An investigation in the sustainable economic practices of ecovillages

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An investigation in the sustainable economic practices of ecovillages

Abstract
Ecovillages represent an alternative yet innovative form of residential living that prioritises community and sustainability. However, prior worldwide research suggests that 90% of ecovillages fail to sustain as living communities. This 2019 report represents Phase 2 of a small project investigating practices within one Australian ecovillage. The original focus was on what kinds of economic practices can help to sustain ecovillage viability. The findings that emerged suggest that an integrated learning approach that considers sociocultural, ecological and economic factors might develop a more durable approach to practising and ‘living’ sustainability.

Keywords
ecovillage, ecovillages, sustainability, economic practices, Narara Ecovillage

Disciplines
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An investigation in the sustainable economic practices of ecovillages

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NOVEMBER 2019
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

UOW acknowledges that this research took place on Aboriginal land and we pay respect to Elders past and present and give gratitude for allowing us to be on the land.

This Phase 2 report extends research originally conducted during August 2017 – March 2018 and reported to members of Narara Ecovillage (NEV) in August 2018 (Phase 1). Phase 1 research comprised an online member survey, individual interviews, one focus group discussion, field observations during a NEV Open Day, informal interactions with NEV members as well as secondary literature review on ecovillages and published academic articles. Phase 2 comprised an updated online member survey, two focus group discussions, field observations during a NEV Open Day and an updated review of recent literature on ecovillage, sharing and economic practices.

Individuals who participated in the Phase 2 survey volunteered their time and observations to share their perspectives about current NEV ecovillage experiences and practices. The authors wish to thank these individuals for their invaluable assistance in helping us develop our findings, and to the leadership of NEV in approving site access. The authors especially acknowledge the assistance of Eileen Watson and Laurence Perrin for encouraging member survey participation and assisting with coordinating the participation and logistics for the two focus group sessions.

Any interpretations, observations and omissions in this document remain the responsibility of the authors.

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DISCLOSURES

None.

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- Business Support Focus Group Session Poster 3 (2 November 2019)
- Business Support Focus Group Worksheet (2 November 2019)
1. Living an Ecovillage Life: Background and Phase 2 Study Approach

In July 2017, the topic of researching ecovillage economic practices arose through informal discussions between John Talbott, Project Director at Narara Ecovillage (NEV) and Dr. Belinda Gibbons from the Faculty of Business at the University of Wollongong (UOW). A small research project (thereafter Phase 1) was subsequently funded by UOW’s Global Challenges Seed Fund when members of NEV’s leadership agreed to participate with UOW and to authorise access to NEV as a local community research site.

From August 2017 to March 2018, the UOW research team completed various data collection activities, including a review of ecovillage sites, a literature scan of academic and practitioner publications, design, delivery and analysis of an online member survey, completion of individual interviews and focus group discussion, and documentation of field notes and photos from a November 2017 NEV Open Day event. The results of these data collection activities culminated in a written research report (Gibbons et al. 2018) and key findings discussed at a NEV member meeting in August 2018.

The interest in ecovillages as sites of ‘lived’ experiences that contribute to sustainable development (Christian 2003, Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) Europe 2015, Hollick & Connelly 1997) has existed for several decades. Ecovillages aim to demonstrate a shared commitment to leading sustainable lives (Miller & Bentley 2012, p. 140) using intentional local participatory processes, hence the term ‘intentional communities’ (Muldur et al. 2015, Singh et al. 2019). Such communities seek to integrate the triple bottom line (TBL) of social, environmental and economic practices (Elkington 2018) in innovative ways, often considered alternative to mainstream living.

During Phase 1 timeframe in 2017, no member houses had yet been built pending local authority approval, although a utilities infrastructure provisioning energy and water services had been created. Therefore, NEV was literally an intentional future community. Phase 1 research findings documented member aspirations, intentions and processes for living practices in progress to establish NEV’s foundation for sustainable living. Economic practices, as financial enablers, were considered significant to assuring ecovillage viability and to strengthen NEV’s sustainable foundation (Gibbons et al. 2018).

