage, codes are organized. Similar codes could be merged, and code groups can be created to bundle codes relating to similar concepts or theories. The final step in the analysis of the data, involves selective coding. In this phase, all code categories become systemically linked with the core theory which is being developed or used (Saldaña, 2009).

A cross-case analysis will follow the case studies. A cross-case analysis allows the author to look further than just the single cases. It allows for looking at patterns, models and theories that could be drawn from the results. The cross-case analysis helps the author to understand to what extent relationships between the cases exist (Khan & VanWynsberghe, 2008).

### **3.4 Position of research**

As a researcher, I attempt at taking an independent position. I recognize this is a challenging task, given my personal background and beliefs. I chose the subject I am researching through an interest in ecological and social societal change. This might influence my judgement. Aware of this fact, I will try staying as neutral as I could, during the research (Berger, 2015).

## 4. Multiple case study

For this research I selected six different ecovillages in The Netherlands (see chapter 3.2). Each of the ecovillages are quite distinct and different from each other on the surface. I chose for this selection to get a representative set to account for the diverse nature of ecovillages in The Netherlands. In this chapter I will introduce the ecovillages and cover the results gathered from the interviews. The cases will be handled in alphabetical order. Afterwards, in order to gain a better oversight, a cross-case analysis will be performed, to look at patterns that became are becoming evident from the case results.

### 4.1 Ecodorp Boekel



Figure 7: Aerial photograph of Ecodorp Boekel (Velms, n.d.)

Ecodorp Boekel is situated in village Boekel in the Dutch province Noord-Brabant. The initiative came from Ad Vlems, whom I interviewed. He had worked at a nature conservation organization in which he worked together a lot with the UN. As he got word of the UN that all glaciers on Earth were melting, it was a turning point for Vlems, as he said in the interview: “I told my wife: I think we must live more sustainably, and do it in such a way, that others would want so too.” He created a website and within three months, 100 people responded who had the same dream. Ecodorp Boekel is a housing cooperative. A housing cooperative is an association of residents that want to independently manage and maintain their homes together and live collectively. Vlems, together with other current residents managed the construction of the ecovillage himself. At this point, in 2024, the houses are built and inhabited. 33 adults and 13 children live in Ecodorp Boekel.

#### 4.1.1 An innovative testing ground for ecology and sustainability

Before the ecovillage came into being, Vlems lived in a “regular, more expensive green neighbourhood” in Tilburg. One of the major things he struggled with in his previous home, was making the house itself sustainable. In the winter, the house was too cold,

so they had to turn up the heating, and in the summer, it was too hot. Furthermore, the position of the roof relative to the sun caused the roof not to be suitable for solar panels. In Ecodorp Boekel, as it is a new build project, he could solve these issues and make truly sustainable homes. Municipality Boekel is the first municipality in The Netherlands not to have a 'welstandscommissie' – beautification committee, translated from Dutch – which means that there are no rules for the appearance of houses. This helped Vlems tremendously with the freedom he got with the design of the ecovillage. The creation of the circular buildings that characterize the ecovillage were thence made possible. Also, Ecodorp Boekel received the Experimental Status within the Crisis- and Recovery Act. The current Building Decree has posed to many restrictions upon the innovative experiment. This means Vlems could request exceptions from regular laws for certain experimental innovations. The ecovillage got multiple exceptions, and the Building Decree had been amended, as the experiments worked.

In order to make this new village sustainable, Vlems delved into methods of sustainable building. Eventually, he had used five sustainable innovations that had not been used in The Netherlands before. As the building sector is responsible for a large share of CO2 emissions, the construction phase is where the first major sustainability steps could be realized. Starting with the fundamentals of the buildings, he used foam glass, made from recycled glass. This is mixed with geopolymers concrete, which uses fly ash, a rest product from blast furnaces, instead of cement. Furthermore, the buildings are fully made of organic materials and insulation material is made from old jeans. The way construction has been carried out has led Ecodorp Boekel to be a climate positive village. More CO2 is stored in the buildings than has been emitted during the process of construction. The buildings are also equipped with solar panels, with which they provide their electricity needs. The solar panels are also connected to an innovative heat system, which does not produce CO2, and furthermore does away with the residents' energy bill, as it provides heating throughout the whole year. Building this innovative system was subsidized by the EU, making it financially feasible.

Ecology plays a large role in the ecovillage. Vlems especially expressed his concerns about what the multiple crises will mean for food supply, as well as biodiversity. He foresees major food shortages if the imperial mode of living is not challenged. He also, due to his previous work field, recognizes the alarming biodiversity rates over the last decades. These issues are therefore major spearheads in the ecovillage's practices. Ecodorp Boekel has its own food forest which they manage together with volunteers. This is a climate resistant and ecological way to provide food. On top of that, the ecovillage has set up a biodiversity plan in cooperation with ecologists. They focus on ten threatened animal species and set target amounts in ten years. Every two years, an ecologist comes by to monitor this and to advise the ecovillage to create more ideal circumstances for the species. If this plan works out, the province Noord-Brabant will include the ecovillage in the nature network, making an ecovillage a type of nature. The ecovillage also made a water plan together with the local water board. Ecodorp Boekel has nine water tanks for collecting a total of 90000 liters of rainwater. This is used for the washing machines and toilets, among other things. With the use of a constructed wetland, the grey water that the residents produce is purified after which it is infiltrated into the ground. Through solely natural processes, thousands of liters of water are added to the groundwater, even in dry periods, which is very beneficial for nature in the ecovillage. Ecodorp Boekel is disconnected from the sewage system. Connection to the sewage is normally mandatory, but the municipality allowed the ecovillage to be disconnected. Vlems said: "We are very lucky that the municipality is such a brave municipality. The municipality has helped us a lot."

The construction materials in combination with the care for nature in Ecodorp Boekel, characterizes it as a blue zone. A blue zone means that people become older in this area than outside the area, because the circumstances are very beneficial for human health.

#### *4.1.2 Three pillars or a social etiquette*

Housing cooperative Ecodorp Boekel rests on three pillars: trust, self-reflection and participation. Trust relates to trusting that the path that the ecovillage has thus far been going on, has been done with the right socio-ecological intentions. Self-reflection is important especially to avoid conflicts. One should first look at oneself before blaming others. Participation refers to the fact that everyone is involved and contributing. This in turn leads to the ecovillage becoming a truly joint achievement and improves social cohesion among the residents. The residents are subdivided in working groups that all have a certain role to play, accompanied by a set of tasks. Each resident is encouraged to find out what their core qualities are, so that they can find a role that they both like, as well as which suits them. Knowing one's core qualities help a person to better self-reflect, and to self-develop as a person.

