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The Ecovillage: A Model for a More Sustainable, Future-Oriented Lifestyle?

Sieben Linden (“Seven Lindens”) is an intentional community. Roughly 135 people, a third of them children, live in this place and share in making decisions about many matters that affect their lives together. They don’t do everything as a group, and they do not pool their money or earnings, but they adhere to mutual agreements and have provided assurance that they value and respect each other.



Figure 1:
A shot of Sieben
Linden.

When visiting Sieben Linden—by taking part in seminars, information days, or by volunteering—you find a settlement of both wooden trailers and rather large houses. Many houses have solar panels, and signs explain the techniques of straw bale insulation and innovative heating systems. Groups of children dart busily between the houses or romp about on the playground; teenage girls are so absorbed in their conversation that they don’t even glance at the guests; adults on bicycles avoid the potholes in the gravel path, maybe with a ladder on their shoulders. Most of them appear “completely normal”; others are barefoot—in November.

This essay was originally written in German and has been translated for *RCC Perspectives* by Brenda Black.

When there is no construction work, it is quiet. There is no noisy traffic, and no dogs barking behind the garden fences; both are completely absent here. The community occupies a sprawling piece of land, so the residents don't seem to live in particularly close quarters with each other. "A mix between village and close community" is a common description of Sieben Linden. The group is made up of very different people with quite different ideas of living, but who are united in a belief that an effort has to be made to live sustainably.

Sieben Linden calls itself an "ecovillage," and its goal is to set an example as a viable and sustainable way of life. The ecovillage aims to use only as much energy, space, and raw material as necessary, so that sufficient resources remain for every other person on the planet to also have the possibility of living in such a way. This is the vision of its inhabitants. Whether they manage to achieve this goal, even in rudimentary form, depends on how one calculates it and with how much generosity. For example, in a study conducted by the University of Kassel in 2004, the village's ecological footprint, in terms of its CO² equivalents, was less than a third of the German average. It is also true that the inhabitants of Sieben Linden live according to certain restrictions: how many square meters each person may inhabit, which environmentally unsound building materials are forbidden, which food products are not local enough for their collective grocery purchases—all of these have been determined by the inhabitants.

While these agreements exist, our ways of life are not uniform. Some residents wish to live as self-sufficiently and environmentally friendly as possible; others wouldn't mind buying organic frozen pizza if the community's tiny store would carry it. In the early years these differing ideas were particularly clear. The subgroup Club99 built a low-energy house using donated materials entirely through their own efforts—by hand, without electricity, without power tools. The subgroup 81fünf, on the other hand, had a readymade eco-house delivered. These various approaches have not caused polarization within the community, and even today differences can be seen—for example, while some residents travel on vacation by bicycle, even riding thousands of kilometers, others book flights to Thailand for a two-week trip and are, nonetheless, not expelled from the village for the environmental damage this causes. This tolerance (for a dedicated eco-community, it can be considered tolerant indeed) makes Sieben Linden interesting to the diverse range of people it attracts. Informational sessions about the community are attended by retirees and families with small children, by artists and

young professionals with the ink still fresh on their diplomas, by IT specialists and drywall builders, and by spiritualists and hands-on farmer types. In Sieben Linden they see the possibility of becoming part of the solution rather than staying part of the problem; they want to become involved in something, rather than constantly trying to justify living ecologically to their friends, colleagues, and neighbors.

Structures for decision making have existed since the founding of the project in 1993 and have been constantly developed in the search for the ideal combination of effectiveness and direct democracy, in which everyone has a say. At present, elected “counsels” make decisions about their particular area of responsibility, for example food or construction. Anyone can present themselves as a candidate for these unpaid village council positions. Regardless, anyone can contribute to decisions; they can also challenge existing ones, if they can win enough support from the residents to veto it. Such challenges are seldom necessary, however; in fact, there has never been a veto since the system of counsels was instituted two years ago. The rules Sieben Linden establishes are supported by an overwhelming majority; there are not even clear procedures yet about what to do if these rules should be broken. The ecovillage has no police; and neither is it a typical village with a church, influential farmers, or an elite group of local personalities.

There aren't exactly many ecovillages around—not in Germany, not elsewhere. For whom, then, can Sieben Linden serve as an example? Is it a suitable model for urban Joe Consumer (urban, for that is the majority of the world's population)? Only few people seem to be willing to venture a life in close cooperation with others, whether in the form of intentional communities, multi-generational households, or political communes. This suggests that a place like Sieben Linden might not function as a practical example to ecologically interested city dwellers in single apartments, to people who don't even live in a shared household.

I am a Sieben Linden resident, and to justify the question of this article even more, I admit that it would be easy to find city dwellers who live more ecologically than me, if I consider only my own actions separately from the community. I neither raise my own vegetables nor abstain from drinking coffee, which requires huge quantities of water in order to grow. I sometimes drive, and I recently, once again, ordered a new computer hard drive. The solar panels that provide me with electricity and hot water were

built by other members of the ecovillage. And, above all, I don't live in a well-insulated eco-house. At the same time, in cities you find neighborhood initiatives that create carless zones, housing communities that renovate and improve the energy efficiency of their older buildings, and commuters who choose the train and bus.