In September 2018, two members from the Phase 1 research team, Dr. Oriana Price and Dr. Belinda Gibbons, secured a UOW Faculty of Business Small Grant to understand how member perspectives and practices were changing at NEV. This longitudinal view sought to confirm member aspirations from 2017 and to provide additional texture to NEV’s progress in establishing a sustainable community. During the intervening two years, members have started to build up to 60 houses in the initial allotment called Stage 1; currently 10 families are living onsite in completed or near-completed sustainable housing. In consultation with leadership from two NEV teams in particular – Collective Know-How (CKH) and the Business Support Team (BST) – the UOW research team completed the following Phase 2 data collection activities:

- An enhanced online member survey with old and new questions, both open and closed response types with a total of fewer than 30 questions.
- Two focus groups discussing member perceptions on sharing, learning and business support practices.
- Field observations arising from one researcher’s attendance at the September 2019 NEV Open Day.
- Updated literature scan on ecovillage, sharing and community processes and practices.

The results of Phase 2 research are provided in the remainder of this document. Both Phase 1 and Phase 2 research projects were conducted under UOW Human Ethics approval 2017/410 and extended in February 2019.
2 Living at Narara Ecovillage: Perspectives from Members

PHASE 2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Our Phase 2 research methodology comprised the following data collection and analysis activities:

- Analysis of an anonymous member survey that generated 61 NEV responses – a response rate of 51%.
- Discussions from two focus groups involving a total of 15 NEV members.
- Field observations generated from one researcher’s participation in a village site tour and NEV visitor presentation.
- Review of the latest biography by NEV founder, Lyndall Parris (Parris 2019) that included historical and current insights about establishing the ecovillage.
- Review of recent academic and practitioner publications related to ecovillage developments, business and sharing practices.

The Phase 2 survey shared some common questions with the previous Phase 1 survey, asking some similar demographic questions and reasons why members joined NEV. However, the differentiating intent was to probe members’ updated perspectives about the nature of business enterprises being established: to identify design issues, role and support needs and/or member perspectives arising from the development of ecovillage-based individual and co-operative enterprises that is intentionally dependent on shared philosophies and resource management.

Two focus group sessions, each two hours in duration, were held to add further texture to more general member comments from the survey. A CKH group session was held on 26 October 2019, comprising 8 NEV members, to discuss how sharing activities had progressed in the village and the challenges encountered to establish CKH as a co-operative NEV business. A BST group session was held on 2 November 2019, comprising 7 NEV members, to discuss progress made to launch member enterprises and the nature of business support needs. To encourage productive discussions using evidence-based findings, the UOW research team generated posters and a worksheet for the two sessions, containing external research findings and highlights from NEV member survey findings (see Appendix for content used at the sessions).

The remainder of this section summarises the findings from the NEV member survey and member interactions/site activities. Subsequently, Section 3 analyses the implications of these findings, using trends from ecovillage and academic literature, to provide our external perspectives on NEV’s current stage of ecovillage development and evolution.

PHASE 2 MEMBER DEMOGRAPHICS AND ASPIRATIONS

Phase 2’s high survey response rate of 51% was similar to Phase 1 (50%). However, a comparison of the respondents’ age demographic shows that two-thirds of the respondents are now 54 years or younger (Figure 1 on next page). This suggests NEV’s improved targeting of younger members (and families) in its goal to create an urban intergenerational ecovillage community rather than a retirement village for seniors. This achievement seems supported by researcher (Johnsson) observations during an Open Day site tour with about half the participating visitors comprising Sydney-based families with toddlers or young children. During focus group discussions, a NEV Board member noted that the ecovillage had engaged in targeted marketing to improve the family demographic, including new measures to restructure levies and to offer alternative contribution arrangements.

Similar to 2017, the 2019 number of female respondents (Figure 2 on next page) continues to outnumber males.
Figure 1: 2017 vs. 2019 comparison of respondents by NEV Member Age
Sources: 2017 NEV member survey (n=61), Question 26; 2019 NEV member survey (n=43), Question 19

Figure 2: 2017 vs. 2019 comparison of respondents by NEV Member Gender
Sources: 2017 NEV member survey (n=27), Question 28; 2019 NEV member survey (n=42), Question 20
Aspirational lifestyle reasons for joining NEV (Figures 3a and 3b below) remained consistent with similar reasons identified in Phase 1 (Figures 10 and 11, Gibbons et al. 2018, p. 14). The top two reasons - aspirations to create an ecovillage community that cares for others and to demonstrate environmentally sustainable living practices continue to be firmly reinforced, with an increased activist desire by respondents to address global issues such as climate change and environmental degradation. The commonalities between 2017 and 2019 responses are shown below.