Life in Ecodorp Boekel is very solidarity and community centred. The residents, according to Vlems, know each other better than their family knows them. It is impossible to feel lonely, as everyone is very involved with each other. There even is a table amidst every circle. If a resident goes sitting there, they are in the mood to talk. In the ecovillage, a share economy is pursued. They have a technical room with collective tools for each circle of twelve homes. Herein are four shared washing machines. Only two households have their own, because they have kids that regularly have dirty clothes.

Furthermore, Ad has been involved in a project regarding a new type of education. As part of a nearby high school, there is now an alternative form of education called Agora. In this form of education, children are totally free to do what they want. As soon as they have discovered what they want, they learn about those subjects. This in turn relates to the counter-hegemonic narrative Ecodorp Boekel stands for, giving much space to a child in order for them to discover their core qualities and do what they want, instead of what they are forced upon doing.

#### *4.1.3 A 'showroom for the new reality'*

The innovative practices and values that Ecodorp Boekel stands for, clearly present a counter-hegemonic narrative. On their own however, they are not holding transformative potential. Vlems is indeed attempting to spread their narrative in various ways. He gives almost weekly tours around the ecovillage for people, municipalities, provinces, housing corporations or contractors. Furthermore, Ecodorp Boekel has won three awards because of its innovations and pioneering role, which has caused for lots of media attention. The innovative character of Ecodorp Boekel, especially when looking in The Netherlands, is quite important in the light of the socio-ecological transformation. Vlems said: "I think because of the fact that we got so much attention – we have been on the national television four times, we appeared in many books and reports have been made about us – it helps other ecovillages to blossom." There is another ecovillage in construction in Noord-Brabant as Ad mentioned, which are inspired by Boekel and use the same materials like foam glass and geopolymer in its construction. In the local

context, they essentially position themselves as the pioneers of change that Brand & Wissen (2018) talk about in their works, using publicity as a means therefor.

The housing cooperative got financial support from the province, the state and the EU to create Ecodorp Boekel. The province provided for 1,5 million euros when the ecovillage started out, without having asked for it. Not knowing about why the province gave Ecodorp Boekel this money, Vlems asked an intern who was making a documentary about the ecovillage, to visit the deputy, whom Vlems had never spoken, who provided them with the money. The deputy said: “The way that the people of Ecodorp Boekel live in 2021, we want everyone in Noord-Brabant to live in 2050. So for us, Ecodorp Boekel is a testing ground and a showroom.” Someone from the ministry of infrastructure and environment once came by, and he told all civil servants in the ministry to visit a similar project, as these are places where real changes are made. He called Ecodorp Boekel a “standard bearer for the new reality” (Vlems, 2020). Vlems was also invited to the EU multiple times to give presentations about his views and Ecodorp Boekel. These examples show the serious interest coming from the Dutch governments and the EU have for the narrative that Ecodorp Boekel presents.

Ad Vlems is ‘climate mayor’ of the municipality of Boekel. In this role, he gives a yearly tour to tell locals what Ecodorp Boekel does, and how they made their village climate positive. He shows the people how they can make their own homes and garden climate proof. He is planning to do more things as climate mayor next year. To further increase Ecodorp Boekel’s role as pioneer of change, a knowledge- and education centre will be built next to the three circles. Through course and webinars, Vlems will try to share as much knowledge to as many people as possible, both offline and online. He sees knowledge-sharing as the most important practice to make sure others can also live sustainably. He said: “I am convinced, and I am willing to put effort into this, that others will also live like this ... Our goal is not to create an ecovillage, but to be an inspiring example of how to live sustainably.”

Vlems also shares knowledge through organizations like GEN and Cooplink. Cooplink is a knowledge sharing platform for housing cooperations. Vlems is regularly asked for a webinar for sharing his experiences and struggles during the creation of Ecodorp Boekel, along with the solutions he found for these issues. Ad also cooperates with Ecolise, a European organization which spreads knowledge from permaculture-experts, ecovillages and transition networks. He has furthermore been involved with two other European and worldwide GEN projects. One focused on how ecovillages could prepare for 2,5 degrees global warming and more. The follow-up project is about how ecovillages could take a key role in making their region sustainable.

Ecodorp Boekel is connected to an association called Vrijcoop. This is an organization of which many other housing cooperatives and ecovillages. When Ecodorp Boekel has paid off all their mortgages, they will continue paying ‘rent’ which will go through Vrijcoop towards starting ecovillages or housing cooperatives. This way, Ecodorp Boekel, among many other cooperatives, contribute to the start of initiatives like themselves, which will, eventually do the same.

## 4.2 Ecodorp Zuiderveld



Figure 8: Photograph I took at Ecodorp Zuiderveld: in the front, one can see the common shed, and in the back, a row of social housing is visible – in between the shed and houses is the community garden (van Doorn, 2024)

Ecodorp Zuiderveld is an ecovillage in the Dutch city of Nijmegen, Gelderland. It was built in 2020. It is the first ecovillage of CVEG. The ecovillage consists of 46 houses and is located in the eponymous neighbourhood Zuiderveld, which consists in total of 550 houses (CVEG, n.d.). The location is unique as, instead of on the outskirts, it is situated in the middle of a city neighbourhood. Ecodorp Zuiderveld has been realized through a cooperation between CVEG, Woningbouwvereniging Gelderland (WBGV), housing corporation Talis, an architect, a contractor and municipality Nijmegen. While the homes are owned by Talis, Ecodorp Zuiderveld is a housing cooperation. I interviewed a resident from Ecodorp Zuiderveld.

### 4.2.1 *Solidary and intentional community*

The interviewee had a previous experience with communal living, which caused him to apply for Ecodorp Zuiderveld. The solidary aspects of the ecovillage attracted him. A defining characteristic of this ecovillage is that it is a form of multigenerational living, meaning that all ages are represented. Inclusivity is an important addition to this. There are single-family homes, apartments as well as studios, all of them are social housing units. All residents know each other well and support each other wherever necessary. This is a thing that the interviewee feels is lacking from regular Dutch neighbourhoods, where people live more past each other and are more individualist. In communities like these, people cannot be lonely, and when they feel lonely, neighbours come by to check on them.

Ecodorp Zuiderveld is an intentional community. Through fostering social cohesion and managing the ecovillage together they attempt to create a community based on their shared values and ideas. The ecovillage works in a sociocratic fashion. This means that the organization is shaped and managed with equality at its core. For example, important decisions are made on the basis of unanimity. Residents perform tasks within the working group that they are a part of. They join a working group based on their talents and interests. Every inhabitant is expected to do eight hours worth of tasks per week.

