

## **Why and How to Organise an EDE**

*We stand at a critical moment in Earth's history, a time when humanity must choose its future. As the world becomes increasingly interdependent and fragile, the future at once holds great peril and great promise. To move forward we must recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny. We must join together to bring forth a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace. Towards this end, it is imperative that we, the peoples of Earth, declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations.* (Preamble of Earth Charter)

Setting up an Ecovillage Design Education Training in our home country or bio-region is a political action in line with the principles and action guidelines of the Earth Charter:

*"Provide all, especially children and youth, with educational opportunities that empower them to contribute actively to sustainable development."*  
(Principle of Earth Charter)

It is an action with repercussions far beyond what we can imagine. The most underutilised resource we have at the moment is the good intention and creativity of citizens, and their willingness to make a difference. Human beings long to generate solutions instead of suffering problems. We long to live high-quality, low-impact lifestyles, which provide hope and guidance to future generations. We have a wish, sometimes not so known to our conscious mind, to leave this world a better place for our children and grandchildren. Courses like the EDE bring this potential out into the open, to be seen and acted upon. They build learning communities and networks that share a growing body of knowledge and practice and a common intention to build successful projects for sustainability. EDEs can help seed and unfold the power of collective wisdom for the transition to resilience.

Many have wondered whether the name 'Ecovillage Design Education' is too narrow to encompass the breadth of scope this course can offer. I agree that the name may be misleading. The mandala of the EDE, with its 4 dimensions and 20 modules, represents a universal pattern language for education for sustainable development. It can be applied in urban as well as rural contexts, in the northern as well as the southern hemisphere. The EDE course is designed to be fully adaptable to local socio-economic contexts, environments and cultures, and can be adapted to different levels of experience and wisdom. As a result, the EDE can be designed to suit the needs of a transition town initiative, a municipality which wishes to transform its region to carbon neutral, or to a group of students who long to delve into action learning for sustainability. In such contexts, a different name might serve better. In other places, however, the name is very apt to describe both content and aims.

One such context has been attracting my interest: traditional/indigenous villages in the South are increasingly expressing the wish to transition into ecovillages. Ecovillages can be defined as living and learning centres for a high quality, low impact lifestyle. In the North, they are geared towards lowering our ecological footprint and finding a community-led response to the pressures of fossil-fuel

depletion. In the South, they are geared towards preserving indigenous wisdom and being in right relationship to the natural worlds, while integrating new and appropriate technologies. Both in the South and in the North they are human-scale settlements, consciously designed for long-term sustainability in all four dimensions: social, ecological, economic, cultural/worldview. In the face of climate change a network which links up these two sides in a spirit of equality, true collaboration, exchange and mutual support deserves special attention. With the impact of climate change hitting hardest those countries in the South that have done least to cause it, the need for compensation and reconciliation work between the North and South is becoming more apparent than ever before. The authenticity of a radical willingness to lower our ecological footprint in the North drastically has given ecovillages in Europe and the USA a special role to play in this work.

How do traditional or indigenous villages and modern ecovillages relate to one another? Is it necessary for the ancient wisdom of healthy sustainable interrelatedness first to be lost, only then to be tediously rediscovered and reclaimed? Thousands and thousands of villages around the world are in the process of losing their cohesion right now. The surrounding forests, lands, waters and natural resources are being bought up, eroded and polluted at a frightening pace. Young people are looking for a way out of what seems like a dead end and long to connect up to the modern worlds of global connectedness. Unluckily, many of them get stuck in the closest city slum. There is a possibility for GEN (Global Ecovillage Network) and Gaia Education to help build bridges here. The EDE can bring to those places where indigenous wisdom is alive a sense of value and appreciation while opening up new avenues and opportunities. We can help deepen a mutually enriching exchange of knowledge and experience between ecovillages in the North and the South.

Representatives, from both government and local activist perspectives, from India, Thailand, Senegal, Congo, Peru, Malawi, Sierra Leone, Cameroon, Ghana and South Africa will meet with GEN-Europe representatives in July and August 2010 to discuss and formulate guidelines and processes for those indigenous and traditional villages that would wish to transition into ecovillages. We will be enquiring into the existence of an internationally applicable pattern language for the transitioning process while honouring the wide diversity and richness of local expression and cultural differences. The process may be accelerated by setting up an EDE or similar training. The learning, sharing and deeply participatory design processes ensure that the linking up to new friends and supportive networks and the integration of innovative technologies are holistically rooted in and invited by local communities.

