
REALITY CHECK

Interview with Dieter Halbach:
Experiences of a Community Consultant

Founding a new community sounds exciting. In this edition of eurotopia you can find almost 50 projects which have been classified either by the participants or the editors as an “embryonic community”. People who have been around communities for a while often show reluctance towards the idea of founding new communities. Australian community researcher Bill Metcalf says in an old interview:

Anybody who wants to found their own community, I always say: ‘Don’t do it.’ Go and live with people in communities that already exist. It may well be that there are communities around that need somebody just like you. So, you’ll benefit that community by joining them and you’ll save yourself a lot of hard work by finding a community and joining them. (...)

(To found your own community,) you’ll need a lot of money, you’ll need a lot of political will, you’ll need a lot of skills in negotiating with the local government, in negotiating with bureaucrats, you’re going to have to understand a lot about conflict resolution, you’ll have to be very clear about core values that you want in that community.*

Dieter Halbach, a community consultant, ecovillage founder, musician and editor of the German language magazine “OYA”, has a similar attitude. He pleads for a very conscious process, especially at the early stages of community establishment. In his paper “10 Deadly Sins – Mistakes in Community Creation” he discusses problems that may even apply to communities that describe themselves later on in this book. Michael Würfel, who conducted the interview on Dieter’s balcony at the Sieben Linden Ecovillage in August 2013, thinks that this makes it all the more interesting.



Photo: Michael Würfel

1. Private Ownership

“No communally owned property”

DH: I’ve met communities who call themselves communities, but don’t have any communally owned land or facilities. This entails huge problems, because it means that individuals – usually an owner – can decide on community matters: who can move in, who

*<http://vimeo.com/61162300>

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gets living space, how should the village be designed. He might, if he's a good person, listen to what the others think, but I've already experienced how, when overstrained, such a "good person" turns into a person who just implements his own agenda. He's just stuck in this economy like everyone else. Therefore the most basic requirement for a community is that it can be created on common ground. So that everyone can make decisions together about what they actually want to do. This does not exclude the concept of private ownership, each community can arrange that as they see fit. Here at Sieben Linden we have an excellent model whereby, also legally speaking, the houses are built by organisations on land that was allocated on a leasehold basis – although they are pretty much privately constructed by the residents. They live there as members of the cooperative which owns the houses. This means that our large community determines the conditions: that the houses must be ecological, how much of the land can be built on, etc. These goals are included in the leasehold agreement, and nonetheless people can create their homes or run their businesses as they wish, that's the balance between freedom and solidarity.

2. Lack Of Structure

When there is a lack of legally and internally binding decision-making structures.

At present, cooperatives seem to be the structure that is most favourable for communities. Because all residents are co-owners of the communal facilities and everyone has a voice, no matter how much money they contributed. This means that there is a democratic basic organisation right from the start.

Often there is an initial dynamic along the lines of "oh, but we're all friends, just go ahead and buy that thing...", or various people buy bits and pieces and so on... This means that there is no real structure for the community, just a lot of self-interest. Somehow this works as long as people have a shared belief or spirit, but in my experience it doesn't work in the long run. The reverse conclusion is that at the beginning, when everyone is full of good will and they love each other and have great shared goals, people should agree on long-term sustainable structures, so that these don't have to be created in an emergency and as a result of already existing conflicts.

"Structures", by the way, don't simply refer to legal structures, but also to a consciousness about who's who in the group, who's responsible for certain areas due to relevant skills or who has simply taken on certain responsibilities. This also involves an inner structure, which the community must establish, in order to create a neat decision-making culture.

M.W.: Many people seem to have the ideal that a good community doesn't need this. Responsible people get on just like that, and if they get on so badly that they need rules, it won't work out with them anyways.