The ecovillage has a large communal building, which I got to see during my visit. Herein, there are offices, there is a meeting room, a kitchen with living room, a dance/meditation room and a Voko – Food Cooperation – where residents can buy biological products. Furthermore, they have a large garden with a vegetable garden. They are also finishing a common shed for inter alia tools and a bike rack. The residents do maintenance of the ecovillage themselves or hire someone to do it. This way Talis, the housing corporation, has only little work to do. The interviewee said: “If there are problems, in the most cases, we solve them ourselves. For the housing corporation this is much more pleasant, than isolated homes, where they function as the contact point.”



Figure 9: Living room of Ecodorp Zuiderveld (van Doorn, 2024)

#### 4.2.2 *Struggles for a young ecovillage*

Ecodorp Zuiderveld is still a recent ecovillage. It was finished during the Covid-19 pandemic. The interviewee explains that it has been hard to prepare for the moment they could start living in their homes. Also, some selected residents pulled out of the project last minute. These reasons threw a banner in the works for creation of the

community and ecovillage. Currently, time and resources are scarce, and priorities have to be made. The ecovillage currently lacks the capacity to handle requests, let alone reach out and cooperate with other ecovillages for example. The interviewee called Ecodorp Zuiderveld the “business card for CVEG”. Through this way they have received quite some public attention. Priorities, therefore lie with tour requests from municipalities or housing cooperations that are received through this business card role.

However, the interviewee emphasized that Ecodorp Zuiderveld recently started running more smoothly and the organization is starting to take shape. The experience from the global, European and Dutch Ecovillage Networks that is bundled in a guide, has helped the organization to find structure. As they had been busy finishing certain things and finding their way, they slowly start having more time to create their own identity. The interviewee referred to the location of Ecodorp Zuiderveld. It is an ecovillage that is surrounded by city neighbourhoods, which is quite unique. In that way the ecovillage wants to promote itself as having an exemplary role for cities, to show that also in cities, where there is less available space, an ecovillage can work. Ecodorp Zuiderveld also has the goal to have good contacts with the rest of the neighbourhood Zuiderveld, to do more things together with neighbours.

### **4.3 Het Groene Spoor**

Ecovillage Het Groene Spoor is a concept originating from Emmie Hulsing and Wim ter Horst from Oosterbeek, Gelderland. As they got older, the question arose about in what way they would like to live as they, and others are getting older. They felt that elderly that still live in a regular neighbourhood get isolated as the neighbourhood is not watching out for them. They also want to contribute to a sustainable and ecological society as they want to leave a better world for the younger generations. This got them interested in the idea of ecovillages, with its ecological, solidary and communal characteristics. They have explored different location possibilities in the area around Oosterbeek and have been working on the plan for some years. They also visited many existing Dutch ecovillages to acquire different ideas about how to set up an ecovillage. In the interview I had with Emmie and Wim, they have particularly mentioned Ecodorp Boekel, see 4.1, and Iewan Strowijk, which will be explored in 4.4, as major sources of inspiration. To their example, they too, want to set up a housing cooperation. The initiators of Iewan guided Emmie and Wim, based on their experience, through properly designing and preparing the ecovillage.

#### *4.3.1 Designing Het Groene Spoor*

Emmie and Wim have formulated four pillars for Het Groene Spoor. The first is sustainability. They want to build with solely sustainable materials. The inspiration they got from Ecodorp Boekel becomes quite clear in this first pillar. For example, they want to use foam glass for the foundation of the houses. They will choose a contractor that builds ecologically. Furthermore, they want to create a constructed wetland for the water purification. They also want to experiment with permaculture, like creating a food forest, which they also saw in Boekel. The second pillar is multigenerational living. They want to select and monitor on this principle. Children to elderly and ages in between should all be represented in the ecovillage. Additional to this pillar is the pillar that a broad range of socio-economic classes should be represented. The ecovillage will consist of social housing, mid- and high-end rental homes, as well as tiny houses. This broader range of housing types should attract these diverging societal layers. Lastly,

social cohesion is an important pillar, which will be fostered through the creation of common spaces and many communal activities like music sessions and eating together, as well as joint management of the ecovillage.

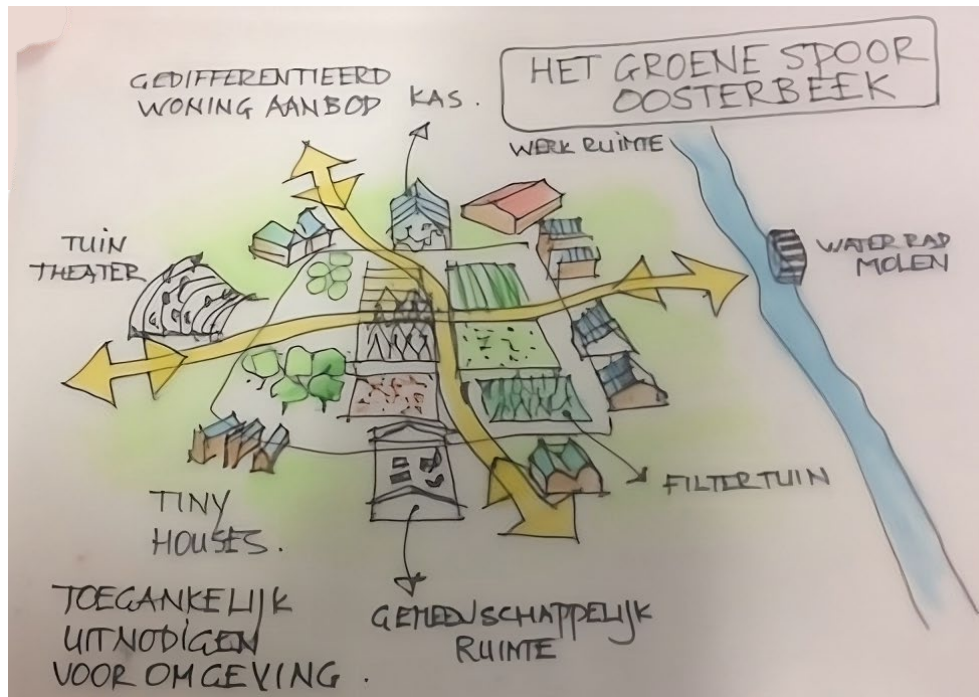


Figure 10: design for Het Groene Spoor (Hulsing, 2024)

Emmie and Wim have already selected future residents. In order to do this, they sent a questionnaire around to the candidates. The resident profile consists of a few criteria that future residents should agree upon. Firstly, the four pillars and vision should be respected and endorsed. The future resident must be prepared to put time and effort in the ecovillage. They should have a sense of humour, empathy, be flexible and able to self-reflect. Lastly, the future resident should be prepared to pay contribution money for the community. Emmie and Wim furthermore had conversations with interested people to make even more clear what Het Groene Spoor is about and what it means to live there. Many people dropped out during this selection process as they were not in line with the principles of the ecovillage. A certain mentality is necessary for residents to be able to develop a community with the ideals that Emmie and Wim want Het Groene Spoor to reflect, and to avoid conflict about radical differences of ideas. Every three months, all future residents to eat together and to get to know each other. They have also already formed working groups, such as a PR- and communication workgroup. Emmie and Wim told me that the selected people bring many fresh ideas and initiatives, and they sense that Het Groene Spoor is more and more starting to become a common and shared project.