Figure 3a: What draw you to NEV? (multiple responses possible, n=90; Source: 2017 NEV member survey, Question 3, Free text responses)

![Graph showing reasons for joining NEV]

Figure 3b: What drew you to NEV? (multiple responses possible, n=173; Source: 2019 NEV member survey, Question 1)
SHARING STRATEGIES, LEARNING AND KNOWLEDGE PRACTICES

For any enterprise or entity involving adults and human interactions, learning is considered critical to its long-term development and evolution (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning 2009). Learning can be enacted through formal or informal processes and may involve creating, codifying, and disseminating explicit and tacit knowledge in procedural, sociotechnical or transformative ways (Beckett & Hager 2002, Gherardi 2009, Manuti et al. 2015). For ecovillages, the additional significance of sharing strategies and practices recognises a world at risk of declining/limited, natural/manufactured resources wherein learning to live lighter and with less are all difficult survival, resilience and wellbeing requirements.

The emergence of the so-called the ‘share(d) economy’ (Schor 2016, Ryu et al. 2019) and the ‘circular economy’ (Geissdoerfer et al. 2017, Kirchherr et al. 2017) recognises opportunities for increased commercialisation of shared underutilised resources that can be mediated through technology (for example, spare accommodation capacity using AirBnB). However, such trends importantly raise the significance of learning how to live and share sustainably in innovative, caring and socio-cultural ways that has the potential to reshape human practices in a postmodern society.

In 2018, NEV established a work team called Collective Know-How (CKH). CKH is considered to be one of the four NEV pillars – ‘grow, eat, sleep, learn’ – a NEV Co-operative business that aims to deliver education and commercial training courses on a variety of topics such as sustainability education, permaculture and seed growing. Such topics derive from personal passions and individual member expertise and/or are learned through collective ecovillage experiences. The current CKH leader mentioned that ideas for about 120 courses and course ideas have already been developed during planning sessions.

CKH focus group participants recognise several categories that characterise what is currently being shared and what NEV members know (Table 1):

Table 1: NEV knowing and sharing practices (Source: CKG Focus Group brainstorming)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Examples of NEV Sharing Practices</th>
<th>Examples of NEV Knowing Practices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Consumables, e.g.</strong></td>
<td><strong>External process management, e.g.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Excess produce grown by members (barter)</td>
<td>• Tendering/Request for proposals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Excess produce (resold at farmers market)</td>
<td>• Grant applications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Food co-op (membership)</td>
<td>• Dealing with local government authorities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Experiences, e.g.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Heritage management, e.g.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Accommodation stays/retreats</td>
<td>• Heritage housing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tangible Assets, e.g.</strong></td>
<td>• Stewardship of indigenous lands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Farm machinery (FarmBot)</td>
<td><strong>Utilities, e.g.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Temporary use of car/ride-sharing (barter)</td>
<td>• Energy services (excess can be resold)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Electric vehicles charging (discussion idea)</td>
<td>• Water services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Money (member loans and donations)</td>
<td><strong>Building construction, e.g.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Evaluation of construction materials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(informal among members, guided by builders)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Design/energy efficiency ratings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Village communications, e.g.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Wiki (including how-to)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Despatch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Monthly member meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Narara Eco Living Network (NELN)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Social media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Interpersonal communications, e.g.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Sociocracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Conflict resolution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Counselling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Resilience/persistence skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Village maintenance contributions, e.g.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Village hours – currently 52 per year – applied to various activities, e.g. common cleaning services, common gardening tasks, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Education, e.g.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Seed growing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Permaculture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Numerous others</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
NEV’s capacity to leverage these sharing and knowing practices into viable businesses with commercial durability is hampered by various ‘critical path’ issues identified by CKH focus group participants:

- **Scarce** resources (time availability, limited money for course packaging, commitment of content leaders beyond initial delivery) – those with the content expertise are being asked to take on course ownership while also transitioning to become residents onsite.

  ‘We’re expecting the person with the expertise to also be the total solution provider … organise [content], market, account for [costs] and book the room’ – CKH FG participant comment.

- **Concentrated** expertise – expertise in certain knowledge areas is limited to only a few members. Not everyone who suggests ideas may be willing to commit to supporting/delivering the ideas.

  – CKH FG participant comment.

