

The 4th meeting of National Networks of GEN Europe

13th to 15th of January 2017, Lebensbogen, Germany

By: Nara Petrovič

After Torri Superiore (Italy), Los Portales (Spain), Park Istra (Slovenia) the fourth venue for the GEN national network meeting was Lebensbogen (Germany). 21 representatives from 12 countries (Germany, Sweden, Estonia, Netherlands, Slovenia, Italy, France, Spain, Hungary, Finland, Switzerland and Russia) gathered to review and celebrate activities in 2016, and to develop plans for 2017.



Many countries reported about increasing collaboration with familiar networks, particularly with Permaculture and Transition Town networks, as well as with other organisations, such as Facilitators Associations, universities and municipalities. There are signs that it would be plausible to build alliances on national level, resembling the European coalition embodied in ECOLISE.

Even within national networks of GEN, the diversity of members is immense, and when scaled up to European level (including Russia) the dimension of diversity is fascinating. It is a challenge for GEN to build unity in diversity. It is clear that the influence of GEN stretches far beyond its membership. Too narrow a definition of the term “ecovillage” doesn't resonate with the reality of the ecovillage movement – its vibrant lively character, stemming from unique people and unique environment that creates the identity of each particular ecovillage.

Now common themes in ecovillages are not only (self-)sustainability, agriculture, permaculture, green technology, ecology and education, but also youth work, reviving traditions, scientific research, influencing policy, social change etc. Some national networks are very successful in connecting with administration and policy-makers, while others are facing problems in that field.

In the last years new models of ecovillages have emerged. In the past, living in an ecovillage meant moving far away from the city, living off the land, being self-sufficient. Now it might be creating a business in the countryside with other people, managing AirBnB or a retreat centre, starting an agricultural cooperative, starting an eco-community or co-housing near or in the city. Ecovillages are getting more organised, they have legal structures, they are connecting with other ecovillages, creating businesses. The image of ecovillages is also improving, visitors are impressed with the facilities (rooms, halls, surroundings etc.) and how well connected ecovillagers are with the world.

Ecovillages are realising how important it is to get well-versed in self-governance and models of an alternative economy – not just to teach about these approaches but to deeply embody them. Strengthening the economy is essential on all levels: in individual ecovillages, in national networks and in GEN Europe.

The main challenges in ecovillages are: finding appropriate land, securing funding, developing good relations with the government, building trust among members, dealing with periods of crises (tensions, conflicts), providing desired schooling for children, attracting young people, taking on too many tasks, burnout etc.

National network meetings are proving to be places of fruitful exchange, designing concrete projects, opening spaces of creativity and hope for the future. In 2018, we are planning to meet in one of the communities that haven't been able to attend the winter meetings in the last years.

NUGGETS FROM NATIONAL NETWORKS

In Russia: 300 participants attended Diana Leaf Christian's seminar in Moscow.

In Italy: 500-700 people attend the summer event every year.

In Hungary: There is a monthly newsletter with news from ecovillages.

In Slovenia: Official landscaping plan was issued for the emerging ecovillage Mokri Potok near Kočevje; the term “ecovillage” is used in municipality plans.

In Spain: RIE will celebrate its 20th anniversary in Lakabe ecovillage.

In Germany: GEN Germany will have €85,000 available for collaboration with ordinary villages to bring the strengths of ecovillages to them.