Similarly to Boekel and Iwan, Emmie & Wim, when Het Groene Spoor is completed, want to give regular tours and actively inspire others. In fact, even in the current stage, they regularly get requests from people or groups that want to know more about starting an ecovillage.

#### 4.3.2 Towards realization

Because of struggles around finding land to build the ecovillage upon, Het Groene Spoor exists still only on paper. They have been quite close to buying a piece of farmland but

got met with resistance from the neighbourhood. Currently they are other possibilities arising, which sees Emmie & Wim moving forward optimistically. However, concessions are lurking around. In the current times in The Netherlands, the housing crisis causes land to be more valuable than ever. This means landowners get many bids and are mostly tempted by property developers with deep pockets. Emmie & Wim could choose to indeed cooperate with such a developer, but this would leave serious marks on their original plan, as a housing cooperation would not be possible. Luckily, Emmie & Wim are on quite good terms with the municipality and planners, who are very supportive of the ecovillage plan. The initiators hope the municipality might have land to spare for the project in the future. They have noticed the municipality and banks becoming more housing cooperative oriented, which is a favourable condition.

Emmie & Wim also talked about a professionalization of their organization. Recently, an architect who came across their project, joined the core group, and has taken over the role of chairperson from Emmie. The new chairman works as program director at the National Climate Platform and was previously involved with the National Climate Agreement. Through his work experience, Emmie & Wim notice his knowledge and skillset make a large difference when in talks with the planner for example. At the same time Emmie & Wim learn a lot from him, which is very beneficial. He shares the same ideas as Emmie & Wim, making him a valuable addition, and many new doors are opening.

#### **4.4 Iewan Strowijk**



Figure 11: Iewan Strowijk (Strowijk Iewan, 2021)

Iewan Strowijk is an ecovillage in Nijmegen that was built in 2015. The idea originated from residents of a living community in an old poorly isolated building in Ubbergen. They had developed a mutual interest in ecovillages. They essentially wanted to copy the values and social aspects that were present in the previous community, but in a sense rebuild it in a sustainable manner. The most important motive of the initiators is to make human and environmentally friendly living in the city accessible for people with

lower incomes. Iewan Strowijk had been realized by the initiators, in cooperation with 'Woningbouwvereniging Gelderland' (WBVG), housing corporation Talis, and a contractor. The province of Gelderland and municipality Nijmegen also facilitated the project. Iewan is a housing cooperative, but Talis owns the houses I interviewed the initiators, Hanneke & Mare Nynke, as well as another resident, Arne. Iewan works on the basis of three pillars: sustainable & ecological, social & solidary and open & educative.

#### *4.4.1 First pillar: sustainable & ecological*

The first pillar is sustainable & ecological. The biggest aspect herein is the building. Mare Nynke said during our interview: "Your home is the largest thing you own. If you think about how this can be as environmentally friendly as possible from the start until its demolition, it has a very positive impact for all people who will ever live here." The municipality Nijmegen supported the ecological construction and were merry about having an ecological building on their territory. Iewan Strowijk is built out of straw bales and loam. These are natural and sustainable materials and are local products. Straw is a very effective isolation material, which means residents have to use less energy for heating. Iewan has its own sustainable energy generation through solar panels for the energy they do need, and, like Ecodorp Boekel, has a constructed wetland.

The ecovillage is very much focused on sharing. There is for example a car limit. Residents share cars amongst each other when they need one. They share more things like washing machines, vacuum cleaners and tools. Residents very much have a mindset that if they need anything they don't own, to first look around in the community if someone has this thing, before buying it. Iewan also has a food cooperation which they manage together with the neighbouring living community, so residents can order vegetables from the region and biological food without packaging. Iewan tries to promote sustainable choices where possible, and people strengthen each other in this regard. Hanneke said during the interview: "One resident once said: before I lived here, I had to explain and sometimes defend myself that I wanted to live sustainably and that I considered eating vegan, but here I am instead stimulated." This shows the difference in views that can exist between the ecovillage and the outside. People living in Iewan learn new things from each other and share ideas about sustainable living and create a partly shared lifestyle.

#### *4.4.2 Second pillar: social & solidary*

The second pillar is social & solidary. For Iewan, as a living community, this pillar is very important. Arne said he wanted to move to a living community before he would get a child, as he wanted her to grow up surrounded with the support and sociability of other people. He also said during our interview: "One of our neighbours here, was also our neighbour at our previous home, but we didn't know each other back then. People live completely past each other in a normal apartment building." Mare Nynke said: "Often you hear people say: I have fine neighbours; they don't bother me. I always think that sounds a bit poor. Here you can see how great it can be to have good neighbours." Iewan consists of a smaller group of very involved people that are closely in contact with each other. By means of social housing, the apartments are affordable for all social-economic layers. Living together and joint responsibility are key terms in Iewan Strowijk. Through a large amount of communal space, people often come together and see each other. Iewan has a common living room, garden, kitchen and workspaces for example. There regularly are joint activities like dining together and a Friday bar.

According to Mare Nynke, the good contact and communication between the residents, is an important precondition for achieving ecological and social goals in the ecovillage.

Solidary has been recently added as another important lewan-task. This entails offering space for undocumented people or people from other vulnerable groups. At this point, mostly refugees are received in this regard.

Residents of the living community themselves are responsible for the management and maintenance of the ecovillage. Contribution money is included in the rent of the apartments. From this budget, shared facilities are bought, activities are organized, and maintenance is funded. Residents, like in the previous ecovillages, perform tasks within the working group that they are a part of. For example, there are working groups for maintenance of the building, for renting out the common hall called De Kleine Wiel or for the jobs in the garden. Once a month there is a klusdag where almost everyone joins in, when they do jobs around the house.