That's certainly a widespread belief. But all communities go through crises and people leave, some of whom may have had crucial positions. Smaller communities certainly need less structure, but I'd nonetheless like to say that they need an association that provides them with common ground. There is indeed a bit of a tendency to just sit around a

table together [and to see that as sufficient structure] – but I’m not sure whether that’s enough, because, for instance, these “organic” structures will have “louder” members getting a bigger share of talking time. This might be doable, 7 to 12 people might be able to maintain a constant process with one another, somewhat like a family, but as soon as you get more people and you still try to be a family, you get overburdened. You can’t sit at a table with that many people and speak on an equal footing. This also leads to something like a loss of home, a loss of orientation. A larger organisation should always be created, which can then have sub-groups – be it professional groups or neighbourhoods, small communities or families. When you get to this level, then it becomes a communal project and therefore needs clear decision-making structures and delegation. Because, of course, a plenary meeting can’t be convened all day, every day.

3. Too Much Community

Lacking privacy and individual space.

When you live outside of communities and get together with like-minded people, you might not be too aware of inter-personal differences. You might only meet up once a week, go on holiday together or whatever; you only see the tip of the iceberg - which you get on well with. And in the initial phases of a new community you experience foundation euphoria – Scott Peck refers to this as “pseudo-community” in his book “The Different Drum”.



What we are currently learning is how to live together as individuals.

If you live in community in the long-term, however, then it’s important not to see the community as a kind of mother that’s responsible for providing everything; it’s also important to know your own dark sides and desires, and paradoxically, as a prerequisite for living in community, you need to be particularly able to look after yourself well. If you don’t, and you’re relatively unaware about yourself and don’t look after your own needs properly, then you might set off in the morning and bump into lots of people and wonder why you are in conflict with all of them... In the long-term a community just differentiates itself, and this needs space, and a culture that doesn’t chastise people along the lines of “hey, you, it’s not very communal of you to do that individually!”, a culture that sees allowing for individuality as part of the community culture. And this is what’s new in today’s communities. You may have a collective picture of a community from their ideology and the initial euphoria, but (luckily) we are no longer collective people who make communities function by making everyone conform. Because then it can fall apart again and there are subconscious currents and conflict. Luckily that’s over and done with. What we are currently learning is how to live together as individuals.

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M.W.: You and me, we live rather individualistic lives in Sieben Linden and are privately content with that. But would we not, as a community, be even more successful if, for example, we had a guru and let go of our egos more in order to immerse ourselves in the collective?

Communities who have a shared outlook, symbolised or personified by a “guru” or group of leaders, are undoubtedly more successful for some time, because there is a focus, an energy that leads them in a given direction without ongoing to-ing and fro-ing. But these communities are also more susceptible to lies, to segregated bits that don’t fit in to the oh-so wonderful unity. This is why the modern motto is “unity in diversity”. This means training yourself to see and accept the godly, or the bigger potential, and also the shadows, in something or someone other – and this is a spiritual path. And you don’t get that if a community is all about free sexuality or peace meditation or whatever... then everyone is doing that, but what about the parts of themselves that don’t fit in? That’s the destructive potential that can get expressed in stories of abuse and the like. And then the group is naturally also dependent on the ideology or the leadership, becomes vulnerable to manipulation and falls apart as soon as the leadership wobbles, as soon as power is transferred due to errors, or the leadership leaves or dies. This is why the big, successful communities such as Osho’s or Otto Mühl’s collapsed, and these were after all the largest communities that existed in Europe in the past decades.

4. Expectations

High levels of idealism and high expectations lead to disappointment/disillusionment.

“Dis-Illusionment” is actually a positive term, because it transforms an illusion. However, when we are unaware of such processes... Especially at the beginning, it’s natural to be in love with the community, or the idea of it, but it’s just as normal for this to change. A relationship would not come into existence without a falling-in-love phase, that’s a wonderful energy. I quite like the metaphor of being in love, because even in our private lives we learn [hopefully] to enjoy falling in love, but not to think that this already constitutes actual love. And not to look away when the first disturbances appear, but to keep on loving at that point, thereby really utilising the love energy in order to integrate, to grow together.