There are already a significant number of initiatives to both learn from and be inspired by. The Senegalese ecovillage network has been extremely successful in following this strategy (see [www.gensenegal.org](http://www.gensenegal.org)) to set up a network of 45 ecovillages. Their success has inspired the Senegalese government to actively support the transformation of 14 000 further traditional villages following a similar path. Hon Sherry Ayittey, Minister for Environment, Science and Technology of Ghana, has declared her intent to follow the Senegalese example and build an ecovillage network in Ghana. The Congolese government is supporting the work of the Bonobo Conservation Initiative to inaugurate a new paradigm for community-based conservation: Throughout the Bonobo Peace Forest indigenous villages will transition to ecovillages and thereby receive

official recognition as caretakers of their natural environment (See [www.bonobo.org](http://www.bonobo.org)). In Orissa, India, an indigenous women's network (Nari Samaj) comprising more than 300,000 women and more than 3,900 indigenous villages wishes to be recognised for the same. As they step into this network the women take an oath over fire to protect the earth, air, water, forest, animals and human communities of which they are a part. The first Orissa EDE will run in February 2011, inviting a rich combination of Adivasis, Europeans and NGO-workers from across India to come together and join forces for the safeguarding of local natural and cultural heritage.

The traditional village transition movement seems to be building momentum and the EDE can play a vital role here. The future will need the integration of both old and modern wisdom. The consciousness of oneness, which ancient traditions carry at their core like a sacred flame, needs to be woven back into modern global culture to soften all of our hearts. This flame can shift modern technologies to ensure they work in harmony with natural forces and flow. Holistic action learning programs, like the EDE, growing from genuine love and compassion for life, can pave the way. Through participatory design processes local people can take ownership of their own path of future development.

Wherever you long to set up an EDE, you might like to consider the following:

1. **Build your team slowly and with dedication:** The EDE is a wide ranging course and the team of trainers should reflect this holistic approach. No one person can hold all the necessary pieces of expertise and wisdom. A healthy and harmonious team will lay the basis for a healthy group process and a healthy learning community - both during the EDE and later on.
2. **Clarify the intention of your particular EDE:** What is special about your locality, what special gifts will your EDE bring to the world?
3. **Enquire into your audience:** Contact your target groups early on. Feed them information about Gaia education, about GEN, the Transition Town Movement and any other networks that may be of help and interest. Build curiosity. Build community. Build trust. People need a strong commitment to attend a 4-week long course. They need to trust you and what you stand for.
4. **Design your course:** With these three aspects in place, you can now start to design your EDE. The curriculum allows for quite a bit of flexibility. Play around with the dimensions and the 20 modules. Allow this to become a process of co-creation. Make sure not to forget the wisdom and experience your audience will be bringing to their course. Make space for their wealth to be shared and acknowledged.
5. **File your certification application with Gaia Education well ahead of time:** This is easier said than done! But seriously, it helps to begin planning up to a year before you anticipate your course to actually run. Give yourself and everyone else time to think and feel things though well.
6. **Raise necessary funds:** In many areas we will need to raise additional funds to that which the participants bring. Trust that some people would love nothing better but to spend their money on a cause as beautiful as yours. There are those who have funds but not the time and space to do this kind of work. Invite them to join your cause.
7. **Draw in participants who sign up:** The most important magnetism for your course comes from mouth-to-mouth propagation. Yes, you can print flyers, but don't expect flyers to bring in your participants.

8. **Be ready for a long haul:** The realisation of a project such as this needs determination and perseverance. There will be times when doubts and overwhelm creep in. Take a deep breath and know that life only offers you the challenges you are ready for.
9. **Celebrate the actual course:** Make sure you are well prepared as far as content and logistics are concerned and then ... relax! Enjoy! This is the best part. Have an extra person on the course to take care of all the small, unanticipated flaws and surprises, and to help with logistics so that you can relish your participants and savour their learning journey.
10. **Recuperation and reflection:** Don't forget about putting time aside for reflection, reporting, financial accounting and the general clean-up that follows every good celebration. And make sure to schedule a few days of deep relaxation after the course. You have held a long wave of energy and deserve some rest. Some of us like to forget that personal sustainability is an integral part of a culture of resilience!

Now, are you ready for the next round? The next EDE is bound to grow beyond the last one in unpredictable ways. There's a whole flock of Geese here at Gaia Education ready to honk support. Wishing you all the best on your transformational journey of joy and collective growth.

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