Hanneke & Mare Nynke have made a resident profile for lewan. People should have motivation, time and energy to be actively involved in the living community. They should also have a sense of humour and be the ability of self-mockery at times. People with these characteristics will be more likely to fit in lewan and will favour the social cohesion and the sense of a joint project. People living in lewan should have a certain intrinsic motivation for the maybe less interesting things. There are for example meetings where everyone is expected to discuss important things in the ecovillage that need addressing, as the decision making is based on the consent principle.

Some residents of lewan are involved in activist activities. One resident went to Spain, to help cleaning the beach. Hanneke & Mare Nynke, along with other residents regularly join climate protests by XR for example. Mare Nynke said: "We thought, you can do activist things, protest and so forth, but with lewan we had the idea to really contribute something positive. You could say setting up lewan has been the biggest activist thing we have done in our life."

#### *4.4.3 Third pillar: open & educative*

The last pillar of lewan is open & educative. This refers both to connecting with people in the city, other communities and ecovillages, as to educating people about their ecological and social way of living and helping interested people to start an ecovillage. It is lewan's goal to actively inspire others about their way of living.

Arne works in the cultural sector. He therefore organizes cultural events in De Kleine Wiel, like workshops, courses and concerts. People from the neighbourhood and other parts of the city visit these events, making it a good way to connect the rest of town to the ecovillage. In his view, culture and sustainability go hand in hand. Instead of spending money on consuming products like more gadgets or clothes, which contribute to exhausting the Earth, collectively shared experiences like a concert or a show are much more valuable and sustainable. "A big score is done in sustainability when people choose for culture instead of consuming." – Arne

Hanneke & Mare Nynke set up Bureau Viertel together. With this bureau, they give presentations, organize workshops and traineeships and courses for initiative groups, municipalities and housing corporations, to share their experience. They give 'zet je dromen in de stijgers' – work on your dreams – courses, with which they reach lots of

people throughout the whole country. With this course, they help initiative groups with a vague idea, getting a concrete idea and plan, with which they have the tools to realize their plan. Also, it's a way to bring people that want to create an ecovillage in the same region together.

lewan regularly organize tours for interested people. They see a growing interest in community living, as they have a long waiting list for new residents. Hanneke recalls that it wasn't the case back when she first joined a living community. Furthermore, they notice an increasing interest from municipalities and housing corporations that visit lewan. For Talis, the housing corporation that rents the apartments, lewan Strowijk had been a new type of project. Hanneke & Mare Nynke, however, notice that Talis repeated the ecovillage idea with Ecodorp Zuiderveld, among five other projects. In this sense Talis holds an example role for other housing corporations. Hanneke & Mare Nynke express the importance of finding open-minded partners without profit motives. They found the municipality and Talis to be beneficial partners in this regard, as partners without profit maximalization as core goal.

#### 4.5 Nijmeegse Stadsnomaden



Figure 12: The site of the Nijmeegse Stadsnomaden (Nijmeegse Stadsnomaden, 2022)

The Nijmeegse Stadsnomaden – The Nijmegen City Nomads, translated to English – is a living community in which the residents live in shacks and caravans on the edge of Nijmegen. It is mobile ecovillage, which has been on multiple locations in Nijmegen in the past. In 2015, they squatted a piece of fallow land on the Radboud University campus. The following year, they got recognized by the municipality of Nijmegen as an innovative way of living and got a legal status. After being located at the campus for three years, they moved to the northern part of Nijmegen. Since a few years they are located in the neighbourhood Dukenburg. I interviewed Max, one of the founders of De Nijmeegse Stadsnomaden.

The Nijmeegse Stadsnomaden did not just start out of the blue. Before Max squatted the terrain of the university, he and his companions had been busy developing the concept 'Nijmeegse Stadsnomaden', thinking about how they would present themselves, which land they would squat and which people they would involve. They appeared to have indeed developed a compelling story, as the municipality included them in their housing vision, granting the Stadsnomaden a sense of stability.

#### *4.5.1 An alternative lifestyle*

The concept 'Stadsnomaden' comes from a rejection of the hegemonic lifestyle I have framed as the imperial mode of living. In our interview, Max especially referred to the alternative life cycle he has had up to this point. He told me that he has never understood people who work their whole lives in an office after finishing school and he feels like life is about much more than work. He sees Nijmeegse Stadsnomaden as showing these people that are stuck in the "broken system" an alternative. He thinks that because of the high rent people often need to pay each month, "people have to work each day all day to maintain a stable life." "People have so little free time to mess around, or develop themselves", which Max thinks is a shame. It seems like a fait accompli to many people to live this way. He especially sees this lifestyle being present in the neighbourhood they are surrounded with. Furthermore, he criticizes such a neighbourhood to lack social cohesion and solidarity. There is a sense of alienation, as Max refers to houses as "islands in the street" where people withdraw themselves. He really thinks the Stadsnomaden with their narrative around social cohesion and ecology can have a positive impact on the neighbourhood. The Stadsnomaden try to increase their visibility in the neighbourhood by cooperating with the local paper and the local church.

Resulting from this rejection of the common neighbourhood, indeed comes a quite unique lifestyle, as the Stadsnomaden are living solely in caravans and trailers. Up until only recently, the Stadsnomaden did not have access to water and electricity net, living truly off-grid. Their electricity, they have generated, and still mostly do, through solar panels. Like previous ecovillages, the Stadsnomaden also have a constructed wetland, where grey water is filtered. They build things solely from rest or used materials, that they find during dumpster diving. The food that they eat, either comes from the food bank or from their own crops.

The Stadsnomaden have a lot of communal space, as they have small homes. There is a lot of outside space where they meet, but there are also communal shacks. Sociability is very important for the Stadsnomaden. Max said during our interview: "A good village, or an old-fashioned neighbourhood, with a local merchant, pub where the same people hang out every day. It has a collective, cosy feel. How we live, is similar to that. This whole terrain is our home, which we share." The Stadsnomaden have a three-day rule. This means that anyone who comes by who needs a place to stay, can stay for three days and feel at home. The ecovillage has no gate and is thus very porous, and open. Max often organizes events on the site, like musical evenings, workshops and philosophical lectures, where anyone can join.

In the community, initiatives are the binding principle. People should have the freedom to do, create or invent whatever they want. Together, they give meaning to the area they are allowed to use by the municipality, in a DIY – 'do it yourself' – structure. Stadsnomaden only do things they truly stand behind. They are not driven by wages or

status, but by self-development and passion. One person might be involved with organization and communication to the outside. The other person might garden all day or do other jobs around the site. Max has always been involved with organizing the events, but also with telling the story to the outside, deeming it important to show the world that alternatives are possible. He gets quite a lot of requests in this regard from high schools and people from the municipality, who want a tour and know more about their way of living, or artists that want to do a project.