Therefore I would invite each community to test what people’s expectations actually are, because these are often compensatory expectations. The single mother hopes that the community will care for her children; a single man who has lived without tenderness for a while might hope for free love in the community and be surprised to find that the women don’t want that at all, or power – you finally want to give your strong, dominant and competent side the room it deserves, but the other people back off: “So-and-so is pushing his point of view, we don’t want that, it doesn’t give us confidence”... So there are many compensatory expectations, which are OK, everyone probably has some. But it seems important to clarify that in the establishment phase, when it’s all still going well. Community, above all else, is growth being mirrored and perceived by others.

5. Group Size

Groups that are too small break down due to internal conflicts, groups that are too large lack connectivity.

I would definitely consider a group that declares the wish to become a community to be too small if they just consist of a family or a couple, maybe also along with one friend. They often already have a farm and now wish to be a community. These founders (parental figures, so to say) find it difficult to let go of what they previously thought, or even owned. Secondly, it's difficult for such small groups to visualise a project with sufficient aspects to be able to invite more people. From my own experience I would say: if you really want to found a small community, which works on a family-scale of about 7 to 12 people, then you really need a very deep integration into the region, to have other networks, where internal affairs concerning the community can also come up. When internal subjects become too hot to handle, you need some sort of companionship, an external view, or somewhere to retreat to, perhaps the option to move into another community, or that this smaller community is integrated into a larger one. In my view this is critical for survival.

Conversely... A community that starts off without some sort of inner core or seed... An apple seed, for instance, already contains the whole tree, i.e. in order to found a community you need a group, and I would indeed suggest for this group to consist of around 7 people, a group that already carries the potential for growth. If you don't do that and go out with a fairly abstract idea, and invite 50 or 100 people, with newspaper adverts and the whole shebang, then you get 50 or 100 people sitting there chatting away and you soon end up with individual fractions... A concept cannot replace human communication; I think this is a very clear experience. After a certain time, when you are stable within your 7-people group, which may already include 20 potential joiners, it's fine to invite 100 people, if you can give them useful pointers on how to integrate. But these purely conceptual things are delusions of grandeur and don't work.



Photo: community network RIVE (Italy)

M.W.: What do you think about Sieben Linden becoming a village of up to 300 people – is that possible, or is it a miscalculated idea?

I'm definitely a fan of big communities, because they are stable. They don't even have to be hugely special; they just have a good foundation due to their life praxis. It's a self-organising web, where some people come and others go. Even if not all people like it, that doesn't mean that the village will go extinct or that everyone will leave. However, it is also an open question as to whether the large diversity we now have at Sieben Linden [or similarly large communities] can be put to use, in more heterogeneous projects, so to say.

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M.W.: Conversely – in working on this book I often deal with two people wanting to describe themselves as a community in the planning phase and absolutely wanting to be listed in the directory, even though I know from experience that this will come to nothing and they won't exist anymore by the time the next edition comes around.

There's nothing to add to that. First of all, anyone wishing to found a community can educate themselves about what's necessary. Secondly, there are enough community-seeking people to get together with and talk about shared ideas, before contacting the eutopia Directory. A communal process often also means letting go of your own favourite idea enough to turn it into a communal idea. I regularly bump into do-gooders who think that if they have an idea or two they can establish a community on that basis. That's not how it is.



Two are not enough. Photo: Michael Würfel (Sieben Linden)

6. Supervision

Professional support for community establishment is often lacking.

Community founding is an incredibly complex undertaking and we are all just learning. Luckily support is available, and so much is possible, especially in the establishment phase, where the first inconspicuous seeds are sown. The initial phase is decisive in whether a community will successfully be founded or whether it will fail. Whether these seeds contain all the information, whether trust has grown, particularly amongst the founders, and so on – this is an existential tip: get people from outside, from other communities, who can assist you at the beginning. Of course people always say “we don't have any money yet” – but that's the first step. You will need a bit of money to set up a base, too. Such supervision has to be valued with a similar priority. This investment is maybe the first shared decision that needs to be taken. This is about a new profession: being a “community founder” is not something we've just picked up somewhere along the way.