- **Missing** expertise needed for commercialisation, e.g. lack of marketing knowledge, lack of administrative support.

  ‘We have a lot of knowledge but we are not using it in a very constructive way, and perhaps, in this case, to find the right person who can do the marketing, the right person who can do the sale, the right person in here with us. … But we need to think about how we want to support all [of] this’.

  – CKH FG participant comment.

Underpinning these critical path barriers could be two opposing tensions that limit the potential value impact of these sharing and knowing practices for the ecovillage (Figure 4):

**Figure 4: Opposing Tensions and Impact (Source: CKH FG participant comments)**

Such challenges are indicative of ‘growing pains’ because individually and collectively, NEV members are essentially *experiencing learning ‘on the go’*, with limited opportunity (and available resources) to reflect on teachable insights, codify and package learning implications in time-efficient ways. Many of the practice examples listed in Table 1 are indicators of individual competencies shared by a few individuals, but do not yet represent enduring *collective* NEV competencies.

‘Learning in relation to the natural houses being built… we have a unique opportunity [here], we shouldn’t miss it but we seem to be!’

‘Become a skill centre; [need to] capture and share results of learning over time’.

  – 2019 NEV member survey comments (Q12 and Q18).

‘To become a skill set we need to catch and share our results of learning over time. I think, while there are certainly topics that we can run workshops on and things now, and it's good to capture those and do it straight away, we're still developing. Our knowledge is still developing in a lot of areas, or there's knowledge that's there but we do have to try and pull it all together’.

  – CKG FG participant comment.
BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT AND SUPPORT

NEV’s current activities in sharing, knowing and learning develop the competencies that can form the basis of its portfolio of future individual and co-operative businesses. Initial enterprises are already launched (e.g. community café, food co-op, West Wing accommodation, honey, mushrooms, mud brick housing consultancy) whereas many others are being considered.

Based on 2019 member survey findings, 47% of NEV members show some interest in contributing to economic activities at NEV through a variety of roles.

Figure 5: Interest in NEV Economic Activities and Likely Business Role
Sources: 2019 NEV member survey Question 3 (n=51); Question 5 (multiple responses possible, n=46)
Several current NEV strengths were captured in worksheets by BST focus group participants as context for discussing approaches to establishing future businesses (summarised in Table 2 below). Whether they reflect, or can be built into, durable ecovillage competencies that underpin businesses will require further analysis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skills</th>
<th>Resources</th>
<th>Models/Processes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Wide range of professional skills</td>
<td>• Financial capital</td>
<td>• Internal communications network (wiki, Despatch, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Broad mix of skills and experiences</td>
<td>• Lifetime savings</td>
<td>• Governance practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Skills in sustainable practices</td>
<td>• Existing infrastructure (e.g. buildings, greenhouses)</td>
<td>• Future capacity to provide models for ecovillages that survive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Agricultural assets (e.g. orchard, gardens)</td>
<td>• Models of sustainable living</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Adjacent bushland</td>
<td>• ‘Living Lab’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Not-for-Profit entity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Crowdfunding</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Values</th>
<th>Sustainable infrastructure</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Community resilience</td>
<td>• Energy micro-grid</td>
<td>• Proximity to Sydney as a major work hub</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Volunteer ethos</td>
<td>• Water system and WICA Licence</td>
<td>• Accessible to nearby cities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Spirituality</td>
<td>• Building Standards</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The BST focus group participants included a mix of BST members and business owners. Insights identified during the session included the following areas for consideration:

- **Emergence of a NEV ‘circular economy’ currently sustaining four micro-businesses**
  - The coffee bean waste from the Coffee Cart being utilised as compost for the Mushroom business.
  - Food waste from the Coffee Cart being utilised to feed the chickens of the Egg business.
  - Knowledge sharing about incubating a micro-business from Coffee cart coordinator and the BST Team to support the Mushroom business coordinator.
  - Harnessing the adjacent bushland and orchard to develop a Bee-keeping business and the wax by-product being used to create food-wrap.

- **Strategic agility and responsiveness to meet emerging needs**
  - Rescoping the Coffee Shop business to Coffee cart in response to planning restrictions.
  - Sourcing Grant Funding to support the establishment of community infrastructure (e.g. Smart Grid, community centre refurbishment and Grafting Shed).
  - Purchase of 23 Research Road to ‘add value’ to Stage 2 of the NEV development.
  - Informal collective ownership of plant and equipment.
  - Reconfiguring membership agreements to support an intergenerational membership.