The Nijmeegse Stadsnomaden are on good terms with several other ecovillages in The Netherlands, Germany and Belgium. If one needs advice or materials, the lines are short. At certain events, ecovillage inhabitants meet each other. Max states that on many different scales, there are ingenious socio-ecological initiatives that formulate a practical critique on society.

#### *4.5.2 Future development of surrounding area*

Municipality Nijmegen has made new plans for the area around where the Nijmeegse Stadsnomaden are currently located. A CPO – collective private commissioning – new build project, tiny houses and atelier spaces will be realized. Together with the Stadsnomaden, the municipality use them with the goal of improve upon the neighbourhood. Max is already connecting with the people that are involved in this new project, to see if together they can submit counterplans for the municipality, about how they want the new place to be. Max hopes to create a cultural heart, which is actively connected to the local people from the neighbourhood, in order to improve upon the neighbourhood's social cohesion and inspire the people to live more sustainably. The contact with municipality Nijmegen is very important for the Stadsnomaden.

Max sees several challenges down the road. When Nijmeegse Stadsnomaden started, the municipality had a surplus of land, making it possible for the Nijmeegse Stadsnomaden to move to three places until now. Max recognizes however, the significantly higher prices of land due to the housing crisis that is present in The Netherlands. He thinks, as land will be sold to the highest bidder, more and more expensive homes will be built, which are the more profitable, leaving little room for ecovillages to develop themselves.

## 4.6 Ppauw



Figure 13: Two pictures taken at Ppauw (van Doom, 2024)

Ppauw is an ecovillage on the outskirts of Wageningen. Erik Groen is one of the initiators of the ecovillage and still very much involved. He is part of the squatting scene in Wageningen. The story of ecovillage Ppauw started when he squatted a demolition site of a hospital together with friends. In between the ruins of the old hospital, they occupied the place, parking a camper and a caravan, and putting up fences on the first of April. In the beginning, they called it the clubhouse for the Party for the Plants. This has been a humorous political party, inspired by the Dutch Party for the Animals, which he used rather as an activist tool than as real political means. Ppauw became tolerated by the municipality. Only a year later, Erik started labelling Ppauw as an ecovillage.

During this time, the term ecovillage was still uncommon, and Erik has seen the land which he squatted as a blank page he can draw his ideas upon by means of experiments and innovations, and hereby give meaning to the word ecovillage. Erik emphasizes that he has always seen Ppauw as a temporary phenomenon, as the municipality gave Ppauw the land use 'temporal cultural breeding ground'. He is therefore very thankful that the municipality has tolerated Ppauw for so long and that he gets the opportunity to get the space for experimentation and pioneering. In his projects he combines art and culture with sustainability and humour with idealism.

### 4.6.1 Ecological experiments in the 'culturele rafelrand' of Wageningen

The idea behind starting the ecovillage, was to promote the 'cultural frayed edges' – 'culturele rafelrand' in Dutch – of Wageningen. Erik sees this as a core function of ecovillage Ppauw, stating: "Cultural frayed edges are places on the fringes of the city where a stuck mainstream culture can gain fresh insights to rejuvenate itself". This

definition that Erik gives to the ecovillage is accompanied by a very experimental and innovative character. Since Ppauw is a fully off-grid community, disconnected from water and electricity, they have been forcedly finding innovative solutions. For example, they have a water tank constructed wetland for water. They have solar panels, windmills and bicycles to generate electricity. Having a positive footprint & living in harmony with nature has been the original idea behind Ppauw and Erik. “We are a part of nature and live together with nature. The Earth is not ours, but more in a Native American way, we are of the Earth. Out of these ideas, flow all kinds of projects.”

The number of residents at Ppauw varies between ten and twenty, as there is a lot of coming and going of inhabitants. Residents of Ppauw share a living room-kitchen combination to come together and cook together. They also share sanitary facilities. There are some permanent residents, but mostly there are temporal residents. As long as people bring ideas and experiments, they are welcome. Furthermore, Erik sees Ppauw as a place for people wanting to leave the rat race of a 40-hour job and to avoid a burn-out. Erik thinks there should be more places where this is possible and is also actively trying to achieve this.

Ppauw’s business card, as Erik puts it, is that there is room for experiments that are not possible in society. In the ecovillage, thinking goes before figuring out whether there is legal basis. He said during our interview: “I like doing things intuitively, and afterwards seeing if it comes at the right moment. Most of the time the inventions arrive too early. I mostly am thinking too far ahead in the quest for the future. The projects mostly are not yet applicable to society yet.” Among projects he refers to is the local currency for Wageningen he developed to stimulate the local economy, the Eurijn. People kept using their regular bank card however, as the local products are more expensive, which Erik would dispute, because the ecological and social externalizations are not accounted for. He concludes that society is not yet ready for it and said: “They are put on the shelf, for when the time is right.”

Erik said in our interview that Ppauw has a pioneering role in “preparing for the inevitable sustainable post-capitalist society”. Linear processes must be turned to circular processes, and he strives for an economy on bike distance. Through backcasting from his desired future, he comes up with projects and experiments to get closer towards this future image. He recognizes a network of squatters, organizations and other ecovillages that contribute to this future, consisting of what he calls ‘toekomstboeren’, meaning ‘future farmers’ in English. Important in Erik’s strategy in this regard is to always look for the conversation and connection with all kinds of different parties, as everyone has its part in the preparation for the sustainable society.

Erik’s approach to attract people has very much, ever since he started Party for the Plants, been based on sparking people’s imagination. Erik wants to show people that sustainable things are possible to do, even if it does not seem so. Ppauw has even been covered in several television shows. This caused Ppauw to have a large impact on the emancipation of citizens, and the creation of demand to ecovillages. Erik has seen a great increase in this regard. He himself has been influential especially with the ecovillages originating in the squat-scene, like Nijmeegse Stadsnomaden. They have been using the knowledge that Ppauw provided them in their own ecovillage.

#### *4.6.2 Spreading narrative as klimaattroubadour*

Since recently, Erik lives in the city again. He said: “We have always tried to stay with one foot in the city. I now live in a house in the city, so that I don’t distance myself from other people. Now I also have to pay rent, and that kind of stuff. Living in the forest for free is like, anyone can do that.” Erik is on very good terms with the municipality of Wageningen. As a result, he even got the function of ‘klimaattroubadour’ – translated to ‘climate bard’ – through which he received many new opportunities for connecting Ppauw with the city. As klimaattroubadour, Erik writes a weekly column in the local newspaper and organizes events in the city to spread his message.