However, I don't believe we fail as a model. Even though no Sieben Linden resident would suggest that everyone wanting to make a difference should move to an ecovillage, communal living and self-governing obviously make possible sustainable solutions that might not otherwise be feasible. In Sieben Linden we easily and with minimal administrative hassle share cars and lawnmowers, and we can finance and install shared solar panels, because we live close to one another and, therefore, can jointly use these devices. The division of labor possible in such a large group also allows for a good deal of providing for its own needs: there are people who like to plant vegetable gardens or who harvest firewood and plant new trees in the forests, while others pursue their professions as kindergarten teachers, accountants, or construction workers. This saves time and transport and caters to a feeling of responsibility that a more anonymous life lacks. I have met urban teenagers who sincerely believed that if they would stop littering, the street sweepers wouldn't have any work—hence, littering is ok. In an ecovillage, you know very well for whom you are causing extra work when you don't care for the place and the things.

As a matter of fact, I can hardly imagine Sieben Linden would achieve such a high score on sustainability without the underlying communal attitude of the project. But the obvious that I just described isn't the whole story, and I tend to believe that there is something to consider about our place even for people who have not yet given much thought to "community" before.

I would take into account that our ecovillage is an object of fascination, and not just for people who have already decided to live in the community. Many of the thousands of visitors per year, many of whom come only for a seminar or workshop, find themselves enchanted by it. When they get on the train to return home, they find the "outside world" suddenly seems quite strange: the people are so odd, so withdrawn, they don't express any feelings; and the towns they return to seem to be designed primarily for advertising and shopping "opportunities." In Sieben Linden, they recall, there was quiet; there were people running around barefoot with open faces.

Those who become better acquainted with the ecovillage often say that in Sieben Linden they rediscovered a connection to their place in the world, that they felt acknowledged and valued as a human being again.

From such statements one might conclude that communal living, with its holistic approach, is itself a stepping stone on the path to sustainability. Perhaps the most obvious examples of ecological living in an ecovillage, such as those described above, are only the tip of the community living iceberg. Thus, Sieben Linden is once again an interesting example, and not for saving energy or water, but of society and culture. The idea below the iceberg's tip is that, as long as we live increasingly individualistic lives and increasingly independent of our fellow human beings, we will never manage a really sustainable lifestyle. Humans of the future must be able to get along with each other—only then will the “heart energy” flow so that they can mutually support one another in the transformation of their lives and in the realization of ecological ideas. Mainstream culture is a culture of individualism, and it glorifies a division of society into many small pieces, each with their own giant ego. And as long as all you need to be super cool is a new smart phone, you aren't really going to worry about your ecological footprint.

When the old and the young, geniuses and simpletons, rich and poor no longer come together and speak with one another, they are mutually resentful of the rest of the world, rather than working together to improve it, or at least to treat it well. In this “ecovillage,” on the other hand, I have discovered that I come into contact with many more types of people than I did during my life in the city. Sieben Linden is large enough to permit diversity—this is where the term “village” kicks in, meaning there are many more group members than just a few. I do suspect that, as a community, we seem to outsiders a group of very like-minded people. But in my pre-communal life, among three and a half million Berliners, I sought out as acquaintances only those few who were relatively similar to me. I noticed the wide variety of lifestyles and cultures around me existed, but that was all. I didn't stop to listen to what motivated my city-mates, and I didn't have to make any joint decisions with them. In Sieben Linden I do both, and my understanding keeps growing.

Sieben Linden offers a chance to learn to be more aware and tolerant of others. Is this what makes the ecovillage exemplary? Is this what we can put on the scale upon which

our worth is weighed politically, socially, and culturally? Indeed, I believe it is. However, it will be much more difficult to present more concrete results here than when we talk about our solar panels or composting toilets. We can point to a few successes: we manage to make decisions without first repeating ourselves for days on end. We have grasped the fact that there's another element to communication besides the content—that is, the interpersonal relationship, which needs to be resolved just as much as conflicts of obvious, material nature. We have experienced how valuable shared silence is during assemblies and in meditation.

For those who live here, however, it is also clear what still needs to be improved, in spite of all our efforts: being able to value and respect others even when we would do something differently; being patient with people who still do not understand the obvious; putting our own interests and the belief that we “know how to do it better” aside in order to concentrate on common goals; and speaking out about what hinders us from contributing. Humility. Inhaling. Exhaling.

The sense of cooperation and togetherness—of which the whole world could use so much and that we in Sieben Linden are theoretically capable of making a reality—is still very much a work in progress, or so it seems to me. I don't think this is a bad thing; indeed, I would find it most uncomfortable to have to serve as the definite example of bettering humankind. And such a work in progress is fascinating; I would rather talk about our problems than our successes, because I hope to see them solved. I don't think that we will manage this alone. Rather than declaring us a completed prototype or model, I wish the world were interested in the laboratory that we are, in which much is brewing and bubbling; and I would rather have support in this research to find better ways of living together than to have to convince others that we know better how to do things right.

What might result from this could then, eventually, provide something that could more obviously qualify as an example for the world around our tiny village.