- **Negotiating tensions for future development**
  - High level of desire to be ‘self-employed’ in tension with limited experience and understanding of required commitment (e.g. hours required to establish and sustain the new business in early phases).
  - Application of sustainable business practices in tension with the willingness to pay higher prices (e.g. cost of organic locally-sourced milk).
  - A planned approach to sharing community resources in tension with an eagerness to locate/establish emerging businesses using community resources (e.g. land, office space, volunteer hours).
  - Exploring the processes of community decision making that facilitated ‘strategic agility’ in contrast to extended decision-taking processes and structure for the establishment of individual businesses within NEV (e.g. time taken for business proposal to be considered by multiple committees and stakeholders).
3. Summary: An Emergent Ecovillage Community ‘in-the-Making’

RECAP OF NARARA ECOVILLAGE DEVELOPMENTS AND PROGRESS

In contrast to 2017, NEV is now emerging as a residential community. A growing number of unique single-family and cluster houses made from sustainable materials provides physical evidence of member resilience to realise Lyndall and Dave Parris’ aspirational vision from 1999. Member demographics appear to further substantiate the goal of an intergenerational membership that individually and collectively can continue the momentum of early pioneers to achieve sustainable living.

It is both an exciting and challenging period for members and leadership. After an extended 20-year period overcoming significant barriers (e.g. finding the property, establishing the utility infrastructure, surviving the merger of two local government councils), NEV is finally becoming an operational ecovillage reality. In entrepreneurial life, this transition often causes ‘growing pains’ as the path forward involves committing to resource utilisation, structure, processes and performance accountability that were easy to ignore during early stages of envisioning and dreaming.

The uniqueness of ecovillages elsewhere (for example, Ithaca, Earthaven and Sirius as researched by Sherry & Ormsby 2016) and NEV in particular, is that an ecovillage is also the place where members live together, care for each other as neighbours and friends and care for the site, region and planet. It is not primarily a place of work or employment, to earn income or to achieve career status. Thus, the nature of any enterprises intended to underpin NEV’s economic sustainability must recognise this integrated home/work/wellbeing characteristic in ways that achieve member aspirations and values, yet also funds the economic engine for future growth.

We make the following observations about the complexity of creating this NEV community ‘in-the-making’:

- NEV’s diversity in intergenerational membership, urban site location on the Central Coast and multiplicity of member ideas, skills and expertise (as evidenced by the initial list of 120 potential courses/workshops) represent both strengths and weaknesses:
  - Rather than launching a full portfolio, it is probably more important to gain some ‘early wins’ with a few low-impact and high-impact enterprises to learn emergently how an ecovillage business can achieve the triple bottom line.
  - While sociocratic principles appear to work well for governing democratic village practices, a flexible yet decisive entrepreneurial approach (rather than corporate business management practices) tailored for ecovillage practices may be needed (see Anderson and Gadde for 2016).

- Business development opportunities that draw upon the principles of the emerging circular economy (Geissdoerfer et al. 2017) may provide high-impact opportunities not only in terms of ecological benefits, but also in terms of collaboration and mutual support for those creating the businesses.

- The idea of creating NEV as a ‘living laboratory’ on the Central Coast (as mentioned by a BST focus group participant) is analogous to Damanhurian (in Italy) members developing a portfolio of robust new research capabilities in sustainable practices (Ananas & Pesco 2009). While these collective competencies cannot be foreseen today, an open experimental approach to capability and practice development may be needed, while managing potential risks in a supportive manner.
Such kinds of innovation noted in the previous point, are helpful when facing perceived insurmountable resource problems (similar to ‘doing more with less’ in the corporate world). As mentioned in the focus groups, NEV has established initial relationships with multiple universities and institutes of higher learning – as Walker (2012) notes, EcoVillage at Ithaca has been particularly successful at partnering with nearby Cornell University. Making productive use of student internships, work-integrated learning projects and business incubator expertise can generate mutual benefits by gaining access to temporary (mostly free) qualified resources to deliver small projects. These would recover expenses, if not generate new income, but importantly also identify learning practices for further refinement.