Erik wants to raise awareness among society about the need for a more ecological and social way of living. Thereby, he needs challenging the dominant narratives on sustainability, which have caused the term ‘sustainability’ to have lost its meaning. Erik wants to show people stories from his imagined future, stating that a positive future story is more than ever welcome in current times. For example, he organizes citizen councils in the grand church of Wageningen, to let them participate in municipality decision making processes. Furthermore, he gets to organize events with King’s Day or other public holidays.

Municipality Wageningen is currently formulating a future vision. Erik, as klimaattroubadour, gets to join every meeting about this vision. This way he gets to make his alternative voice heard in municipality processes. This ever-present search for connection and dialogue with the municipality and people of Wageningen has yielded significant results in the future plans for the city.

#### *4.6.3 De Beuk*

Ppauw is entering a new phase. Through establishing itself since its beginning, the ecovillage is getting a legal status, moving away from the tolerance construction. This means that Erik will have less freedom, as he needs cooperating with multiple parties. Ppauw will be part of a new joint ecovillage project that is called De Beuk, which will involve the realization of 150 rental apartments as part of a living community. Although Erik thinks the legalization will create limits in the projects he can do, he tries to carry on putting innovative methods in this new form.

With the changing form of Ppauw and its surrounding area, Erik aims to diffuse his vision of the future of Wageningen. “I’d rather see that we start, as I call it ‘preparing together’, not for the fall, but for the inevitable sustainable society.” He calls De Beuk as an example of such a together preparation. Erik wants to bridge the gap between Ppauw and Wageningen by getting involved with the development of De Beuk with Ppauw. Through cooperation with other parties, more possibilities arise for narrative diffusion in Wageningen and visibility increases.

### **4.7 Cross-case analysis**

The narratives of the several ecovillages, formed through practices and values, do indeed have lots of overlapping features. All ecovillages are clearly involved with holistic practices to create resilient communities. Renewable energy generation and a circular water system are aspects that are present at many of the cases that have been explored. Also, solidarity and community building are important for the ecovillages. Differences lie in different approaches and models. There is definitely a distinction between ecovillages that emerged through housing cooperatives and ecovillages originating from the squatting movement. Through these different strategies also come different

designs. Ppauw and Nijmeegse Stadsnomaden have a more experimental appearance, with people living in caravans, campers and shacks. Ecodorp Boekel, Ecodorp Zuiderveld and Iewan Strowijk, through cooperation with the municipality, have realized their ecovillages with sustainable materials, really focusing on the design in advance: How many houses? Which materials to use? What organizational and decision-making structures to apply? They wanted to create a narrative beforehand that their partners would also find attractive, as they needed them for the realization of the ecovillages. With Ppauw and Nijmeegse Stadsnomaden, the ecovillages originated more as a form of a spontaneous protest. They have designed and given meaning to their ecovillages mainly after their founding, through experiments and initiatives of residents. They very much embraced their temporal character, as they have not been certain of their continuity. Now, however, after some years of their existence, they have, through successful connection building with their municipalities, gained a more secured status through legalization and involvement in other projects.

It has also become evident that new innovations from one ecovillage become adapted by other ecovillages. They complement each other through sharing of knowledge and experiences. For example, Iewan has helped Het Groene Spoor to get going and set up a plan and do this for many other initiatives. Ecodorp Boekel has adapted many innovative ideas that had not been done in The Netherlands, which are increasingly getting adopted by other starting ecovillages.

Spreading the counter-hegemonic narrative is a vital aspect for the ecovillages I visited. The notion of organic intellectuals plays a prominent role in this regard. For every case, a few organic intellectuals can be identified. Ecodorp Boekel, Ecodorp Zuiderveld and Iewan Strowijk take on an educational role by regularly organizing tours and workshops. At Ecodorp Boekel, Ad Vleems presents himself as an organic intellectual, as he gave presentations at the EU and organizations like Cooplink, gives tours and as he is climate mayor of municipality Boekel. People in the municipality and province also present themselves as organic intellectuals, sharing the views of Ad to varying degrees. Hanneke & Mare Nynke of Iewan, with Bureau Viertel, help starting initiatives to realize an ecovillage. And Arne, who organizes events in De Kleine Wiel, hereby also tries spreading the narrative and connecting to the rest of the city. Housing corporation Talis has taken up the ideas of Iewan, to for example Ecodorp Zuiderveld. The Nijmeegse Stadsnomaden organize events on their site, with music and talks. They will also get involved in the development of the area where they are currently located. Max wants to involve the neighbourhood as a part of this new project. Erik Groen of Ppauw more actively moves the other way around by bringing events in the city of Wageningen, as klimaattroubadour. He also gets to join municipality meetings to let his views known in municipality future plans.

Several challenges should however also be addressed. As Het Groene Spoor shows, the process towards realizing an ecovillage can be quite challenging and take up quite some years. Furthermore, Ecodorp Zuiderveld, while being inhabited, is still struggling with narrative creation and diffusion because of the sheer fact that they had some problem when they started, with covid-19 as example. There is not enough time and there are not enough resources to put much energy in narrative diffusion.

## 5. Conclusion

### 5.1 Revisiting the research questions

In this thesis, I explored a diversity of ecovillage initiatives in The Netherlands and their different narratives consisting of practices and values, as well as their strategies to spread their narrative. The central assumption has been that by developing counter-hegemonic narratives through practices and spreading the narratives, the imperial mode of living, a major root of the multiple crises, could be challenged, and socio-ecological transformability achieved.

I had developed two sub research questions. The first question – “How do ecovillages in The Netherlands develop counter-hegemonic narratives?” – has been addressed. The ecovillages develop counter-hegemonic narratives through holistic practices with the goal of creating a small ecological footprint and taking care of each other’s social wellbeing. The practices are initiated or arranged upon by the residents. While some ecovillages created their narrative mainly at the drawing table, some, like Nijmeegse Stadsnomaden and Ppauw have been developing their narrative only since they squatted the place they are situated. In all cases however, it is clear that the narrative is not fixed and is adjusted regularly.

The second sub question – “To what extent do ecovillages diffuse their counter-hegemonic narratives?” – had also been addressed. Spreading the narrative is an important agenda item for the ecovillages. Through tours around the ecovillage, workshops or organizing events around the city, the ecovillages are involved in practices to spread their counter-hegemonic narratives. Certain examples of these practices being fruitful have been covered. Through close cooperation with municipalities and housing corporations, some ecovillages have had impact on policy. Also, the development of other ecovillages is being fostered through sharing of knowledge and experience. Through media attention, some have been able to spread their narrative to an even wider public. Challenges have also become apparent in some instances. The process of starting an ecovillage can take up quite some time. It had also become clear that recently developed ecovillages have to focus their resources and time on other things than narrative diffusion.