7. Internal Work

Lacking individual and collective space for internal themes and shadow work.

I'm quite happy to find that over the course of the past 10-20 years the consciousness to acknowledge that we need to do some internal work when setting up communal projects seems to have spread. This is naturally just as relevant for political movements and for social projects. We are human and humans can only create something when they communicate with one another, and this communication can't just be factual, it must also be humane, when it's about desires, feelings and perceptions. This education I have just described, this prerequisite for community founding, more than anything else is an education in perception. Each person was a bit of a bubble beforehand, with his/her biography, profession, family... and if all these individual people's bubbles somehow want to get together, there must be an opening. It is important to learn to make joint decisions, but also to enter closer relationships. Being able to tell the truth in a way that doesn't hurt,

but can be taken in by someone, is something that needs to be learned. These things are internal work, it doesn't necessarily have anything to do with spirituality or therapy. It's like learning a new alphabet. You can get a lot from mediation and communication tools, from family or organisational set-ups. Community isn't something that frees you from yourself. It's more like the self grows in it and it's about knowing more about your own subjects and not hiding yourself.

8. Community Isolation

A lack of local integration.

In the larger, political sense this means not falling into the trap of the old assumption that a community in itself is enough to implement worldwide revolution. However, a community is always part of a movement in which the whole of society develops in a certain direction. Looking at it from a practical point of view: we used to always talk about "islands of survival". But there won't be any kind of survival in a society where climate change leads to desertification. By then, a community might have changed a little something about their soil, allowing it to retain more water or whatever, but they will face the same problems and poverty refugees at their borders... There simply are no islands. Even communities live within society, and this is actually good news. We can contribute to turning this society into more of a community. This may be the original contribution which we can make to all these political and social movements.

9. Learning

Learning from other communities rather than reinventing the wheel.

The eurotopia Directory and also the "Oya" Magazine try to think the communal thought on a society level, to turn this into a movement and to inspire community impulses in all areas of society. Every now and again you bump into people who didn't even know that communities exist. The community movement needs more publicity, more presence in political, spiritual and social movements, and internally it requires more professionalisation in order for it to offer to share and transmit communal experiences. We need professional companions, who can translate this knowledge into broader society. Who can, for instance, provide community consultancy for businesses, politics etc. This is relevant for those who still think that we need to re-invent everything, and for the goal of continuing to professionalise ourselves.



10. The Vision

Not just aligning oneself with sensitivities, but with a joint task.

There is an interesting tension between emotions on the one hand, which endlessly revolve around inner sensitivities and keep us somewhat trapped, and on the other hand the energy and direction given to internal work when it is not just seen as a private state of mind. Internal work, which goes beyond pure emotion, is also connected to the vision of the community. Therefore it becomes part of a "historical growth and healing process". Because what we are trying out in communities, whether in the small details or the larger picture, is a new kind of culture. The culture of our society has a long history, which is anchored inside us, and in our cells, and if we want to create a new culture based on our internal work, then this requires humility, a certain suppleness, and a willingness for awareness. It's not enough to simply say: "Me and You". This "Me and You" requires a "We", and a perspective for the "We". This vision means looking at the most intimate inner subjects of a community, and an individual, as parts of a larger context. When you do this you find a desire to increase awareness, there is joy in being a communal part of a bigger picture. And this is inner work on a higher level, which has a lot to do with consciousness-building, which must also be communicated politically and mentally. This can give a community a lot of strength, if this vision is not misused for the purposes of beautifying or covering up conflicts and weaknesses or personal pettiness, but used to trigger the community's impulses towards internal growth.



Photo: Eva Stützel (summer camp Sieben Linden 2012)