As we mentioned in our 2018 report (Gibbons et al. 2018, p. 22), we still believe more external market scanning is needed to better assess customer and market demand for potential ecovillage services on the Central Coast. The popularity of the recent Sustainable House Day suggests that, simultaneous with current member house construction, the knowledge and learning practices that emerge might be packaged in practical narrative-based ways, rather than considering more conventional (and time-intensive) textual coursework delivery modes.

Further opportunities may exist to align with local economy priorities through collaborations with the Central Coast Council and its community and business development resources and plans. For example, finding community and business initiatives that align with action plan priorities for Regional Economic Development and Employment Strategy (REDES) led by Regional Development Australia Central Coast NSW (2019). EcoVillage at Ithaca (Walker 2012) is particularly effective at this kind of alignment with its equivalent local government authority in New York, although it took many years of tactical ecovillage planning negotiations before more strategic community opportunities arose.

There have been ongoing discussions about how to ‘price’ a fair value when exchanging/sharing assets of different types. For example, is an hour of car usage equivalent to an hour of gardening help in a bartering system? Certainly, there have been discussions about whether 52 hours of village hours contributes fairly to basic ‘housekeeping’ of village services when the nature of these hours vary widely. These issues of co-operative value/valuation are important conversations to hold, as they may lead to initial trials of income sharing and value exchange models, even if they are later discarded through learning experiences and further refinements.

Such observations suggest that NEV’s journey towards sustainability is multi-faceted and complex. While many activities can be planned in rational ways, the phenomenon of ‘making a community together’ emerges as ongoing lived, socio-cultural, learning experiences. Economic impacts can be identified and calculated from activities and experiences, but the challenge of achieving sustainability is in delivering holistic benefits in integrated ways. A supplementary basis of acknowledging ecovillage value exchange should consider both intrinsic and extrinsic benefits of learning sustainability, not necessarily reducible to only financial results. A potential learning framework is discussed next.

**LEARNING SUSTAINABILITY: A FRAMEWORK AND PATH FORWARD**

The UOW research team developed and briefly discussed a learning framework during the two focus group sessions (Figure 6 on next page).

This framework suggests that NEV as an ecovillage is already learning in multiple ways and via multiple dimensions. Yet the nature of this learning will differ if we are evaluating members’ housing experiences (*Learning to Live*) compared to pricing tangible or intangible assets (*Learning to Share*), so that a uniform approach is unlikely to succeed. The integrating common thread is in treating all these ways as opportunities to *learn how to know*; essentially, ecovillage competency development.
Decisions around prioritising opportunities for commercialisation may be currently over- emphasising individual competencies at the risk of minimising higher-impact collective competencies. For example, shared member reflections from building and completing sustainable housing have given other members useful insights about their own housing options (internal sharing), while visitors also appreciate (and pay for) the lessons learned and their practical realisations during Sustainable House Day (external sharing with commercial value).

CKH’s current charter may be to only focus on becoming a business enterprise (Learning to Create). However, NEV’s aspiration to become a successful demonstration ecovillage means that cultivating members’ skills, mindfulness and development are fundamental to building NEV’s human capacity for resilient behaviour, i.e. implementing a developmental change meaning to ‘creating community’. Organising the processes and member forums for learning practices (vertical pillars in Figure 6) as well as facilitating the invisible (horizontal) interconnections among these pillars is, we believe, a critical ecovillage brokering role that is yet to be made explicit. Such a role can be designed and delivered through different approaches, internally (e.g. through rotational work teams or a cross-section of NEV leadership) or in partnership with external learning partners.

BST’s current charter to support business development at NEV may benefit from working towards an agreed definition of what might constitute a NEV sustainable economy. Such a definition may facilitate the development of criteria against which emerging business ideas and opportunities could be evaluated. The emergence of NEV circular business flows (circular economy) provides a focus and starting point from which to harness further business opportunities.

As the nature of the NEV community changes (i.e. transitioning from a community of interest to a community of location; a community of greater intergenerational diversity), it may be timely for the CKH and BST (and perhaps other NEV) teams to revisit their charters, priorities and operating processes. Reflecting upon opportunities for further alignment among team and community priorities may represent ways to address some of the challenges and opportunities so far discussed, providing mechanisms to harness and further embed collective learning and know-how.