Now, the main research question – “To what extent do ecovillages in The Netherlands have socio-ecological transformative potential by developing and diffusing counter-hegemonic narratives?” – can be answered. I argue, looking at the results from the interviews, that the analysed ecovillages, through attempts to spread their narratives, which are deeply rooted in whole systems thinking, hold transformative potential. Through sharing of knowledge and experience, ecovillages learn from each other, and complement each other, which has a mutually reinforcing effect.

### 5.2 Discussion

The results confirm certain aspects that had been covered in the theoretical framework. Ecovillages indeed create counter-hegemonic narratives in line with the socio-ecological transformation. They clearly create narratives that challenge the imperial mode of living, through conscious community creation and fostering a small ecological footprint. Next to the creation of such a narrative, they are actively involved in the war of position, speaking in terms of Antonio Gramsci. The ecovillages produce pioneers of change that

are constantly involved with innovations, which in turn get adopted by other ecovillages. Organic intellectuals, to continue with Gramsci terms, are also clearly present in the cases that had been analysed. These people actively try spreading the narrative that the ecovillages intend to hold. It had become clear that some initiators could be defined as organic intellectuals, but also people in the municipality and housing corporations had adopted views of the ecovillages in their plans. Meijering (2012) had framed ecovillages as eco-role models. This notion has definitely been recognizable in my research, as some had inspired policymakers and the public. Dias et al (2017) recognized the challenge for ecovillages regarding their geographical isolation in many cases. Some ecovillages I visited, were as opposed to this statement, located inside the city. I noticed if they were located a bit outside of any town, they attempt to involve the town more actively, for example by organizing tours or bringing events into the city. I furthermore have found in my results that is a relation between how long an ecovillage has been active, and their ability to spread their narratives. In other words, the longer an ecovillage is active, the more transformability the ecovillage has. Possibly the most significant observation I could make, is the fact that none of the ecovillages is a finished project. Even the more established ecovillages I visited, still changes regularly in their fundamentals, through a changing community structure or learning from other ecovillages.

### **5.3 Reflection**

There are certain things, while looking back, that I could improve upon in the future. I had quite some instances when starting with the research, when I was not sure about the specific route I was taking. This doubt made me change little or more significant aspects of the theoretical framework or research questions. As I was even still during my first interviews not entirely certain, looking back I would have approached the interviews differently.

Furthermore, reliability wise the research could have been performed better. Ecodorp Zuiderveld was the only ecovillage I did not get to speak an initiator of. This led to a different set of answers than for the other cases and therefore led to different results. In addition to this, each case could have been more thoroughly explored if I had more time and resources. In the current state, I performed one to two interviews for each case.

### **5.4 Recommendations**

As I noticed, ecovillages in The Netherlands are still not researched a lot. To future researchers in the topic area of ecovillages, I recommend looking at several aspects that I have not been able to explore. It would be interesting to look at more detailed parts of the narrative spreading of ecovillages. Looking for example to what extent other types of communities with similar values, like local church communities as I observed the Nijmeegse Stadsnomaden cooperate with, can cooperate with ecovillages to widen the public reach would be interesting in this regard.

Furthermore, I discovered that some municipalities and housing corporations have integrated ecovillages in their policy. Researching in what ways this is done, and what the implications hereof are, would be another topic worth researching. Also, in which way ecovillages can play a role in the Dutch housing crisis was an idea that came to mind during the process. Ecovillages, as Ecodorp Boekel shows, could be included in

nature due to their ecological characteristics. This might make ecovillages a great solution as types of homes that can be placed in more types of areas, like natural areas.

People involved with ecovillages, should focus more on the conscious creation of a narrative, and spreading this narrative, as this is an important aspect of the transformative potential.

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## Appendix

### Interview guide (Dutch)

Ten eerste wil ik je bedanken voor je tijd. Voor de analyse van de interviews zou ik dit interview op willen nemen. Ga je daarmee akkoord? De opname zal enkel gebruikt worden voor de data-analyse en niemand anders te gehore komen dan mijzelf.

#### Persoonlijke achtergrond

Wanneer is het plan voor een ecodorp ontstaan?

Hoe ben je op het idee gekomen?

- Wat heeft je geïnspireerd?

Waar woonde je hiervoor?

- Wat is de reden dat jullie in een andere vorm willen leven?

Ben je betrokken bij milieu-activisme?

#### Karakteristieken van het ecodorp

Wat zijn aspecten die dit ecodorp volgens jou anders maken dan een normaal dorp of een normale wijk?

- Ecologisch vlak
- Sociaal vlak
- Andere dingen?

Op welke manier verschilt de manier van leven denk je?

Wat zijn belangrijke waarden binnen het ecodorp?

- Op welke manier verschillen deze met de rest van Nijmegen?

In welke mate doen jullie inspiratie op bij andere ecodorpen?

In welke mate inspireren jullie de buitenwereld? Zijn jullie hier actief mee bezig?

- Overheid
- Klassen

En werken jullie samen met andere ecodorpen?

Met wat voor partijen moeten jullie samenwerken voor de verwezenlijking van dit ecodorp?

Ervaren jullie soms obstakels in dingen die jullie willen verwezenlijken?

Zijn er bepaalde karaktereigenschappen die de bewoners hier verbindt?

Proberen jullie jullie manier van leven te promoten naar buiten?

Wat voor boodschap willen jullie uitdragen?

Heb je het idee dat jullie manier van leven populairder wordt?

### Toekomst

Wat zijn volgens jou de grootste uitdagingen voor het ecodorp om te kunnen bestaan?

Kunnen jullie al jullie aanvankelijke ideeën en plannen uitwerken?

- Waarom sommige plannen niet?

Maken externe organisaties het jullie over het algemeen moeilijker of makkelijker?

- Waardoor komt dat?

Wat voor plannen hebben jullie nog in de toekomst?

Denk je dat de ecodorpen-beweging potentie heeft om grote invloed uit te oefenen op de manier van leven in het westen?

- Wat zijn limitaties?

Heb je nog verdere dingen die je nog graag kwijt wilt?

Ik dank je hartelijk voor de tijd die je voor dit interview hebt willen nemen en de informatie die je gegeven hebt. Mag ik vragen of ik je in het vervolg nog eens mag contacteren als ik in een verder stadium van mijn onderzoek ben?