We wish NEV members all the best as the growing pains of today lead to innovative approaches to develop collective ecovillage competencies in the future. Learning sustainability: how living practices work effectively, practically and situated to contribute to its local economy are important contributions that ecovillages make to society. Narara Ecovillage, with its member capabilities for persistence, resilience and diversity, seems poised to demonstrate its vision to be ‘inspired by life’.
References


Appendix

The following posters and worksheet were generated by the UOW research team to encourage productive research-informed discussions at the two focus group sessions.

- CKH Focus Group Session Poster 1 (26 October 2019).
- CKH Focus Group Session Poster 2 (26 October 2019).
- BST Focus Group Session Poster 1 (2 November 2019).
- BST Focus Group Session Poster 2 (2 November 2019).
- BST Focus Group Session Poster 3 (2 November 2019).
- BST Focus Group Session Worksheet (2 November 2019).
“The Sharing Paradigm”  
(after McLaren & Agyeman 2015)

COMMUNAL/INTRINSIC
Peer-to-peer sharing  
Unconsumption  
Gift economy

INTERMEDIATED (3rd party/learned)
Redistribution markets  
Disownership  
Product/service systems  
Sharing economy  
Access economy

SOCIAL-CULTURAL (evolved)
Collective commons  
Core economy  
Service co-production  
Collaborative lifestyles

COMMERCIAL/EXTRINSIC
Open sourcing  
Peer production  
Collective economy

Source: Adapted from Figure 5 in Ryu et al. (2019)

What Recent Academic Research Suggests About Emerging Ways to Learn and Share Practices: Implications for NEV

“Learning to Know”  
“Learning to Live”  
“Learning to Care”  
“Learning to Share”  
“Learning to Create”

Potential ways to learn and develop NEV ecovillage practices

Examples

Learning to Know (knowledge)
Codifying/Extracting/Situating/Disseminating/Extending/Repackaging

Learning to Share (resources)
- Ecovillage ethos (sociocracy+)
- New forms of shared housing
- Ecovillage retreats
- Landcare

Learning to Care (community)
- Celebrations/festivals/advocacy
- Young and elder care
- Working Bees
- Community Meals

Learning to Create (enterprises)
- Food Coop
- Ride-share
- Tool Library
- FarmBot
- Education/skill development

 Becoming sustainable and resilient as an ecovillage community

Examples

- Celebrations/festivals/advocacy
- Young and elder care
- Working Bees
- Community Meals
- Food Coop
- Ride-share
- Tool Library
- FarmBot
- Education/skill development

- Models of growth
- Income-sharing
- Incubator/funding
- Commercialisation
- Enact regional priorities

Where is the focus of NEV’s momentum: pace, priorities?
What could be potential tipping points that can enable or restrict progress and momentum?

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FG1: CKH Poster 1: Learning and Knowledge Research  
26 October 2019
Selective Member Perspectives about Learning to Become a Sustainable Enterprise

Member aspirations for joining NEV have remained consistent across two member surveys 2017-2019:

Increased desire to contribute to, and improve global issues (climate change, env’t degradation, social isolation)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey 1</th>
<th>Survey 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oct-Nov 2017</td>
<td>May-Jun 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Survey Response rate</strong></td>
<td>50% (62/125)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Survey Demographic</strong></td>
<td>• 72% are 55yrs or older</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• 58% female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interest in economic activities</strong></td>
<td>• 40% want to retain existing employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Uncertain about interest, roles and nature of activities needed for sustainability</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Survey Response rates: 2017, 2019 NEV member surveys

2019 priorities about learning and knowledge-sharing (Q12, Q18):
• Collective Know-How to seize on the interest by the public in our buildings that are already completed
• ...Learning in relation to the natural houses being built... we have a unique opportunity [here], we shouldn’t miss it but we seem to be!
• Collective Know-How ... has the best chance of generating income ... suits a slow start-up model ... matches the skills sets of a number of members ... great potential for social and environmental benefits
• Training/education centre as education for furthering environmental causes
• Become a skill centre; [need to] capture and share results of learning over time
• Develop a ‘light touch test’ and learn model[s] for business growth

Learning and development issues about improving likely success of NEV business activities (Q6, Q12, Q18):
• [Differentiate] morale support vs. technical support vs. practical support
• Allow business models to emerge and innovate; less red tape and bureaucracy
• Differing roles of ecovillage activities: utility vs. social hub vs. private/cooperative enterprises

Source: 2019 NEV member survey, selected comments

Source: UOW Research Team

© UOW Research Team

FG1: CKH Poster 2: NEV Survey Findings
26 October 2019
Recent Academic Research About Implementing Sustainability in Practice: Implications for NEV

Below are strengths for the 3 ecovillages discussed by Sherry & Ormsby (2016). In business strategy we talk about strengths as **sources of competitive advantage**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Ithaca</th>
<th>Earthaven</th>
<th>Sirius</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Residents</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strengths</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Eco-suburb location, access to mainstream services</td>
<td>• Varied experimental housing materials</td>
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<td>• LEAP timebank currency</td>
<td>• Mix of inside self-sufficiency/external employment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Sherry & Ormsby (2016)

Questions for discussion

How does NEV define economic sustainability?

How does NEV define sustainability for businesses?

Are there any emergent tensions?

Questions for discussion

Does NEV have similar strengths?

*Individually on your handouts, circle the strengths that NEV has in common with the above ecovillages.*

What are other strengths or sources of competitive advantage for NEV?
Selective Member Perspectives about Business Development Practices To Support a Sustainable Enterprise

Source: 2019 NEV member survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey</th>
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<td><strong>Response rate</strong></td>
<td>50% (62/125)</td>
<td>51% (61/120)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
| **Survey Demographic** | • 72% are 55yrs or older  
• 58% female | • 67% are 54yrs or younger  
• 62% female | |
| **Interest in economic activities** | • 40% want to retain existing employment  
• Uncertain about interest, roles and nature of activities | • 25% want to retain existing employment  
• Increased interest in different ways of engagement; wait-and-see: ‘not sure yet until we live onsite and get stuck in’ | |

Member aspirations for joining NEV have remained consistent across two member surveys 2017-2019

41.3% Owner/Part Owner of Private Business; 41.3% Contractor or Employee of NEV; 11% Profit share of NEV business in lieu of salary

**Likely Business Role in NEV**

(Q5; n=46)

- Private sole owner within NEV
- Contractor to a NEV Cooperative business
- Employee of a NEV Co-operative business
- Private part-owner at NEV
- Profit share based on salary sacrifice
- Other

Question for discussion

There appears to be an expectation (41% of respondents) that there will be NEV cooperative businesses which will employ or contract members. How does this expectation line up with the current BST plans and activities?
Selective Member Perspectives about Business Development Practices To Support a Sustainable Enterprise

Why focus on business activities? (Q7, Q8):
- Draw outsiders to NEV (20%)
- Provide an amenity useful to entire community (17%)
- Provide discounted value as benefit to members (12%)
- Draw outsiders to NEV (20%)
- Provide an amenity useful to entire community (17%)
- Provide discounted value as benefit to members (12%)
- Offset Co-op cost ... to make it affordable to live here
- Contribute to something of value in the world, not just to NEV
- Contribute my competencies, ... personal fulfilment in building a viable business that I am passionate about.

Member perceptions about the focus/priorities for business support activities in 2019 (Q8, Q9, Q18):
- Food production and sale, climate emergency response for individuals and communities, cafe to attract the wider public to share our space and spread the word and integrate us into Narara/Central Coast
- 1 - Café. 2 - food growing 3 - education programs
- The business won’t survive without a sound financial basis; there’s no point if it doesn’t create a worthwhile value; wellbeing and happiness should be counted alongside financial and social value
- Help with cutting through NEV red tape and timely decisions
- By helping prepare a basic business plan and strategy which includes some feasible way of starting to pay contributors
- Nothing at this stage. When ready to launch I’ll be in touch

Questions for discussion

What is BST focused on right now?

How have members engaged with you?

How is BST supporting members at different stages of business development?

How is BST engaging with local priorities/local economy to support the development of businesses at NEV?

Member priorities about learning and knowledge-sharing in 2019 (Q12, Q18):
- ...Learning in relation to the natural houses being built... we have a unique opportunity [here], we shouldn’t miss it but we seem to be!
- Become a skill centre; [need to] capture and share results of learning over time
- Develop a ‘light touch test’ and learn model[s] for business growth
Worksheet

Questions for discussion

Does NEV have similar strengths?
*Individually circle the strengths that NEV has in common with the above ecovillages in the table below.*

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<td>• Community – ecovillage education</td>
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</table>

Source: Sherry & Ormsby (2016)

List other strengths or sources of competitive advantage for NEV below: