

Living and Institutionalising Sustainable Utopia

How the members of Ecovillage Boekel construct and maintain their utopian ideals



SDG-wijk Ecodorp Boekel¹

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¹ Reference: www.ecodorpboekel.nl. Accessed on 20-06-2021.

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*“You never change things by fighting the existing reality.
To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model
obsolete.”²*

By R. Buckminster Fuller

² Reference: <https://greencoast.org/quotes-about-sustainability/>. Accessed on 19-06-2021.



View from the third circle, under construction, on the temporary units and the Community Centre serving as common space for Ecovillage Boekel

Table of contents

Acknowledgements	7
1. Introduction	8
2. Theoretical framework.....	15
2.1 Anthropology, utopia and hope (Eva)	15
2.2 Heterotopia as a utopian reality (Isa).....	17
2.3 Ecovillages creating an alternative (Eva).....	19
2.4 Morality and ethics. Constructing and living the ‘good’ in ecovillages (Isa).....	22
3. Context	25
3.1 Ecovillages within the Dutch societal structures (Eva).....	25
3.2 Ecovillage Boekel (Isa)	27
Chapter 4. Utopian Ideals of Ecovillage Boekel.....	32
A sustainable life in connection (Eva)	32
“You have to show them” the ideals of being an inspiring example (Isa).....	35
Conclusion (Isa and Eva).....	39
Chapter 5. Moral dilemmas and breakdowns (Eva and Isa).....	40
From Utopia to reality (Eva)	40
“What it really means to be an icebreaker” difficulties the ecovillage faces (Isa)	44
Conclusion (Isa and Eva).....	50
Chapter 6. How to negotiate conflicting ideals (Eva and Isa).....	53
Collectively learning to work through moral dilemmas (Eva)	53
“Being flexible is the key” strategies of dealing with moral dilemmas (Isa)	58
Conclusion (Eva and Isa).....	62
Discussion/conclusion.....	63
Bibliography.....	70
Attachments	75
Attachment 1. Vision, mission and objectives.....	75
Attachment 2. Manners	78
Attachment 3. Samenvatting.....	80

Helicopter view of Ecovillage Boekel under construction³



³ Reference: <https://www.change.inc/infra/innovaties-duurzaam-bouwen-35975>. Accessed on 22-06-2021.

Acknowledgements

From the 8th of February until the 16th of April we conducted our fieldwork in Ecovillage Boekel, the Netherlands. Although the covid-19 pandemic has put serious strain on our ability to freely move, we were very lucky to live amongst the ecovillagers during these times. Firstly, we would like to express our gratitude to all the people in the field. We were taken in with a lot of warmth by the ecovillagers. We really enjoyed the good care and delicious and fun dinners with everyone. Although the topics discussed were not always easy, we are thankful that they were so open in sharing their experiences and allowing us to sit with them during many different occasions. This allowed us to gain a genuine experience of the life within the ecovillage. Not only that, but they also put a lot of faith in us, having no construction experience, they still let us help construct their houses. Aside from the interview skills we have developed during our research, we also gained many practical skills through building. We are looking forward to building our own sustainable houses in the future. Secondly, we would like to thank the people outside of the ecovillage that were willing to share their time and stories with us. Whether these concerned people from big insurance companies, the municipality, neighbours and old members, everyone was excited to share their point of view. We would particularly like to thank Ad for his broad network and extremely helpful personality through which we have been able to reach out and connect to people outside of the ecovillage as well. We would like to thank Laura for being the 'mother figure' to us when we needed a little emotional support during the ten weeks that we were there. Lastly, we would like to thank our very enthusiastic neighbours and friends, Lineke and Robbert, for spending a lot of time with us and making our fieldwork experience unforgettable. Finally, we would like to thank our supervisor, Vinzenz, for his elaborate feedback and endless patience, even though we went over the word limit by a few thousand on many occasions. All in all, we could not have written this thesis without the enduring energy and support of all the people involved in this project.

1. Introduction

“Ecodorp Boekel is a unique, inspiring example of sustainable life in connection.”

“In Ecovillage Boekel we will, to a great extent, sustainably provide for our basic needs of life. For this we will introduce solutions for climate change, environmental degradation and depletion of resources, in collaboration with our surroundings. Besides that, we will act as an example for the rest of the society.”

“Our culture is based on the three pillars of self-reflection, participation and trust.”

(Projectplan Ecodorp Boekel 2020)⁴

Today, we find ourselves in a world in which we have to deal with worldwide social and environmental crises (Lockyer and Veteto 2013, 1). In such a world, people are looking for and going towards initiatives that will both literally and figuratively ‘turn the tide’. One such initiative that has the potential to create social, economic and sustainable change, with a focus on tackling climate change, individualism and capitalism, is an ecovillage (Bosch 2017, 11; Lockyer and Veteto 2013). We based our research on Dutch Ecovillage Boekel, an ecovillage aiming for sustainable change, both within their community as well as in relation to wider society. It is an ‘experimental garden’ where new methods and materials are used to build as sustainably as possible. The ecovillage is still in development, during which they encounter difficulties and opportunities in the process of realising their common vision.

Ecovillages are intentional human communities who use local participatory processes to create a community wherein the ecological, economic, social and cultural dimensions of life are integrated in the most sustainable manner. Participants in these projects try to minimize their ecological footprint, partly through self-provisioning practices (Gilman 1991, 10; Global Ecovillage Network, n.d.; Lockyer and Veteto 2013). Both the words eco-community and ecovillage are used interchangeably. For the sake of legibility, we will use the word ecovillage in the remainder of this thesis because ecovillage Boekel itself uses the Dutch translation of this (*Ecodorp*).

⁴ Own translations from Projectplan Ecodorp Boekel (Ecodorp Boekel 2020)

This research is of theoretical as well as societal relevance. Current research on ecovillages tends to focus on the discourse of what an ecovillage stands for or how questioning larger societal structures, such as consumerism, are balanced between members (Kosnik 2018). In this, the direct relationships with outside actors such as municipalities remain obscure. We feel there is an empirical gap to be closed here given that these direct relationships, for example meetings with government officials, do make up daily reality for ecovillagers. By integrating and applying both the fields of utopia and morality to these relationships, we shift our focus to the explicit and direct interactions instead of the larger more implicit structures that are usually explored in research on ecovillages. We integrate utopia and social change to illustrate a continuous perception of morality, thereby going beyond a moral breakdown, because this better lines up with the lived reality of morality in the daily lives of the ecovillagers. This point ties up with the social relevance of our thesis. Since the number of ecovillages has been rising the past years (GEN Nederland n.d.), getting a better understanding of how an ecovillage functions, the problems they face and how these problems are dealt with, provides useful knowledge for other initiatives to learn from. This is important since these initiatives have the ability to inspire people to live more sustainably, something which is essential in the current climate crisis of the world we live in. The findings of our research can be taken up by both sides involved, ecovillages and authorities, in order to make the collaborations more productive.

We are interested in how the strategies of balancing ideals and reality are constructed, experienced and put into practice. Morality and ethics are particularly apt as a lens for anthropologists through which to explore these different strategies. Firstly, because it takes into account how 'the good' is constructed (Zigon 2007, 135), which links up with the construction and experience of ideals. Secondly, for it recognises and emphasises those moments where 'the normal', unreflective course of events is interrupted. This happens for example when someone has an idea about the realisation of an ideal, but where someone else 'breaks in', because he or she disagrees with the implementation. This hinders the smooth or unreflective proceeding of routine therewith causing a breakdown in which someone has to consciously think and make decisions (Zigon 2007, 137-138). Being subjected to these setbacks during the realisation of utopian ideals does not, however, appear to be a reason for despair since people are able to overcome setbacks wherein hope and social learning keep them going (Bryant and Knight 2019; Lockyer and Veteto 2013, 270).

Furthermore, using morality and ethics as a lens through which to explore and analyse groups of people has only recently gained traction within anthropology (Zigon 2007). Especially anthropological research linking utopia to ecovillages, exploring this through the lens of morality in the specific Dutch context, is non-existent. Morality allows for difficulties in direct contact to be researched because it is here where actors directly influence the opportunities for the other based on their perception of what is the right thing to do. The Netherlands is the perfect context to investigate morality because the relational character in the form of direct relationships between ecovillages and outside actors is very strong. For example, the many rules and regulations regarding sustainable construction foster frequent contact between these actors (Rijksdienst voor Ondernemend Nederland 2020; Bosch 2017, 55-59). Because of this frequent contact with many different actors, the ecovillage is often exposed to possible different value structures. By focusing on the Dutch context, we thus hope to contribute to closing the empirical gap described above.

Ecovillagers do not live in their own ideal world but are embedded in the society they find themselves in which they are at the same time trying to change (Ergas 2010; Mychajluk 2017). By trying to change the current set of relations that are present and usually assumed in society, ecovillages act similar to heterotopias as described by Foucault (1986). This allows us to research ecovillages as social movements, aiming for social transformation (Beckett, Bagguley and Campbel 2017, 2; Susser 2016, 185). Differences in opinions about ideals and how to implement these between the different actors of the ecovillage and the perceived mainstream society can be apparent. This can cause setbacks in realising ideals, which shows the gap between the ideal and reality (Fraser 2017). However, people seem to employ strategies that help them to deal with these setbacks and that keep them going in pursuing their goals (Binay, Itir and Oppewal 2020; Bosch 2017; Lockyer 2007).

All these fields of interest taken together have led us to our main question: *How do people in Ecovillage Boekel construct and maintain their sustainable utopian ideals both within community-life and in relation to outside actors?*

It can be seen that Ecodorp Boekel goes through a dynamic process in their journey towards realising their common utopian ideal of an ecovillage as an inspiring example of a 'life in connection'. We argue that in Ecodorp Boekel, it is often the ideal of trust that forms the very base of the construction of both relationships with outside actors as well as the set-up of the ecovillage. However, it is also this very ideal, and wanting to maintain this ideal in

collaborations, that sometimes creates the moral dilemmas they are trying to prevent. In trying to overcome moral dilemmas, when a different perception of ideals is at play, we see that institutionalisation takes place in the development and introduction of tools for decision-making, conflict resolution and social connectedness. The group goes through a process of social learning whereby the development of social competencies and professionalisation is important in order to create and maintain a cooperative culture and to reach the common and individual utopian ideals.

Research Methods

This research is both descriptive and complementary. Descriptive because we explore and describe the experience of the people living in an ecovillage and their experience in relation to what they view as mainstream society. We complement each other by researching utopia, morality and social transformation on an internal level as well as on an external level at the same site. This in order to understand how both 'spheres' influence each other.

Throughout our fieldwork from the 8th of February until the 16th of April, we were taken in with much enthusiasm and willingness to share by the inhabitants of ecovillage Boekel, The Netherlands. They form the very heart of the information that we collected. During our fieldwork the ecovillage had 36 members and twelve children, most of them living at the village while others were waiting for the houses to be finished. The ages ranged from 25 to 72 years old. The family compositions also varied from families with children, older couples to singles. But, at the very core, they were all connected by their shared vision to take care of the earth and to live in a community.

Because our research is complementary, we spoke to different people and asked different questions. Eva focused on the members living in the ecovillage, or people who had been living there. Alongside the ecovillagers, Isa interviewed neighbours and met many enthusiastic and idealistic pioneers, in government positions or large companies.

We used different (anthropological) qualitative research methods to gain a thorough understanding of the experiences, motivations and meanings people attributed to their life within the ecovillage. The method of participant observation was mainly used through participating in daily activities, interactions and most events of the ecovillage in order to learn and understand the explicit and tacit aspects of a life routine and culture (DeWalt & DeWalt 2011, 1, 23-24). This involved working every weekday on the construction site with the

ecovillagers. During the work, and especially during coffee- and lunch breaks, we talked to the ecovillagers who were working that day. Additionally, we joined meetings, both between the ecovillagers as well as with outside actors. In short, we used participant observation to gain information about trends that naturally came up in the ecovillage about which we could ask questions during interviews.

The second most important method we used was interviewing. We started off by conducting informal interviews to uncover what things were at hand in the ecovillage. We advanced to doing semi-structured interviews by the end, when we built up the necessary rapport, to really discover the details of problems and dilemmas in the ecovillage (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011, 137-139).

Lastly, we analysed documents relevant to our research such as the projectplan (see attachment 1), a description of how meetings are structured according to *holarchie*, email correspondence and articles in the local/own newspaper.

Aside from the 'usual' anthropological methods we use, we had to take an extra factor into account, that of the rules and regulations concerning the Covid-19 virus. We stuck to the rules in those instances in which this was necessary to assure the safety of the participants. More information about ethical dilemmas and our roles as anthropologists follows now.

Reflection

During the fieldwork we experienced two main ethical dilemmas. Firstly, we came across topics that some people had a hard time talking about. In particular, certain collaborations proved to be a difficult issue. People's moods and daily lives are influenced by the events surrounding certain collaborations or internal conflicts. We decided not to push on these issues in order to prevent creating more stress for our participants. This ethical dilemma in itself is a reason for future research. As a result of not covering all the details on sensitive subjects, there is still much to explore.

Secondly, we regularly overheard informal conversations between people with possible valuable data for our research. The difficulty here was that sometimes people might have forgotten that we were conducting research since we hung around for ten weeks. Although we anonymised all data, conversations between people were considered to be private, even when people were aware that we were listening. In short, we decided not to use this information in our research.

Additionally, our social position in the field changed throughout the fieldwork period. At the beginning we were seen as part of the group of Woofers (volunteers) since we did the same work. However, when the other volunteers left and the longer our fieldwork went on, the more we became integrated within the ecovillage. This allowed us to build up rapport and to have more and deeper conversations about sensitive topics.

As researchers in the field, we brought our own expectations and perceptions to the field which could have influenced the research (DeWalt & DeWalt 2011, 99). We ourselves are interested in sustainability which regularly led to having similar knowledge and practices as the ecovillagers. This drove us to really join in and 'talk with' all sorts of topics discussed by the ecovillagers. This might, to some extent, have hindered our critical attitude about the topics and practices specifically relevant to our research because we were already agreeing on many things. We tried to reign in the influence this had on our research by discussing these issues on a daily basis between ourselves.

Outline

This thesis consists of several chapters. In the following chapter, we introduce anthropological theories and concepts which are relevant to this study. These involve the following themes: utopia, hope, heterotopia, morality and social movements. In the subsequent chapter we use these themes to analyse the specific context of ecovillage Boekel in the Netherlands. This is followed by three empirical chapters in which we connect the theories from our theoretical framework to the data that we collected. Every chapter starts with a paragraph about the relations within the ecovillage, followed by a paragraph about the relations between the ecovillage and outside actors. The first empirical chapter focuses on utopian ideals. The second empirical chapter explains what kind of moral dilemmas arise in the ecovillage and the last empirical chapter explains how these moral dilemmas are dealt with and the strategies used for this. Every empirical chapter ends with a concluding paragraph in which we show how the internal and external parts are related. Our thesis ends with a section named discussion and conclusion in which we will answer our research question, point out some noteworthy results and provide a direction for future research. The core of our conclusion is that the ecovillage goes through moral dilemmas and moral breakdowns during their process towards realising their utopian ideal. Throughout this journey, they learn to develop strategies characterised by institutionalisation and professionalism to work through these dilemmas,

both within the ecovillage as in relation to outside actors. The ecovillagers have more collective experiences between them which enables them to develop more set social structures of how to deal with issues on an internal level, than in collaborations with outside actors.

2. Theoretical framework

In this research we use the concepts of utopia, hope and heterotopia to explore how ecovillages as social movements construct and maintain their sustainable ideals. We use morality to show how the gap between the ideal and practice is filled with moments of negotiating different and/or complementary ideas that need to be thought about and worked through. This dual integration and application of utopian ideals and morality to direct relationships between ecovillagers and outside actors has not been included in other research on ecovillages. However, we deem it necessary to apply morality to this interaction because both actors directly influence each other. We also apply morality and utopian ideals to an interpersonal level between the ecovillagers to understand how they settle differences. Researching all of this in the Dutch context is interesting precisely because it is characterised by a highly relational character between ecovillages and outside actors (Bosch 2017, 55-59).

2.1 Anthropology, utopia and hope (Eva)

This chapter describes how the concept of utopia, in relation to hope, functions as a useful lens in anthropology to study social change, particularly in the context of ecovillages.

According to More (1997), utopianism is about a desire for an ideal society which seems impossible to realise. The word utopia reveals the generated tension between the real and the ideal and suggests one could strive to overcome this (Lockyer 2007, 9). According to Hébert (2016, 2), utopia underlines the dynamism, potentials, and political relevance of “worlds not yet in being”.

Anthropologists produce important ethnographies exploring utopia but are also reluctant to use this concept because they want to refrain from its critiqued link to exotic writings and romanticisation of ‘the primitive’ as apparent in writings including utopia (Hébert 2016, 2; Susser 2016, 188). The applicability of utopia to other contexts is also questionable since utopia is closely linked to Western modernity (Hébert 2016, 2). Moreover, its applicability within anthropology can be questioned because utopia refers to a vision of a non-place, (Hébert 2016, 3; More 1997), while anthropological studies revolve around participant observation in a specific spatial setting.

Despite these objections, Hébert (2016, 3) states theories of utopia can be useful for the social sciences when one focuses on the concrete articulations and oppositions to social

order which are apparent in utopias. Hébert (2016) argues that utopianism does not only involve hoping for something new, but also producing hope in a particular social historical situation. Bryant and Knight (2019, 134) see hope as a “futural momentum” which means it is a way to press into the future whereby one tries to realise particular potentialities. The utopian moment wherein concrete plans are made to hopefully change future lives towards a more positive (utopian) world could be seen as creating a futural momentum of hope. In a similar way, Bloch (1986) describes this as people having “wishful images” about things which have yet to come, and these influence their actions towards the future.

According to Bryant and Knight (2019), hope is a movement whereby a tendency *towards* something exists. A sense of hope exists when the potential of entering the realm of the actual occurs. Besides utopianism, hope involves acting out a potential in a particular social historical setting, since it tries to bring the otherwise-than-actual into actuality, which happens through utopian thinking (Bryant and Knight 2019, 134; Hébert 2016, 13). This means that these two concepts are closely interrelated and could be seen as co-constructing each other.

So when, in a “futural momentum of hope”, practical plans and alternatives to achieve a utopia are put into practice, the concept of utopia could become a topic for ethnographic research studying social change (Bryant and Knight 2019; Hébert 2016). Since anthropological research about social movements involves studying how the current system is critiqued, transformative processes towards increased social rights and the development of utopian ideas (Susser 2016, 187), hope and utopian thinking can be considered as useful concepts to study social change within anthropology. In addition, Lockyer and Veteto (2013, 1) state that utopianism is very relevant today since humans worldwide are faced with coupled social and environmental crises. Lockyer and Veteto (2013) consider sustainability ultimately as a utopian concept, since it is something good we strive for. This striving for something good related to sustainability is apparent in ecovillages which is our specific research topic. We focus on these sustainable communities putting their ecological and social visions into practice in order to achieve their view of utopia. For example, prosumers⁵ in ecovillages challenge consumerism through self-provisioning (Kosnik 2018). This can be seen as a ‘futural

⁵ Kosnik (2018) explains that a prosumer considers production for own consumption as the ideal. This way one would not contribute to the mass consumption society. This is put into practice in ecovillages through practicing self-provisioning to the best of one’s ability.

momentum of hope', since they try to bring something which does not yet exist, into practice. We discuss this process through the lens of heterotopia which we explain in the following chapters. Herewith we show that utopia and hope are relevant theoretical concepts to study social change within anthropology. We subsequently combine hope, utopia and morality to explore the negotiation of ideals between ecovillagers and outside actors, to understand how they keep on going despite difficulties that might arise.

2. 2 Heterotopia as a utopian reality (Isa)

Now that it is clear how anthropology is linked to the study of utopia, with a specific interest in (imagined) social change, we focus on heterotopias that question and relate to utopias. The term heterotopia was coined by Foucault (1986, 23-24) who focuses on those spaces that are connected to all other spaces but at the same time question the set of relations that are usually assumed to be present in hegemonic spaces. An example of such a space is a utopia. Utopias envision society and its relations as principally different from how they are now experienced in society, either as reversed or perfected. However, utopias are spaces or sites with no actual place. Heterotopias, however, are those real places in which utopia is effectively strived for. Heterotopias perform as counter-sites in questioning accepted normal relations (Foucault 1986, 24). Every culture in the world produces and accommodates these heterotopias but the form in which they exist might differ.

Johnson (2006, 76) states that Foucault gives us a way to study spaces that challenge the norm of the space in which people live. Heterotopic ideas and their use, however, remain rather vague and are interpreted and applied in various ways (Johnson 2006, 81). Oftentimes, the concept is linked to researching transgression in which these different heterotopic spaces allow for resistance to the perceived dominant culture (Johnson 2006, 81). Johnson (2006, 81-82) critiques this obvious application of heterotopia when researching transgression and resistance. Because resistance cannot be understood in absolutes of 'escape' or definitive outcomes where being separate is the ultimate goal. Beckett, Bagguley and Campbell (2017, 7-9) explain that Foucault thus understands resistance to be in a relational character with the existing power relations. The power relations that configure societal relations cannot be escaped, but we have the freedom to resist and "work the power relations by which we are worked" (Butler 1997, 100). In short, it is the process of intentionally resisting normalising

rationales and the establishment of alternative truth regimes that matters and should be researched (Beckett, Bagguley and Campbel 2017, 5-6).

Hetherington (1997, 39) continues this discourse on freedom and control in the form of power relations as present in heterotopias. Freedom or complete social control are constantly in conversation. This shows that heterotopias are spaces where alternate social ordering takes place (Hetherington 1997, 40). According to Hetherington (1997, 49), it is all about how heterotopias are performed in relation to other sites.

While ecovillages have not often been analysed as heterotopic sites, Edwards and Bulkeley (2017, 7) show that focusing on resistance and applying heterotopia functions well in the field of climate change and creating sustainable change in general. The application of heterotopia allows for recognition of the ambivalent interconnection between climate change projects and the broader environment in which they exist, in short, their relational character.

Institutionalising utopia

What becomes clear is that heterotopias take into account that extra factor of relationality between different sites, people and institutions that determine the extent to which, and how, utopia can be strived for and thus specifically how current relationships between the actors involved are changed. So, if you want to change the way the actors relate to each other, you are going to have to go against, but also work with these larger institutions and structures precisely because of the relational character these actors are in. This presupposes a high level of interdependence and mutual influencing.

Beattie (1964, 34) and Douglas (1994) voice this tendency of mutual influence/relationality in stating that societal change of how people relate to each other goes through institutionalised means. Kanters (2021) explains that what they mean by this, is that the initiatives that want to differently construct current structures and organisations such as governments and their rule, who are by definition large, institutionalised actors, actually often institutionalise themselves. In this, institutionalisation entails “the process whereby social practices become sufficiently regular and continuous to be described as institutions”, that is, “social practices that are regularly and continuously repeated, are sanctioned and maintained by social norms, and have a major significance in the social structure” (Abercrombie, Hill & Turner 1988, 124). Kanters (2021) points out that these initiatives often try to actively pursue institutionalisation in order to create some stability because institutionalisation provides

structures to live and collaborate by. I would like to take up Kanters (2021) idea of not only applying institutionalisation as a concept, but rather as a process in which people are caught up when engaging in creating societal change of how people relate to each other.

In short, initiatives that strive for utopia, but that are a heterotopic version of this because they are influenced in their ways and opportunities due to their relational character with the institutions and structures that are in place, are thus influenced by these structures in a way in which they start to institutionalise themselves to create some stability from which they can organise themselves better (Kanters 2021).

We have discussed that utopia and heterotopia relate to and critique each other. The tension and critique lie in the fact that utopia is essentially unreal and imaginative and therefore cannot be applied in the real world whilst heterotopias are enacted utopian visions in the real world but have to deal with what is possible in the society in which they exist due to their relational character. In short, there is this gap between that which is imagined as the ultimate vision and the possibility and reality of bringing certain visions into actuality. This gap shows how utopia can function as a tool for heterotopias to imagine a different future and as something to be worked towards, which can be sustained and bridged through the use of institutionalisation (Kanters 2021) and hope (Bryant and Knight 2019). We use all concepts because they cannot be separated in reality and help us better understand and study the construction of sustainable lifestyles.

2.3 Ecovillages creating an alternative (Eva)

This chapter analyses how ecovillages relate to the theoretical concepts heterotopia and social movements questioning societal norms. We connect utopianism, heterotopia and social movements in order to further explore our case-study: ecovillages. In addition, we look at the relational dynamics within an ecovillage, characterised by a process of social learning, leading to a cooperative culture. Hereby we emphasise the relation between ecovillages and surrounding societal networks, whereby we problematise the concept of 'mainstream society'.

As argued, utopia is a useful concept for anthropology since utopian ideals and hope are put into practice as happens in heterotopias, resulting in social change (Hébert 2016; Susser 2016). Relating this to the current relevance of sustainability leads us to our specific interest in ecovillages as a social movement.

Gilman (1991, 10) defines ecovillages as follows: “human-scale, full-featured settlements in which human activities are harmlessly integrated into the natural world in a way that is supportive of healthy human development and can be successfully continued into the indefinite future”. Lockyer and Veteto (2013, 15) also emphasize the intentional character of ecovillages. Important to note is that ecovillages are striving for this ecological utopian ideal instead of being settled utopias (Lockyer and Veteto 2013, 270).

The specifics of ecovillages can be related to social movements and heterotopias. Ecovillages are considered social movements since they challenge institutional, organisational and cultural authorities, within the cultural context and civil society, in order to cause social transformation (Schehr 1997; Snow, Soule and Kriesi 2004; Susser 2016, 185). This is visible in their solution focused perspective and entrepreneurial activities, aiming for creating sustainable communities and livelihoods as a response to current social-environmental problems related to the issues of climate change, environmental degradation and social-environmental injustices (Ergas 2010; Lockyer and Veteto 2013, 2).

Ecovillages for example question consumption, but also the lifestyles of individualism (Lockyer and Veteto 2013, 253-254). This relates to Mychajluk (2017) who notes that, at its core, the ecovillage approach is characterised by a cooperative culture. This is about a form of interacting whereby relationships are placed at the centre (Mychajluk 2017, 181). Other aspects are participatory decision making, peaceful conflict solving and a mentality of ‘we’ rather than ‘me’. In order to create this culture, Mychajluk (2017) argues that the community has to develop social competencies which happens through a learning process. Ecovillages thus also challenge established social structures. In addition, Escobar (2008, 303) argues that the basic idea of social movements is that we must overcome the liberal capitalist society, which he believes could actually be achieved.

As previously described, within heterotopia, societal norms are questioned and challenged, while they are connected to this perceived mainstream societal context at the same time (Foucault 1986, 24). This involves alternative social ordering which makes the concept potentially useful for studying social movements (Beckett, Bagguley and Campbell 2017, 2). Ecovillages do not exist in a vacuum when performing these activities but are embedded within larger societal structures. Ergas (2010, 33) argues that this involves interactions wherein both actors influence each other. Existing analyses of ecovillages focus mainly on how ideas about outside societal structures, such as consumerism, are balanced

between ecovillagers (Ergas 2010; Mychajluk 2017; 1991). However, the direct relation with outside actors and how these internal dynamics directly influence the relations with outside actors remain unclear.

Ecovillages challenge and question norms as apparent in the wider society, or 'mainstream society' (Lockyer and Veteto 2013). However, the use of the concept 'mainstream society' in opposition to alternative spaces, in this case ecovillages, are concepts one should use carefully⁶ (Ergas 2010; Kosnik 2018; Thornton 1995). We take up Thornton's (1995) critique on the use of this concept while also showing that labels are used by ecovillages to state their alterity. Our theoretical relevance lies in showing that multiple perceptions of mainstream society exist, causing frictions. Hereby we go to some extent against scholars who portray and focus on showing that ecovillages question the norm and by doing this, portray 'the norm' as a static one-sided thing. Because of this we use the term 'perceived mainstream society'.

Since we take different perceptions within the ecovillage into account, we display a deeper understanding of where individual ideals come from and how these cause possible frictions during the construction of communal ideals, while other research on ecovillages takes the already established common ideals as the starting point and analyses difficulties from there.

So, ecovillages act as social movements, resembling a form of heterotopia related to sustainability. We emphasised the relationality between ecovillages and the perceived mainstream society, whereby norms are influenced and constructed in relation to and opposition to society. Both the ecovillagers and actors of the perceived mainstream society will feature in this research. We explore this further through the lens of morality to gain a better understanding of the personal processes behind the construction and implementation of these norms.

⁶ As argued by Thornton (1995, 150-154), the dichotomic use of 'mainstream society' and subculture, complicates a correct description of social phenomena. So, it happens that scholars who have contradicting perceptions of the 'mainstream' apply it in similar studies as the same concept (Thornton 1995, 151). However, concepts have no strict boundaries but are rather fluid in reality. Norms within ecovillages can conflict but also conflate with norms in the perceived mainstream society. Ecovillages collaborate with various societal actors which shows there are no strict boundaries between the perceived mainstream society and ecovillages either (Ergas 2010). However, the term 'mainstream' does carry relevance because when one challenges and questions norms, one positions oneself to a phenomenon which involves naming this a certain way. This is apparent in ecovillages who position themselves to societal trends as 'different' since they question for example the trend of consumerism (Kosnik 2018).

2.4 Morality and ethics. Constructing and living the 'good' in ecovillages (Isa)

We have looked at how ecovillages generally try to pursue different values in the area of sustainability and question the norm, thereby placing them in the context of social movements. We are interested in the relationship between ecovillages and the society against which, through which, but also with which, they perform their alterity. The extent to which this is possible differs from community to community. Researching how distinctions and ideals are put into practice and maintained can, in our view, be approached very interestingly through the lens of morality and ethics. Morality is about what it is that is 'good' and how this 'good', through practices, is defined, performed and experienced (Zigon 2007, 135). For a long time, the motto has been that morality and ethics are in everyone and in everything one does. Therefore, anthropologists have always studied morality and it should thus not be researched as a field on its own (Zigon 2007, 132). Recent perspectives in the anthropology of morality, however, show that focusing on morality is essential. We contribute on a theoretical level by showing that it is necessary to bring in morality to grasp the daily life experiences of ecovillagers for they have to directly negotiate the implementation of ideals with people like neighbours and government officials. This side of morality applied to direct relations with outside actors has not yet been taken up by other anthropologists in exploring ecovillages.

Where Das (2012), Howell (1997) and others focus on the everyday aspects of performing ethics, with a specific focus on language and the action of moral reasoning in having freedom in choosing from different possibilities, there are others who argue that this perspective is analytically narrow and leaves out what ethics and morality mean when reasoning and choices become necessary (Zigon 2009, 79). Zigon (2007, 137) introduces this perspective through moral breakdowns. These entail situations in which somebody steps out of unreflectively experiencing and doing into a situation in which the person consciously has to think and act through an ethical dilemma that presents itself. In short, when something happens out of the norm, we enter the sphere of morality and ethics. Anthropologists should step in at this moment and research how people experience acting through such an ethical dilemma but also how people go back to a normal irreflexive state, albeit this state is altered by the very experience of the ethical dilemma (Zigon 2007, 138). Since ecovillages try to actively and consciously question and differently perform the norm, instances of acting

through ethical dilemmas and stepping out of unreflectively experiencing seem to play a part in ecovillages.

As stated before, ecovillages are the living example of having to deal with the relational character of 'the norm'/'unreflectively experiencing' and 'questioning'/'reflectively acting'. Borsos (2017, 93-94) shows this through stating that ecovillages are influenced by the historical and social environment in which they are (continually) produced. Here again we come full circle from morality back to heterotopia for both occupy themselves with this relationality. Explicitly, relationality entails the direct relationships between the members of the ecovillages themselves and with outside actors, such as officials or institutional actors. By applying morality to these direct relationships, we highlight a continuous dimension of morality that is crucial and often remains unexplored. It is crucial because the ideals that the ecovillage wants to realise, need to be implemented and worked out between the ecovillage and outside actors. In short, the extent to which they can work out the ideals between them, will determine how morality functions within the collaboration.

Robbins (2007) supports and deepens this assertion by bringing our attention to cultural change and value systems. Because of the embedded nature of ecovillages in society, ecovillages have to deal and live with and in between two different valuing systems. When this happens, as Robbins (2007, 300) states, morality becomes an important aspect of life because in that instance, a conflict between values arises. People become much more aware of having the freedom to make choices that relate to different values. Decision-making processes are therefore conscious and full of moral issues (Robbins 2007, 300). Moral decision-making processes are expressed and experienced differently. It can be stable in the sense that people are aware in the day-to-day that their current daily actions are to some extent in conflict with the morally ideal situation (Robbins 2007, 301). On the other hand, some (partially enduring) moments in the lives of people are highly characterised by experiencing cultural change in which this sense of conflict between values is felt very strongly. Moral weight is then put onto all actions that people perform (Robbins 2007, 301-302).

During our research, we have seen that these snapshot moments of a moral breakdown, as described by Zigon (2007; 2009) do occur in the ecovillage. However, this perception of acting with and through morality according to the concept of a moral breakdown is too limited to grasp the continuity of unbroken reflection on your actions on a

day-to-day basis. Robbins (2007) already hints at this a little bit, yet he does not grasp the completeness of the possibility of the long duration of reflection, and the effects that this has on your actions, either. We will demonstrate that it is the continuous nature of morality that makes up the lived reality of the ecovillage in our empirical chapters. In our thesis we highlight the difference between a moral breakdown and the more enduring moments in acting through moral issues, which almost puts people in a liminal phase of acting through morality, by using the concept 'moral dilemma' for the continuous moments of experiencing morality.

In short, we have stated the use of analysing ecovillages as a heterotopic site in which utopian ideals are put into practice and sustained through hope. Ecovillages try to pursue different values in the sphere of sustainability, thereby questioning the norm, which makes them a social movement. We continued exploring the relational character between ecovillages and the social context in which they are continually produced. We ended by stating the use of morality and ethics as a lens through which to research ecovillages to help us understand the experience and process of constructing and maintaining utopian differences between the perceived mainstream and alternative society.

3. Context

In the context chapter we explore the ecovillage movement in the Netherlands. We continue exploring the relational character of Dutch ecovillages and how utopianism and morality feature within these ecovillages. Hereby we demonstrate the relevance of our theoretical concepts in the Dutch context at large. Lastly, we introduce our research site for this thesis: Ecovillage Boekel. We will give an overview of relevant elements of ecovillage Boekel to get an image of it.

3.1 Ecovillages within the Dutch societal structures (Eva)

Today, the amount of ecovillage initiatives in the Netherlands is growing rapidly (Servicepunt: Anders Wonen Anders Leven n.d.). The oldest ecovillage of the Netherlands, the Hobbitstee has existed since 1969. In 2013, the Ecodorpen Netwerk Nederland started and since then several initiatives were set up, causing the movement to gain more attention and support. Dutch ecovillages are often connected to the Global Ecovillage Netwerk (GEN) and the Dutch branch of this: GEN Nederland. The number of residents in an ecovillage varies from eight to several hundreds of people (GEN Nederland, n.d.). In the Netherlands, ecovillages act as social movements through organising activities to spread their visions, influence the norms within the perceived mainstream society and to foster sustainable development (Lockyer and Veteto 2013, 223).

Keeping the sustainable element in mind, ecovillages can also be called ecotopian⁷ social movements (Lockyer and Veteto 2013, 2; De Geus 2002, 189-190). Through entrepreneurial activities as workshops, they interact with surrounding communities (Kosnik 2018, 129). In the current situation of the COVID-19 pandemic this has become complicated, but ecovillages anticipated quickly by organising events online. The way Dutch ecovillages take shape, corresponds to ecovillages in general whose members try to limit their ecological footprint, decrease interference in natural processes and fit human activity into the natural world without harming it (Ergas 2010, 35-36).

Ecovillages experience constraints and opportunities from the dominant culture, in this case the Dutch societal structures (Ergas 2010, 32-33). This brings attention to the

⁷ De Geus (2002) states an ecotopia is an ideal image of something which does not yet exist, a utopia, specifically related to ecological utopian thinking. Supporters of ecotopia question abundant production and consumption, emphasizing a rather sober life with close contact to nature. They strive for an ecological utopia.

relational character of ecovillages with regards to the society in which they are embedded. Relationality is also an important aspect of ecovillages in the Netherlands as will be described below.

As argued by Lockyer and Veteto (2013, 223), the relationship between ecovillages and what is perceived as the mainstream society has changed in the past decades. Technologies and expertise developed in ecovillages are now also used by conventional organisations. Ecovillages are often open to visitors to present more sustainable alternatives (Binay, Itir and Oppewal 2020, 102; Lockyer and Veteto 2013, 223). Ecovillages seem to increasingly profile themselves as active actors who also foster sustainable projects in their surroundings. This transforming relationship works both ways since societal actors too, increasingly recognise the innovative ideas of ecovillages as relevant (Lockyer and Veteto 2013, 227). Additionally, Ergas (2010, 33) states that the larger society shapes the physical environment of the ecovillagers, who in their turn reshape laws and ideologies in society through spreading awareness.

This interrelation is also visible in the Netherlands. Bosch (2017, 55) shows us that ecovillages situated in the Netherlands are all, at a minimum, involved with municipalities, architects, housing corporations and contractors. This shows that ecovillages are embedded in the regulations and governmental structures that exist. The nature of relationality can differ from one ecovillage initiative to the next, but a lot of thought goes into the relations between ecovillages, co-communities and governmental institutions.

Bosch (2017, 59) additionally states that external networks are important to keep engaging in to maintain ecological goals like employing the expertise of someone outside of the ecovillage. As other websites of Dutch ecovillages show us, many provide and need volunteers to help out (Ecodorp Boekel, n.d.; Ecodorp Bergen, n.d.). This corresponds to the statements that ecovillages worldwide are becoming more related to their surrounding communities as well to each other (GEN, n.d.; Lockyer and Veteto 2013, 217).

All in all, what the relational character looks like differs from place to place but this demonstrates that relationality is an important factor in the lived reality of ecovillages in the Netherlands and thus worth researching.

3.2 Ecovillage Boekel (Isa)

The research site of this thesis, Ecovillage Boekel, is located in the east of the Netherlands, on the outskirts of the small village Boekel. On one side, the ecovillage faces the forest while on the other side a new residential area is still in the making. At arrival, you are welcomed by a huge board portraying an image of what the Ecovillage should look like in the future. This utopian image contrasts with the current state, still rather looking like a construction site complete with fences, nine temporary mobile units, a temporary barn and two huge circle shaped buildings still under construction. The circular building closest to the forest, called 'circle one' by the ecovillagers, is almost finished and is already occupied by twelve households. Next to it lies an almost two-acre piece of land that is still looking a bit messy, with mostly grass, some vegetables, two chicken coops and two pigs, but big plans for a large food garden are in the making (Ecodorp Boekel 2020, 23).

The two initiators of covillage Boekel and the first members have occupied the current land since 2016. Throughout the years, the group composition has changed more than a few times. Nine people have left, but many new members joined over the years with a record number of ten people in 2019. During the time of our fieldwork, the ecovillage hosted twelve children and 36 adult members, eight of them living outside the ecovillage waiting for the houses to be finished. Once all the circles are finished, a total of 36 houses will be available for families/singles to live in. In general, people join the ecovillage with the wish to live a sustainable life with likeminded people creating a sense of community with each other. The members have different educational levels and socio-economic backgrounds, but the majority of the members share the fact that they have a history of travelling and living abroad for several years or longer.

The members of ecovillage Boekel have a specific mission and vision. This is expressed in the goals they construct which are based on the SDG's (Sustainable Development Goals) created by the UN (Ecodorp Boekel n.d.). This, as they state, helps them to get their policy clear and thus organise their ideals. These ideals are written in the 'projectplan' which states: "Projectplan for a unique, inspiring example for a sustainable life in connection." They strive for a connection between ecovillagers as well as with outside actors. The culture of the Ecovillage depends on the three pillars: self-reflection, participation and trust (Ecodorp Boekel 2020, 12). The projectplan is based on a utopian ideal which is not yet achieved (More 1997),

generating a tension which causes the ecovillagers to strive to achieve this (Foucault 1986, 24; Lockyer 2007, 9). This involves creating a local economy with 'win-win' situations with their surroundings and outside actors, developing 100% self-sufficiency for energy and sharing knowledge (Ecodorp Boekel 2020, 4-5).

The ecovillage is currently in a phase of development, characterised by a life in which people always seem to be busy working to realise the ideal, either through constructing houses or developing future projects to create collaborations and inspire others. A typical week often looks like this: from Monday to Friday, 08:00-15:00, there are always a few ecovillagers who join the volunteers on the construction site. Saturdays are considered 'social days', it is on these days where you can find most ecovillagers present on the construction site but there is also plenty of opportunity to just have a nice chat with your neighbours. Saturday always ends with a drink at around 4 PM after which most people stick around to share a common meal. Every member should at least spend two days a week helping out in the ecovillage. This includes a wide range of activities such as building, regulating finances, being hostess in the common room, having meetings, cooking common meals and gardening. Although this costs a lot of time, many people consider this a good way of working together to achieve your goals and can appreciate the interactions that come out of working together. Aside from working in the ecovillage, many people have parttime/fulltime jobs in different sectors. However, there are also a few people who have quit their regular job and volunteer fulltime in the ecovillage.

Aside from this, Ecovillage Boekel engages in many different activities with people and organisations that live outside the ecovillage. On the one hand this relational character is 'forced upon' them through the specific rules and regulations of the municipality, the lack of expertise in some areas and need for volunteers to keep up with completing all the work. On the other hand, Ecovillage Boekel also actively seeks out those organisations and people with whom they consider they can work best to achieve their goals (Ecodorp Boekel n.d). An important example of this is active engagement in trying to obtain and become part of a subsidised project by the EU. They achieved this collaboration, as they state, through the work of partner organisations (Ecodorp Boekel n.d.). This allows them to test innovative systems. This shows the importance of the embedded character of the ecovillage and the implications and inherent nature of the relational character of Ecovillage Boekel with people and organisations that lie outside of the direct establishment. The goal of these collaborations is

to create transformational processes within companies, in which their current social and economic structures are fundamentally transformed towards sustainability. By doing this, they engage with a lot of partners and their current 'structures' that they are trying to change and are thus confronted with different valuing systems. All of this, according to Robbins (2007), constantly throws one in the sphere of morality. Navigating different moralities also happens on an interpersonal level within the ecovillage, since each person comes into the ecovillage with specific cultural and personal baggage, having specific motivations to join and interpretations of the projectplan (Mychajluk 2017, 181).

All in all, Ecovillage Boekel hosts plenty of phenomena to be researched within the sphere of the concepts utopia, relationality and morality.



Community Centre Ecovillage Boekel (BEB) with a view on circle three in construction



“Well, we use a lot of new sustainable materials here, such as metisse and lime-hemp. But yes, it is of course about looking for those partners who want to embark on that adventure with us.”⁸

⁸ Participant observation 04-03-2021

Chapter 4. Utopian Ideals of Ecovillage Boekel

A sustainable life in connection (Eva)

On a Wednesday morning eight ecovillagers have gathered in the BEB⁹. Eline enters and greets someone smiling with a hug. Then it is time for the opening round¹⁰ and everyone tells how he/she feels this morning. Pieter, the building coordinator of today, starts with a simple “I didn’t sleep well but am looking forward to today”. Others are also happy to continue building the last two circle-shaped buildings of sustainable houses. After the last one in the round, the tasks are divided, and Pieter puts his helmet on his head: “Let’s start building!”

This illustrates a typical weekday at Ecovillage Boekel, busy building and enjoying daily social contact. Life in the ecovillage is often described as “*leven in het kwadraat*” (“life squared”) because it is experienced as intense, which the ecovillagers mostly see as positive and adventurous. Roos, who initiated the Ecovillage with Jan, told me she feels happy with her adventurous and meaningful life. She explains their motivations to initiate the ecovillage: “We were directly confronted with climate change for the first time when we received a message that a river in Chili dried up because the glacier melted, causing half a million people to evacuate. Then, when our son was born, we wanted to provide him with a better future. I wanted a meaningful life. We got the idea for the ecovillage because Jan wanted a sustainable house with positive impact, and I wanted to realise this with multiple people. We made a website and within three months we received one hundred messages.”¹¹

Their ideals form the basis of the ‘projectplan’, a document signed and supported by every member. This creates a basic collective identity in terms of how to live, act and where to aim for. The vision states: “A world where it is possible to live in connection, also called integral holistic life, to have the freedom to take up the responsibility for the quality of your own life, community building, sustainability and developing personal growth.”¹² This reflects a ‘life worth living’ which is explained by Narotzky and Besnier (2014) as a life people create

⁹ BEB is the abbreviation for ‘Buurthuis Ecodorp Boekel’, a temporary warehouse serving as the community centre and common space of the Ecovillage Boekel.

¹⁰ This opening round is used during meetings and implemented to start the day at the construction site.

¹¹ Interview Roos 18-02-2021 and informal conversation Jan and Roos 17-02-2021

¹² Own translation from Projectplan (Ecodorp Boekel 2020, 4)

in response to the current economic models, as exposed by the world economic crisis. This new life involves a rethinking of current nature of economic life and social relations. Hereby people attempt to create a 'life worth living' for themselves and future generations. This is apparent in the ecovillage as well: "We think in terms of value, not only money. Our values form the basis and we have confidence that eventually this will be expressed by a value in money."¹³ The projectplan also emphasises the creation of a meaningful life, but rather with a focus on sustainability. They attempt to create the utopian ideal of a meaningful 'life in connection' (More 1997). In particular, the connection, by Meike described as "having contact with someone on a deeper, more physical and emotional level"¹⁴ with other ecovillagers, is highly valued. Anna tells: "It [life in the ecovillage] is much more than I expected. It was my dream to find a place where you can have such a fine connection with the people who live here."¹⁵

A 'life in connection' contradicts an individualistic lifestyle through realising the common vision together and frequently interacting with each other. As Imke notes "Here you are somebody, your neighbours know what keeps you occupied."¹⁶ In addition, the ecovillage tries to create a better life for future generations through acting as a heterotopic site, resisting the perceived dominant culture (Johnson 2006, 1). However, the term the ecovillage itself uses is not 'resisting' but 'inspiring'. They attempt to cause a change in the sense that people's actions and societal systems change through spreading an alternative way of sustainable and communal living and sustainable innovations. This is practiced in an inspiring way through "being the change" as Ergas (2010, 40) describes. Meike mentions: "Change starts with yourself"¹⁷, she hopes that by showing "how things can be done differently"¹⁸, the ecovillage initiates societal change. Although acting as a social movement (Lockyer and Veteto 2013, 2), they do not focus on persuading people, but rather on inviting others to come and learn.

As Roos explains, every member can be trusted to support the objectives in the projectplan and act according to these because of the registration procedure¹⁹. However, varying ideals and interpretations of the projectplan exist since everyone brings his or her

¹³ Concluding sentence of a meeting, a dialogue, where ideas were proposed for the future community centre 04-03-2021.

¹⁴ Interview Meike 20-03-2021

¹⁵ Interview Anna 30-03-2021

¹⁶ Informal conversation Imke 10-02-2021

¹⁷ Interview Meike 20-03-2021

¹⁸ Idem

¹⁹ Interview Roos 09-04-2021

personal and cultural baggage (Mychajluk 2017, 181). Everyone's ideals are constructed during the life course: upbringing with environmentally friendly norms and values in a social neighbourhood, friends, own research, work et cetera shape personal values. Additionally, individual ideals are further constructed within the ecovillage through inspiring each other. Roos considers the different personal ideals as positive: "I think freedom is very important, it starts with one's own responsibility, everyone is responsible for the choices they make in life. We will for example never take the airplane for holidays. When someone in the Ecovillage takes the airplane, that's fine, it's your decision. We just trust each other."²⁰

However, different ideals and opinions can cause frictions and disappointments which complicates common decision making of the ecovillage. As Robbins (2007) states, decision making processes are conscious processes characterised by moral issues. The ecovillage makes decisions according to the organisational structure *holarchie*, a non-hierarchic method to take goal-oriented decisions which allows for disagreement. The Ecovillage is organised in 'circles', groups of people which have a specific responsibility to fulfil. They use *holarchie* in different meetings such as 'village circles'²¹, dialogues²² and general members meetings²³. *Holarchie* is very apt to put individual ideals into practice because everyone can create a role, they deem necessary, under the condition that it fits within the projectplan. In addition, reaching the goal of each circle means common ideals are realised. However, Sarah tells: "In practice people have opinions about things which are not their responsibility."²⁴ As she explains, people create boundaries through having opinions and arguing out of personal feelings and emotions. So, in reality, *holarchie* does not yet function to its full potential because of such problems. *Holarchie* depends on the three pillars self-reflection, participation and trust. When people act according to this, ethical disagreements could be overcome. Trust for example prevents people from intervening in others' responsibilities. As Bernard says: "You have to trust that a circle does the right thing, when you do not have that you should join the circle."²⁵

²⁰ Interview Roos 18-02-2021

²¹ A 'village circle' (*dorpscirkel*) is about issues which go beyond the responsibilities of a circle, the lead link and representative link of every circle join this meeting.

²² A 'dialogue' is a meeting for all ecovillagers, the goal is to discover how everyone thinks about a proposal.

²³ During a general members meeting, everyone is invited to react on a more elaborated proposal which is important for the whole ecovillage. Hereafter the proposal is rejected or accepted.

²⁴ Interview Sarah, 03-030-2021

²⁵ Interview Bernard 12-04-2021

In short, the project plan describes a utopian ideal. In line with this, Ecovillage Boekel acts as a social movement, causing change through being the inspiring example of the alternative. In order to realise the visions of the project plan, it is important that everyone acts according to their roles in *holarchie* and trust others so that the decision-making process, and thus the practicing of ideals, is not disrupted. However, the common vision allows much freedom for interpretation which can cause a clash of ethical ideals during the realisation of the ecovillage. This will be further explored in the next chapter.

“You have to show them” the ideals of being an inspiring example (Isa)

“Hey welcome, good to have you here! Well, this is our community centre.” Jan is up early again today to receive some representatives of external parties for an interview. Today a representative from an insurance company and a cameraman have decided to drop by. Each interview starts with a warm reception in the community centre which has a homely atmosphere due to the heating of the fireplace and the wonderful scent of coffee. Jan, a large man somewhere in his 50s, is already wearing his construction helmet and construction shoes. He likes to go to the construction site, consisting of three circular shaped buildings, to give his, now regular, set chat about all the innovative and sustainable building materials that are used.

The insurance man, an innovation manager, also somewhere in his 50s, has already had a lot of contact with Jan, but today is his first time on the site. Jan and the insurance man have signed a contract of collaboration together. On the way to the scaffold in the third circle, which has the best helicopter view of the terrain, they catch up on some personal business. The cameraman, a young guy in sporty clothing, takes a while to find the best spot, but when all the equipment is installed, Jan starts: “Well, we use a lot of new sustainable materials here, such as metisse and lime-hemp. But yes, of course the main thing is looking for those partners who want to embark on that adventure with us.”²⁶

The ecovillage embarking on an ‘adventure’ with partners from the mainstream society is all about creating and initiating projects that will have a positive future effect on current societal structures. The partnership with the insurance company allows the ecovillage to use new

²⁶ Participant observation 04-03-2021

materials such as lime-hemp or a new type of recycled cables. Many other insurance companies will not yet insure these because the materials are so new. By teaming up with this insurance company, the ecovillage hopes to pave the way for others, and taking down some hurdles, to stimulate using sustainable materials and having those insured.

Constructing, creating, and lobbying for an ecological basic income is another project in which utopian ideals of living sustainably come together and coincide with partners outside of the ecovillage. The ecovillage shares ideas with partners, such as certain economists, with a specific vision about how to mould different kinds of economic structures²⁷. Realising this project also requires finding other institutionalised partners, such as de Sociale Verzekeringsbank (SVB), in order to make the project work. Here, concrete articulations of oppositions of the current social order are present because they want to differently construct current economic structures. This, according to Hébert (2016, 3), makes an ecovillage a place of creating social change. Not only does the aspect of creating social change become apparent, the very idea of wanting to construct an ecological basic income, for which certain partners are needed, shows us that utopian ideals form the base from which certain partnerships are selected and necessary.

The heterotopic relational character is strongly demonstrated here between this ecovillage and outside actors. After all, there is a questioning of currently accepted relationships between places and people (Foucault 1986, 23-24) (in this case both on a social and economic level) between the ecovillage that comes up with a 'new' idea that has to be implemented in society at large. Furthermore, this questioning of currently accepted relationships between places and people is also present in the very act of approaching those organisations against which they also want to act out their ideals. This requires a restructuring and rethinking of the relationship between the ecovillage and such institutions. The resistance and relational character that are inherently present in being a heterotopic site, are also present in this kind of partnership, as explained by Beckett, Bagguley and Campbell (2017, 7-9), who focus on the fact that you cannot escape the current power relations that are in place. The ecovillage is going to have to work with the exact power relations against which they are also trying to work to make the ecological basic income a fact. In short, the definition and concept of heterotopia (Foucault 1986), seems to be very relevant in the case of this ecovillage

²⁷ Online meeting 01-03-2021

and its contact with outside actors and it shows us how a relational character requires and presupposes change.

This restructuring and rethinking of current relationships are what the members of the ecovillage call creating transformational processes within the companies with which they want to collaborate. Sarah explains it like this: “[...]you know, it is the most complex thing we ask actually. We ask people to step away from ‘the old economy’, to really free themselves from it and let them decide that you have to operate from a new ground. So, to let this different attitude take shape within the ‘new economy’. But that is quite the structural change, and we cannot force that onto them. We can only invite them to join the ecovillage.”²⁸ The self-description of the ecovillage in this regard lines up with how social movements are understood and operate when the focus indeed lies on challenging institutional authorities within civil society to cause social transformation with a solution based perspective and specific entrepreneurial activities (Schehr 1997; Snow, Soule and Kriesi 2004; Susser 2016; Ergas 2010). Succeeding in creating this in companies and organisations would, therefore, be the ultimate ideal for the ecovillage.

However, to bring about such changes, in which entire structures have to be rethought, the ecovillage has encountered some ‘bumps’ along the way²⁹. Encountering these ‘bumps’, however, is also part of the very utopic ideal the ecovillage strives for. This becomes clear when Jasper, involved in different circles relating to collaborations with outside actors, compares the ecovillage to an icebreaker when he discusses some of the issues they face in the relationship with the contractor and the ‘construction world’ in general: “I compare our initiative to an icebreaker, you know, the kind of ship that has to go through this sea of ice first, it costs a lot of fuel, it’s quite hard to pave this way, but the things we do here will be taken up in the laws concerning construction, so we pave the way through experiments here. I mean, right now what we do is experimental but for others it will be an option later on. So we see and understand here that it will take more effort to complete things and we accept that.”³⁰ In short, the ecovillage understands that they will encounter ‘bumps’ in trying to realise their utopian ideal of setting up new possibilities and creating social change, from which the rest of society will profit.

²⁸ Informal conversation Sarah 07-04-2021

²⁹ Interview Jan 19-02-2021

³⁰ Interview Jasper 26-03-2021

Aside from being an ‘icebreaker’, the ecovillage can also lean on experience in knowing that collaborations can be very fruitful. It is therefore that the ecovillage always enters into collaborations with a lot of positivity and enthusiasm. As Peter explains: “We always get into contact with the good side of the organisation, with the innovation experts, the pioneers or the lone wolfs.”³¹ This shows us that the direct contact is searched for and characterised by looking for that shared notion of wanting to realise (utopian) ideals and innovation. This searching for those contacts with that shared vision mainly falls under Jan’s responsibilities. He quit his regular nine-to-five job to completely immerse himself into this new ‘job’, working for the ecovillage. Jan spends a lot of time searching for new partners and attending conferences that might be useful for the ecovillage and the partners they could possibly collaborate with. “Every morning I spend about 15 minutes sifting through Twitter, and if I find anything useful, I sign us up immediately.”³² It is this attitude that Jan himself describes as saying ‘yes’ to everything and going with the flow. “Go with the flow, do all kinds of things, seek publicity, go to symposia, make PR, until at some point someone hears about you [...] if someone invites you to something you should never say no.”³³ It is mostly through this personal attitude and approach, which Peter describes as Jan always being enthusiastic and able to create a win-win situation³⁴, that the ecovillage was able to participate in a lot of collaborations. This has created lots of opportunities for the ecovillage to develop itself.

In all this, we have found that the claim Bryant and Knight (2019) and Hébert’s (2016) make, that hope is necessary to create and realise visions of utopia, is also present in the common knowledge/common experience in the ecovillage in that they ‘know’ that there are always people in certain positions out there that will help them realise their ideals. However, by shining light on the coupled use of the concepts of social change, utopian ideals and how hope functions in bridging the gap of what is ‘now’, what the ‘ultimate ideal’ is and the reality of the ‘in-between’, we see that the definition of how hope is used in Bryant and Knight (2019) can be understood differently in the case of the ecovillage. Hope here does not come from possible ‘wishful thinking’ of how the future will turn out and how to act on this. Hope in the ecovillage is based on experience (more like an educated guess). Bryant and Knight (2019) do not cover this aspect in detail but as we have shown, based on the experience of knowing that

³¹ Interview Peter 07-03-2021

³² Small talk Jan 22-02-2021

³³ Interview Jan and Roos 17-02-2021

³⁴ Interview Peter 07-03-2021

the ecovillage will always get into contact with the co-operative sides of organisations, we show that a broader understanding of hope exists in the real lived experience of people.

Conclusion (Isa and Eva)

As we described in this chapter, multiple aspects are both apparent within the ecovillage as in relation to external actors. In each case, the main utopian ideal the ecovillagers aim for is to create alternatives to current structures and 'ways of doing' that are found in the perceived mainstream society. In trying to realise this utopian ideal that should inspire change, the focus lies on 'show, don't tell'. This results in the fact that the ecovillage makes certain choices that other people can see. Outside actors are invited to behold and participate in a different way of 'doing business' and getting inspired by that, rather than letting the ecovillage voice what should be different and how this should be accomplished. Moreover, personal characteristics like skills, knowledge and positive attitude help to make collaborations successful.

However, sometimes different value structures exist, both in collaborations with external parties as between members within the ecovillage. These can lead to moral dilemmas as described in the following chapter.

Chapter 5. Moral dilemmas and breakdowns (Eva and Isa)

In this chapter we discuss what kinds of moral breakdowns, as described by Zigon (2007; 2009), occur in the relationships between the members as well as with outside actors. Moral breakdowns, however, are too limited a concept to accurately represent the daily lived morality of the ecovillage. It is for this reason that we use the word moral dilemma when the concept of a moral breakdown falls short.

From Utopia to reality (Eva)

As described before, individual ecovillagers have their own interpretations and ideals within the common vision, the projectplan. Regularly morality comes to the fore when they have to consciously negotiate conflicting values between ecovillagers (Mychajluk 2017, 181; Robbins 2007, 300). This paragraph explores how moral dilemmas and breakdowns evolve and are experienced by the ecovillagers.

To begin with, morality comes regularly to the fore when a utopian ideal cannot be implemented because of practical issues such as regulations and limited budget. As Roos tells: “We have just one fifth of the land we originally aimed for.”³⁵ The design of the houses also changed, and the proportion of sustainable building materials decreased. As Pieter explains: “There is no free choice for the most ethical and sustainable materials, mostly because of the limited budget.”³⁶ These practical boundaries cause a moral breakdown because they have to adjust the utopian dream to a less ideal alternative.

Living in the ecovillage asks for much commitment and flexibility because of the constant development involving changing circumstances. However, several people have been so committed that they exceeded their limits of carrying capacity, leading to physical and mental exhaustion. Denise tells: “Everyone is doing the same as they did outside the Ecovillage [...] Taking up huge responsibilities without being able to let go of this.”³⁷

This shows that in the process of realising an alternative way of life, actually a temporary situation of a life they want to refrain from is created. The common ideal is that everyone should do what one likes and not do too much. Moreover, their aim is being an inspiring example of how to live a healthy ‘life in connection’ where everyone can develop their talents. However, the workload and time pressure from deadlines leads to less attention

³⁵ Interview Roos 18-02-2021

³⁶ Informal conversation Pieter 09-04-2021

³⁷ Interview Denise 31-03-2021

to connection and people become overstressed when they take more responsibilities than they can carry. For example, people working at the construction site feel responsible since they have the knowledge and skills to realise things in a professional way. Additionally, Vincent worked 50-60 hours a week before he lived here, but he wanted to stop this and be home with his family more often. However, now he is doing almost the same by working fulltime on the construction site in the ecovillage. This situation is something the ecovillagers see as being part of the mainstream society, thus a way of living they want to refrain from.

This situation brings the whole ecovillage in a continuous state of questioning their moral position. It is a dilemma about what is the 'good': working hard to meet the deadlines and reach the common ideals although this means much stress for the ecovillage; or change this and focus more on well-being and social connection. However, some people taking many responsibilities consider dropping these responsibilities impossible, they see the deadlines and time pressure as unavoidable and accept the stressful situation in the hope it gets better. Where Zigon (2007) notes when someone first enters the sphere of morality, here people keep going without making a conscious decision of 'what is right'. They postpone an ethical reflection on this because they feel continuing is the only option. Others who disagree with the course of the process consciously argue people should take more rest and focus on the degrading connection and well-being. Some experience a moral breakdown when they suddenly realise it becomes too much, physically and/or mentally, when exceeding their limits and become confronted with different options (Zigon 2007, 138). Anna for example fell, forcing her to take rest during which she realised that she put too much time in the ecovillage. Thereafter she was able to set her limits strictly.

In addition, this is a dilemma of who is responsible to guard one's limits, most ecovillagers consider this as personal responsibility to learn. However, people enter the sphere of morality when others draw attention to a moral issue, aiming to help change their behaviour (Zigon 2007, 137). Last year for example, Koen noticed that everyone was worn out, grumpy and stressed³⁸. Roos describes the situation: "We lived in temporary units, but we had to leave them because we signed a contract which was at its end. So these were taken while the houses were not even fished. This was a very busy period."³⁹ During this time Koen experienced a moral dilemma because of the ongoing situation of people being stressed. He

³⁸ Informal conversation Koen 10-04-2021

³⁹ Interview Roos 18-02-2021

took up the responsibility to prevent the situation getting out of hand. He sent an e-mail, convincing everyone to take a week break. Through putting this under attention, others became conscious or were confirmed in their experience of the untenable situation, entering the sphere of morality, and considered taking some rest as a good, more healthy option.

However, in January the ecovillage went through a new moral dilemma, as Roos says: “Everyone was exhausted again. There were unsolved tensions.”⁴⁰ Koen explains: “It became clear there was a dichotomy in the group.”⁴¹ This was related to varying ideals and interpretations of connection. A small group of people aimed for a deep form of connection with everyone whereby the group spends much time together during dialogues and ‘connection days’⁴². Most people disliked the obligational aspect, that was experienced by interlocuters as ‘therapeutic’, to strengthen the connection. Peter experienced it as follows: “It became too psychological, it made me feel indisposed. There are always tensions in a group, but this was deeper.”⁴³ Also Pieter disliked this approach: “I think there should be attention for connection, but that can take many forms. We had too many meetings, lots of talking. For me that does not feel like connecting but rather as burdening.”⁴⁴ However, Jolijn preferred this deeper form of connection: “Here the focus is on sustainable building and being an inspiring example to the outside, but we want to focus more on the process of how to do this together, to care and personal development. This proportion feels unbalanced now.”⁴⁵

This small group, although having lived here for a long time, gradually moved into another direction than the rest of the ecovillage and “unconsciously tried to change the original vision of social connection.”⁴⁶ The greater group felt fine by having a deeper connection with just some people and disliked the time-consuming and ‘therapeutic’ conversations to encourage connection. So different visions about how to connect and the level of connection existed, causing a moral dilemma for most ecovillagers through consciously discussing, rethinking and promoting their values about connection with each other over a longer period, rather than within a sudden moment of moral breakdown as Zigon (2007) describes.

⁴⁰ Informal conversation Koen 10-04-2021

⁴¹ Interview Roos 18-02-2021

⁴² ‘Connection days’ (*verbindingsdagen*) were days for all ecovillagers, giving workshops about certain themes to strengthen the connection between each other. One example is a workshop that was given about nonviolent communication.

⁴³ Interview Peter 07-03-2021

⁴⁴ Interview Pieter 24-03-2021

⁴⁵ Interview Jolijn 23-02-2021

⁴⁶ Interview Roos 18-02-2021

A difference in mentality about professionalism amongst ecovillagers also shows a moral dilemma. According to Peter, this is one of the main differences between the ecovillagers, concerning how people do the work. He illustrates this: “We receive an email: can everyone put three potatoes in the BEB which we will plant. But then you find a mix of floury and solid boiling potatoes in your pot. Very cosy, but that is no professional gardening and no useful result.”⁴⁷ He explains this ‘unprofessional’ approach conflicts with the approach of people working on more complicated projects such as realising an ecological income. This requires an attitude which involves a systematic approach similar to paid work requiring specific knowledge and skills, in contrast with the social approach of doing things together. Although all ecovillagers seem to treat each other equally, Denise experiences that circle ‘social’ is taken less serious during village circles, seemingly because they are seen as ‘unprofessional’ by other circles who have specific work/education experience in for example finances. At the construction site, professionalism is also an upcoming issue since only some people are sufficiently experienced or had specific training for it. Thomas, working as building coordinator, describes Saturday “as hell”⁴⁸ because he sees socialising as incompatible with professional building. Different ‘professional’ approaches cause a moral dilemma. As Peter describes: “It is more a gossip, I only say it in their face when there is a proper occasion for it.”⁴⁹ This way people like Peter remain conscious of this moral dilemma, which occasionally comes up but is mostly not discussed with the one’s having different ideas about it.

Moral dilemmas also arise when individual ideals clash with common ideals. An example is about two pigs which are brought into the Ecovillage to get rid of couch grass in the garden. After a few months they will be slaughtered because they are not property of the Ecovillage. The slaughtering of the pigs contradicts the norms of several ecovillagers concerning animal welfare. Imke struggles with this: “I’m a bit disappointed about the lacking prevention for animal suffering. I think it is very unfortunate that we have meat pigs in the garden. The awareness concerning this subject is very low. I would like to find more like-minded people here.”⁵⁰ However, having the animals does not contradict the projectplan, so individual ideals conflict with common ideals, causing a moral dilemma for these individuals.

⁴⁷ Interview Peter 07-03-2021

⁴⁸ Informal conversation Thomas 08-03-2021

⁴⁹ Interview Peter 07-03-2021

⁵⁰ Interview Imke 14-04-2021

In short, although a common vision exists, the ecovillagers regularly deal with moral dilemmas. These are caused by conflicting ideals and opinions between ecovillagers, but also because of practical limitations forcing the ecovillagers to choose between other, less ethical options. People go through a moral breakdown when something happens out of the norm (Zigon 2009). However, it is complicated to determine a situation of 'the norm' and an unreflective state since the ecovillage is in a stage of development where much is happening and regularly something 'breaks down' during disagreements, as became clear from past year's tensions as described above, which brought the ecovillagers in a moral dilemma over a longer period of time (Zigon 2007, 137). The following sentence illustrates this: "The only thing that is certain in this Ecovillage, is that nothing is certain."⁵¹ So I argue the ecovillagers are mostly not in an unreflective state but have to consciously negotiate moral issues during a longer period of time, rather showing a moral dilemma.

"What it really means to be an icebreaker" difficulties the ecovillage faces (Isa)

There appear to be three main reasons and types of collaborations the ecovillage has with outside actors. First, there is the voluntary type. Many of the relationships the ecovillage enters into are voluntary or come down to being approached voluntarily by people. As Jan describes: "We hardly ever need to find someone to get something done or try something new because we are approached so often."⁵² This does require an active attitude of attending every conference that may be relevant and thus building up a gigantic network, as Jan explains. These partnerships usually entail two parties that want to try to construct something new and supposedly "embark on the adventure together". These kinds of relationships are often talked about and experienced in a very positive manner.

Then there are the partnerships that are entered into, not because something cannot be realised in any other way, but on the basis of a decision to get something subsidised or to do something for zero budget. The moral dilemmas that sometimes occur here are related to having to shift the focus of a project. This entails for instance the experience of changing the focus of the community centre, to that of an education centre. With this come different expectations and implementations, such as the need to give workshops, for that is a 'demand'

⁵¹ Comment during social circle 16-03-2021

⁵² Interview Jan 19-02-2021

that comes with being an education centre⁵³. This change in focus is based on the fact that if you are or want to be subsidised, you are sometimes obliged to follow certain rules which can diverge somewhat from the original ideal you had in mind. Being influenced to adjust your ideals by an organisation shows this heterotopic relationship in which the ecovillage is to a large extent subjected to the wishes of institutions of 'mainstream' society, thereby showing the dynamics of hierarchy and authority and the power relations that you cannot escape (Kadir 2016; Foucault 1986; Beckett, Bagguley and Campbell 2017).

Lastly, however, there are the relationships and collaborations that must be entered into on the basis of necessity. When there is not a lot of choice in selecting partners, the ecovillage has some more difficult experiences of collaborations. This is when morality, according to Zigon (2007; 2009), comes to the fore because reasoning and choices become necessary in these kinds of collaborations. There are two collaborations in particular that especially hold issues over morality at the core that cause moral breakdowns and dilemmas, namely the relationship with the green contractor and with the municipality and its inhabitants.

The 'green' contractor

It's 07:45, different ecovillagers walk in and out of the community centre. Usually this is the hour at which some ecovillagers show up to start the working day on the construction site.

The people present now, however, do not belong to the usual group that shows up on Tuesday mornings. The atmosphere is tense and there are little groups, from different 'circles', chatting to each other here and there. There are two men, completely 'geared up' in white suits sitting alone at a table somewhere in the back. They are drinking coffee and following the movements of the other ecovillagers, waiting to see what is going to happen next. "Oh come on!! This is sooo annoying..." shouts one of the ecovillagers.

As it turns out, the plasterers, the guys in the white suits who have been doing a great job of plastering the walls in the second circle, have been told they cannot continue working, not today nor the rest of the week, by an affiliate of the contractor because they do not meet the requirements according to their standards. This is an unexpected blow to the ecovillage who thought they had arranged this set-up well. Not only that, but this setback might also

⁵³ Small talk Daan 16-02-2021

delay the 'moving in date' for some people. Where one person thinks it's a lame trick, the other also sees the contractor's point of view. In any case, there is a lot of commotion because no one knows exactly what is going on. Finally, someone gets a hold of the subcontractor. He will come to the community centre in half an hour to discuss the situation...

This morning is nothing like the usual start of the day for most ecovillagers. It is not the first time, nor the last, that tensions are running high between the ecovillage and the contractor. Although the conflict was solved by the end of the day through a lot of conversations, the event caused a break from the normal way of acting which required reflective thinking and decision-making. This is exactly what Zigon (2007, 137-139) would describe as a moral breakdown.

This is not the only time when a moral breakdown occurs. The ecovillage started this collaboration as "a bunch of amateurs and volunteers who do this in the evening hours."⁵⁴ This, according to some, paved the way for some 'open ends' in the contract because they were lacking professional knowledge and assistance⁵⁵. From this structure of the collaboration, the contractor takes the opportunity to bill for jobs that were thought to be contracted work and asks that decisions are made in a short time span. These short-term decisions that must be made also rupture and break the flow of the normal meeting structure of the ecovillage, every two weeks, and puts pressure on the decision-making process that is in place causing another form of a moral breakdown.

The concept of a moral breakdown is a useful concept for understanding a 'snapshot' moment or event. For example, when it comes down to sudden and short-term decision-making or the incident concerning the plasterers. In short, both parties are in direct contact with each other, and the breakdown is resolved once both parties agree on a way of dealing with the issue. The concept of a moral breakdown, however, does not leave enough space for the entire experience linked to morality with the contractor. The people of the ecovillage are living in constant anticipation of the next "clash" which influences their actions on a day-to-day basis. For instance, in the beginning, a process of learning together (another utopian ideal of the ecovillage) formed the base from which the collaboration was set up which required a

⁵⁴ Interview Peter 07-03-2021

⁵⁵ Interview Jasper 26-03-2021

lot of trust on both sides. For example, the 'deal' was made that both parties were allowed full access to each other's finances because they were not yet sure how applying sustainability would take shape⁵⁶. By using trust to such an extent, which is not at all common in the construction world⁵⁷, the ecovillage is aiming to create social change by showing that business can be done in this way. Gradually, however, the approach of the director/management of the contractor changed. The ideal and 'execution' of trust altered because the contractor turned out not to be transparent in the finances according to the perception of the ecovillage. In dealing with this unforeseen lack of trust and transparency, the ecovillage is going through a continuing learning process to rethink their perceptions of trust. This has resulted in the ecovillage continuously and consciously taking up more and more tasks themselves because they want to control what is happening, by whom and how much it costs, since they no longer work with the contractor in 'blind faith'. Because both the ecovillage and the contractor have a different perception of what trust entails and how it should be valued, the ecovillage feels it must make certain decisions. As Robbins (2007, 300) states, this decision-making process is then full of moral issues. Indeed, by taking up more tasks themselves, the ecovillage is continuously thinking with and acting through moral decisions that relate to still being able to work with the contractor, not being squeezed, but also not angering the contractor through their actions, because that would complicate the relationship even more.

In short, the concept of a moral breakdown does not leave enough space for the above-described experience of morality in the ecovillage because a breakdown does not allow for endless continuity. We show that by a coupled use of applying morality to initiatives that also want to challenge the normal way of things and therefore must experiment a lot and constantly need to learn, morality and moral choices need to be understood as more enduring liminal actions. This is exactly where the relevance of this research emerges. By zooming in on those specific direct relationships between the ecovillage and outside actors, the understanding surfaced that through the relational and heterotopic character of the ecovillage wanting to create social change, a lot of interaction and negotiations of perceptions take place (whether physical or anticipated interactions) between the ecovillage and outside actors. This constantly throws them into a continuous sphere of morality. This is something other researchers do not focus on given their attention lies with understanding balancing

⁵⁶ Interview Pieter 09-04-2021

⁵⁷ Idem

larger societal structures. In short, it is through a focus on direct relationships that an understanding of continuity in morality beyond the moral breakdown is demonstrated.

PR communication

The situation with the contractor also creates a moral breakdown within the ecovillage concerning the communication about the relationship with the contractor facing outwardly. This lines up with Das (2021, 136) and Howell (1997, 20) stating that often it is also the discourse that accompanies the actions that is important to research when it concerns morality or moral actions. Up until now, the publicity outwards about the contractor has been of a (very) positive nature⁵⁸. This is not, however, a realistic reflection of how the relationship is perceived by both the ecovillage and the contractor⁵⁹. Multiple interests play a role in the communication outwards. On the one hand, they find it difficult to communicate their struggles with the contractor because it does not go according to their standards of sustainability. Alongside this are the expectations from the partners that subsidise them as well. Sarah explains: "We are not happy with it. And actually, that is not even the right way of putting it, we are just ashamed of it. We no longer want to associate our name with it. With those kinds of practices."⁶⁰

On the other hand, however, a 'moral' obligation is felt by the ecovillagers to speak honest and realistic about the collaboration, Sarah continues: "It is also fair I think for us that we do that, number one in our constitution focuses on that we first attempt self-reflection, so that also applies to the relationship with the contractor and the whole project."⁶¹ This moral obligation clashes with their other experience described above and causes a moral breakdown in those moments when they have to consider how and what to publish about the relationship with the contractor.

Boekel and its inhabitants

Thinking about how you can express yourself, the consequences your words carry and how morality functions in this, also seem to play a large role in the moral dilemmas the ecovillage faces in the relationship with the municipality. The relationship with the municipality is very

⁵⁸ Participant observation 04-03-2021

⁵⁹ Participant observation 06-04-2021

⁶⁰ Interview Sarah 08-04-2021

⁶¹ Idem

positive at one moment and difficult at other times. The relationship once started on a very positive note when they were more or less invited to place the ecovillage in this specific municipality⁶². The municipality has made real compromises here and there in favour of the ecovillage when it comes to land allocation. However, once the elections took hold, several political parties took the ecovillage as a focus of their campaign and cast them in a bad light. On a personal level, this has led to bad experiences for ecovillagers with the rest of the neighbourhood/residents of the municipality of Boekel. Anna describes the current situation as one in which the ecovillage is like an island within the municipality⁶³. The relationship is better at the moment, but as Lot explains, the ecovillage itself still consciously takes into account what they can or cannot express strongly and to what extent their messages can be politically coloured⁶⁴. Balancing these considerations concerning discourse make up the moral dilemmas presented to the ecovillage because they continuously have to think about how to express themselves and have to make calculated decisions. As Jan explains: “we do not participate in any anti-agrarian events, that is a very conscious choice you know. Boekel is an agrarian community, there are so many agrarians or people related to the sector that live here and have for generations. Getting mixed up in the anti-agrarian protests or voicing our opinion about that would only create more animosity in the community.”⁶⁵

The moral dilemmas that come up here seem to be related to a ‘triangle’ affiliation in which each ‘actor’, those being the ecovillage, the inhabitants, and the municipality, influences the opportunities or strategies for the other. As long as the inhabitants (both direct neighbours and those further away) maintain a certain negative stereotypical image of the ecovillage, the municipality can respond to this in a political manner thereby influencing the opportunities of the ecovillage. The ecovillage, in turn, cannot express itself to the extent that they might want to, as described above, because that will negatively influence the relationship with the inhabitants. Possible strategies to break through these dilemmas are described in the next chapter.

⁶² Interview Jan 18-02-2021

⁶³ Informal conversation Anna 11-02-2021

⁶⁴ Interview Lot 27-02-2021

⁶⁵ Interview Jan 16-02-2021

Conclusion (Isa and Eva)

We both argue that a certain continuity has to be taken into account when ecovillagers experience moral dilemmas. This adds to Zigons (2007; 2009) perception of moral events when we see that the ecovillage remains in a liminal state of morality because they live in constant anticipation of what is to come. Moreover, there seems to be a struggle in professionalism, and the lack thereof, in both relationships between the members as well as with outside actors that cause certain moral dilemmas and breakdowns. Besides this, we see that these moral issues evolve differently in both relations concerning the dynamics of the group.

Within the ecovillage a freedom to have different moralities is present and highly valued. However, it is this very freedom of moralities that leads to difficulties between ecovillagers. On the other hand, in the moral dilemmas the ecovillage faces with outside actors, we see the values of the ecovillagers as a group are more aligned. So, we see that in collaborations with outside actors, the ecovillage functions more as a group.



Drawing made by Bernard after an intense and emotional 'sharing'



“We can start working as a green contractor ourselves. There are plenty of people who know how it works now. We manage a budget, we have gained a lot of technical knowledge, we also build ourselves and maintain the planning and the process and working with volunteers. It is, you just really get trained.”⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Interview Jasper 26-03-2021

Chapter 6. How to negotiate conflicting ideals (Eva and Isa)

This chapter explains strategies the ecovillagers develop to work through ethical and moral issues. We use the concept of institutionalisation in a way in which the ecovillage does not have a strict 'company policy' kind of set-up and/or regulations. Rather, we apply institutionalisation as a process providing structure for the ecovillagers since the ecovillage is still in development and strategies are created on the way.

Collectively learning to work through moral dilemmas (Eva)

Different values and opinions exist between ecovillagers. Since these differences can affect everyone and/or disrupt decision-making, these should be worked through. Ecovillagers develop strategies in order to work through these moral breakdowns and dilemmas, thereby attempting to solve and prevent disagreements. These strategies, next to the *holarchie* method, help to take decisions and realise ideals.

Roos tells what someone said who gave tips for the ecovillage: "When the roots are good and healthy, a beautiful tree can grow, but then you really have to make sure this basis, the group, is right."⁶⁷ This illustrates the importance to have a strong collaborative group cohesion and shared vision in order to realise the common utopian ideal. Additionally, when everyone feels good and is committed, this contributes to the functioning of the Ecovillage. Because of this, personal development is encouraged whereby the three pillars, self-reflection, participation and trust, form the basics of the ecovillage culture (Ecodorp Boekel 2020).

To create a strong basis, a 'connected' group, for a cooperative culture, 'sharings' are organised. These are gatherings where everyone can share everything what keeps one occupied at the emotional level. 'Sharings' provide a safe situation to release tensions and to build trust and understanding between people. Bernard explains: "I think sharings are valuable, for myself to make clear what keeps me occupied. It also strengthens the connection between others, you get to know each other as a person. I would for example like to talk to people in a sharing who I normally don't talk to that often because I'm curious what keeps them occupied at a deeper level."⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Interview Roos 18-02-2021

⁶⁸ Interview Bernard 12-04-2021

Using a fixed method to facilitate 'sharings' shows a way of institutionalising the sharing of feelings. This provides structure by offering fixed moments, apart from coincidental informal moments. It helps to prevent moral breakdowns through releasing tensions and creating mutual understanding before disagreements evolve into enduring moral dilemmas as described before. Additionally, the opening round every morning and during *holarchie* meetings provides fixed moments to share feelings.

As Das (2012) argues, morality exists in everyday practices, which means there should be a focus on language and communication when expressing ethical commitments. Interlocuters have mentioned the importance of proper communicating, for example a moral discourse of nonviolent communication is emphasised. This involves certain institutionalised steps someone should follow to solve conflicts, starting with self-reflection to discover why one feels tension and what is triggering this. Following the method correctly means the tension can be solved and someone returns to a normal unreflective state.

However, conflicting values can grow and start affecting other ecovillagers as happened when different ideas existed about connection. This led to tensions because people experienced the way social connection was encouraged as too 'heavy'. Improving social connection became in a sense too 'institutionalised' since there were too many formal occasions in which things were discussed or people tried to improve connections (for example, obligated connection days). Jasper and Koen took up the responsibility to discover the specifics of these tensions because: "we both heard various things, we wanted to know what people were thinking. For my safety but also for the group, to regain the trust that we do this together."⁶⁹ This involved a list of questions ('thermometer'), giving every ecovillager anonymously the opportunity to tell their experiences. Then it became clear there was a conflicting ideal about social connection between a small group of people and the rest. Jasper tells: "During the thermometer five people said they would leave the village. It led to clarity for the group, I think the whole group could breathe again, became more relaxed."⁷⁰

So, this moral dilemma could be worked through because two people took the responsibility to discover the core of the tensions. Eventually it could only be worked through by people leaving because their ideal of the 'right way to connect' differed too much from the rest. One person told she is still experiencing this dilemma: "I still don't know if this [current

⁶⁹ Interview Jasper 12-03-2021

⁷⁰ Idem

connection] is sufficient for me. It brings much for many people, but I'm not sure if it is enough for me at the long term."⁷¹

In addition, Jasper organised a 'clearing' during this period. He explains the reason to organise this: "Someone wanted therapy, someone else just wanted to live with each other and see each other. This was not dovetailed, multiple people were bothered by this and clashed."⁷² The goal of a clearing is to 'clear' the air, which means interpersonal tensions are solved. Through doing this in a group, others can learn from aspects they recognize and understand each other better. During this period, tensions influenced the whole group, when this is cleared everyone benefits. Alongside this, *opstellingen*⁷³ are used to solve tensions. Moreover, *holarchie* shows an institutionalised way of decision-making since everyone should act according to one's role and *holarchie* rules during meetings. These methods show an institutionalisation of conflict solving and social practices since people work through disagreements in specific ways (Abercrombie, Hill & Turner 1988, 124). This provides guidance to work through a moral dilemma/breakdown collectively.

These common strategies increase trust and support the discussion of conflicting ethical issues, but also individual ways to work through dilemmas exist. This relates to the social competencies people develop to realise a cooperative culture. Mychajluk (2017, 185) mentions four competencies which also came to the fore in Ecovillage Boekel as highly valued and important for the social functioning of the group. Firstly, inclusive discussion and decision-making through in this case using and acting according to *holarchie*. Secondly, an honest and compassionate communication which here involves nonviolent communication or common strategies, both between individuals as during a clearing or *opstelling*. Thirdly, embracing diversity of people and perspectives which means here accepting different opinions and trusting others will carry out their responsibilities properly. Fourthly, inner work which here mainly involves self-reflection and guarding limits. These competencies come back in the manners as stated in the projectplan (attachment 2). The essence of these manners are the three pillars which are institutionalised since everyone is expected to act according to these.

⁷¹ Interview Denise 31-03-2021

⁷² Interview Jasper 12-03-2021

⁷³ In an *opstelling* a situation is played out by other people within the group, directed by the one who brought this up. It serves to look at a conflict situation in order to clarify the dynamics and possible mistakes. This is used about two times a year.

In addition, as I have heard and seen, to create a cooperative culture, everyone has to be flexible in order to accept the change of plans and ideas, meaning people have to be adaptive since the situation constantly changes. Meike illustrates this: “In the projectplan was stated what we wanted, but we often deviated from this. The projectplan was the dream, but a lot of things were just unfeasible because of budget limitations or because a lack of support by the main group. We made decisions not everyone agreed with. Someone for example highly valued self-sufficiency, so it was very difficult for her when we became connected to the power grid.”⁷⁴ Although people left for various reasons (often because their ideals differed too much or the group is too big), it is partly related to having too many difficulties with adapting to the changing practical circumstances, which often means letting go of the utopian ideal. As Evelien, one of the ‘older’ ecovillagers living here since 2016, says: “The vision hasn’t changed since we live here, only practical things like the shape of the houses.”⁷⁵ Every individual works differently through dilemmas caused by practical limitations, Meike tells: “It was a mourning process I went through. The projectplan was presented as a promise, which appeared to be a dream.”⁷⁶

The conflicting ideas about the pigs also ask for flexibility and adaptation. Some accept it because it is seen as the most sustainable and ethical solution, or because it is not their responsibility as non-members of the circle ‘garden and green’. Imke worked through the moral breakdown by leaving this circle and thus dropping the responsibility without disrupting the decision and causing a moral dilemma for everyone. Roos reflects on this: “I think it is a respectful way how she deals with it, she keeps her principles but does not try to change the Ecovillage.”⁷⁷ However, Imke is still working on a plan to save them from the slaughterhouse, now experiencing it is a moral dilemma because it is still present for her.

Hope in a collective learning process

Through the years the ecovillage implemented the described tools, but the ecovillagers also learn that some should not be implemented a certain way or not at all. For example, ‘connection days’ are no longer organised because of lacking support. The ecovillagers are now aware of the value of using different methods: “It is a fact that conflicts just arise between

⁷⁴ Interview Meike 20-03-2021

⁷⁵ Informal conversation Evelien 14-04-2021

⁷⁶ Interview Meike 20-03-2021

⁷⁷ Interview Roos 09-04-2021

people, always. I think in a group like this, you should not be dependent on one mode that does not fit everyone.”⁷⁸ This also applies to social connection; one prefers bonding activities such as ‘sharings’, others prefer other ways of connecting such as working together.

However, they still try to find the right way to create connection which fits everyone’s needs. Just a few people participate in ‘sharings’ nowadays. Some fear this might endanger the social connection. As Roos states: “The common building is also a bonding activity, possibly on another level than you create with sharings, but still it connects people.”⁷⁹ She hopes that after the building, connection will receive more attention. Others like Evelien agree: “I have lived here for a long time. I have faith that the connection will improve after the building.”⁸⁰

Bryant and Knight (2019, 134) argue hope emerges when there is a gap between the potential and the actual. Within the ecovillage hope also emerges about the current reality which already is the desirable situation. Meike for example: “I hope that the connection is still present in five years”⁸¹. Here hope for a lasting connection functions to keep ecovillagers going and motivates to deal with difficulties like stress. Additionally, hope helps to realise the utopian ideals of the ecovillage because people hope they inspire others to create a more sustainable world (Bryant and Knight 2019; Hébert 2016). Hope helps to work through moral dilemmas because people keep going in the hope the main goals will be realised and the situation is less stressful after the current deadlines are met, whereafter they can set their own deadlines. A sentence heard very often is: “You really have to learn to guard your limits.”⁸² This relates to responsibility to care for oneself. Bernard tells: “Everyone here comes to learn something. We as a group have to learn things. We are in this process and frictions are an unavoidable part of that.”⁸³

Evelien explains that newer members have different expectations and are less used to the constant changing and delay of plans. Because of this, newer members act differently as Geert, having a conflict with a newer member, describes: “I don’t like this way of communicating, he clearly didn’t join the workshops of nonviolent communication.”⁸⁴ Experiencing the learning process together offers opportunities to understand each other and

⁷⁸ Interview Jasper 12-03-2021

⁷⁹ Interview Roos 09-04-2021

⁸⁰ Informal conversation Evelien 14-04-2021

⁸¹ Interview Meike 20-03-2021

⁸² Participant observation throughout the fieldwork

⁸³ Interview Bernard 14-04-2021

⁸⁴ Informal conversation Geert 26-03-2021

develop common manners to deal with dilemmas. Newer and older members mix, but small groups of closely connected people exist as an unavoidable consequence of the group size. Close groups occur based on their neighbours, activities in the ecovillage and ideals. Creating a cooperative culture is complicated because still new members join, bringing new ideas which have to be accepted and adjusted to fit the group.

In short, institutionalisation happens in multiple aspects of the social realm in the ecovillage, providing stability and guidance to deal with conflicting ideals. Various institutional tools have been developed for decision-making, conflict regulation and improving social connectedness since the first people lived here. Individual behaviour is also to some extent institutionalised in how people are expected to treat each other and developing personal competencies, showing the importance of individual responsibility. All this should create a cooperative group with common trust wherein everyone feels safe to discuss ethical issues, since these will always occur, and work through or prevent these by using or initiating varying tools that fit their preference. However, the developing ecovillage and group still has to improve the cooperative culture through learning to act according to these institutionalised manners, when to use which tool, and by this work effectively through moral dilemmas.

“Being flexible is the key” strategies of dealing with moral dilemmas (Isa)

When it comes to trying to deal and work through moral dilemmas and breakdowns with outside actors, there are various strategies the ecovillage uses.

The ‘green’ contractor

The first strategy of getting out of the moral breakdown consists of the ecovillage reorganising its decision-making process. In cases where it concerns direct contact with the contractor, i.e., it concerns the construction meetings where all parties are present (contractor, ecovillage, intermediary, and architect), they conform to the wishes of the contractor in the form of a more traditional hierarchical meeting structure thereby letting go of their ideal of *holarchie* to some extent⁸⁵. In short, in trying to overcome the moral breakdown of not at all being able to work with the contractor because their approaches are so different, they adopt/let go of their ideal to some extent to communicate/work on the same level as the contractor. On the other

⁸⁵ Interview Jasper 26-03-2021

hand, the contractor gives way in the level of involvement and influence the ecovillage has on deciding how the planning takes shape, something that is not at all common in the construction world. Being flexible is thus the key but it also shows the mutual influence each actor in this relationship has on the other due to the relational character. This flexibility as a strategy also comes back in the moral breakdown described above in which the normal flow of the meeting structure, every two weeks, is broken because decisions must be made in a short time span. In this moral breakdown, they want to stick to their ideal of *holarchie* but at the same time they decide to be flexible in the meeting structure and they organise emergency meetings if this is deemed necessary⁸⁶.

Aside from the strategy described above, the ecovillage has developed, throughout the collaboration, into becoming more and more professional, knowledge- and organisational-wise. This is a by-product of dealing with moral dilemmas, as described in the previous chapter. Jasper explains: “And we became more and more business-like. And now we say a lot of things to each other, once we are finished, we can start working as a green contractor ourselves. There are plenty of people who know how it works now. We manage a budget, we have gained a lot of technical knowledge, we also build ourselves and maintain the planning and the process and working with volunteers. It is, you just really get trained.”⁸⁷ In short, through experience and over time, the ecovillage has become more business-like in all the tasks they oversee in the building process. In a way they adopted a ‘standard way of dealing’ with the contractor in which they now know how to organise themselves, have a set system of communication, and have a lot of practical material knowledge as well as knowledge of how a contractor organises itself. Access and use of this knowledge are divided over the different circles and its members, such as the financial circle or the construction circle.

Although institutionalising and professionalising, which entails becoming more business-like, have helped the ecovillage to overcome, deal with, and avoid certain moments of moral breakdowns, institutionalising was never something they consciously aimed for. The ecovillage would have liked it much better if they inspired the contractor to such an extent that they would have changed their approach of doing business, instead of the ecovillage changing its structure, thereby creating some stability to meet the contractor at the same level. Alongside this, institutionalising does not allow for complete liberation from continuous

⁸⁶ Interview Pieter 09-04-2021

⁸⁷ Interview Jasper 26-03-2021

moral dilemmas. These will keep presenting themselves because the ecovillage and the contractor have a different perception of how trust can function in collaborations. As Jasper explains, both parties just toughened up in the battle and communication on a personal level is no longer possible: “We would just like to have a conversation with the contractor, about how they talk about us, about our initiative, about the way we are organised [...] but we cannot have these conversations because this business attitude has slipped into our collaboration, and we can no longer be personal. It is so sad and fragile though, you just toughen up in the battle.”⁸⁸ So, in a way, the ecovillage needed to develop those ‘ways of doing’ and becoming business-like, thereby institutionalising, to create some stability in the relationship with the contractor (Kanters, 2021). Institutionalisation is thus simply a way of dealing with moral dilemmas on a day-to-day basis. Seeing institutionalisation as a process as Kanters (2021) does, can thus take up part of the critique given of a moral breakdown, because institutionalisation as a process allows for a continuity in dealing with morality the ecovillage is caught up in and does not presupposes a beginning and end.

Struggling to find the right words

The ecovillage is still struggling to determine how to act and communicate about the relationship with the contractor. Moreover, various ideas about this range from being silent to telling everything, of an ‘exposing’ nature. One possible strategy was voiced by Sarah, however, in which both honesty and maintaining respect for the other come together, it was deemed the ‘Tony Chocolonely approach’. “they say, we want to achieve 100% slave free chocolate, we have reached 80%. So, the ecovillage should do that too. Saying, well, we went for sustainable partners, we succeeded with three of them (three names), but it simply went wrong with the contractor. Well, included that no specific names would be named and that we show how and why we ourselves are to ‘blame’ for the mistakes.”⁸⁹ Towards the end of the research period, a tendency to carry out this latter strategy became more prominent.

The municipality and its inhabitants

Once the connection with the inhabitants becomes better, the political aspect, gaining votes for the municipality or not granting certain wishes because they might ‘piss off’ the locals,

⁸⁸ Interview Jasper 26-03-2021

⁸⁹ Interview Sarah 08-04-2021

drops, thereby creating more opportunities for the ecovillage. In short, for the ecovillage to maintain and construct their utopian ideals in the specific municipality of Boekel, they are going to have to work on the connection with the inhabitants⁹⁰, thereby also reducing moral dilemmas that occur in this triangle partnership with the perceived mainstream society. Since we take up the idea that the ecovillage does not exist in a vacuum but is embedded in larger societal structures where the actors involved influence each other (Ergas 2010; Foucault 1986; Beckett, Bagguley and Campbell 2017), we now turn to the perspective of the outside actors the ecovillage is engaged with. Due to ethical reasons, this perspective from the contractor's side was not taken up because engaging with the contractor would have put even more strain on the collaboration. There was less tension in the relationship with the inhabitants and the municipality so the perspectives from these outside actors are taken up in this research and will follow now.

There is one thing both neighbours, as well as government officials from the municipality agree on, the ecovillage needs to become 'more visible' if they want to create better connections with the neighbourhood. This, according to the neighbours and the neighbourhood team, includes taking away the building fences, clearing out the rubble and creating a community centre of which the front part is directed towards the street and has no bushes whatsoever to reduce the 'crossing a boundary' feeling⁹¹. Although these strategies all sound very doable and reasonable, they cannot yet be put into practice because the building is not finished, and it will take some years before the community centre will be there. In short, these will be strategies of dealing with moral dilemmas that are future based.

What the ecovillage could take up right now to improve their relationship with the inhabitants and take away some stereotypes, is to take in some locals and let them help out in the ecovillage. Maud, a civil servant, explains: "you know, I have to arrange daytime activities (*dagbesteding*) for a lot of people in this municipality. There are plenty of people out there who have the interest and time to help here. It is just that right now, I do not know what kinds of jobs they (the ecovillage) need to get done so I don't know if I can direct anyone to the ecovillage."⁹² A very easy strategy for the ecovillage would be to sit down with this civil servant and discuss these issues. The neighbours Maurice and Victoria compared this situation

⁹⁰ Small talk Anna 11-02-2021

⁹¹ Interview neighbours 28-03-2021

⁹² Interview Maud 17-03-2021

of overcoming the negative stereotypes with the Dutch saying, “*wat de boer niet kent, dat vreet hij niet*”⁹³ (Some people distrust anything they don’t know). So, if you let people in so that they know who those people in the ecovillage are, and what is happening there, it is likely that a lot of negative thoughts/stereotypes will disappear which will benefit the triangle affiliation.

Conclusion (Eva and Isa)

In this chapter we have looked into strategies the ecovillage develops to deal with ethical issues between the ecovillagers and with outside actors. On both an internal and external level, a learning attitude, in which being flexible is key, seems to be the most important quality of creating new ways of doing things in order to go away from a moral dilemma/avoid a moral dilemma in the future. A way of dealing with maintaining trust amongst different actors and thereby partially overcoming moral dilemmas comes down to institutionalisation. Institutionalisation is a valuable asset in creating some stability which helps deal with moments of extreme stress and preventing breakdowns in the first place. However, the extent to which this is exercised, differs in the collaborations between the members, and with outside actors. Namely, more set systems are in place between the members to overcome moral breakdowns, such as clearings, ‘sharings’, nonviolent communication than between the members and outside actors. In the collaborations with outside actors, these systems are sometimes to a large extent absent because the people embark on a sustainable adventure together and because everything is new, there are more unpredictable and unforeseen moments that are thrown on someone’s path and people are rather left to think of solutions in the heat of the moment. In contrast, the ecovillagers have gone through a longer and constant enduring learning process together wherein they can develop more thought-through strategies based on experience.

⁹³ Interview neighbours 28-03-2021

Discussion/conclusion

The members of Ecovillage Boekel actively try to develop more sustainable alternatives by also creating a cooperative culture with each other. As one of the greatest and most developed ecovillage initiatives in the Netherlands, it provides an interesting place to conduct research, especially because of its embeddedness in the Dutch society. In this conclusion we look back at the previous three chapters and assemble our findings to answer the main question: How do people in Dutch Ecovillage Boekel construct and maintain their sustainable utopian ideals both within community-life and in relation to outside actors? In this research we have addressed the concept of wanting to create a utopia, hereby generating social change because of the embedded nature of those initiatives that want to differently construct current societal structures. Since different value systems meet during this process, we used the concept of morality to explore this.

Ecovillage Boekel strives for a utopian ideal whereby they act as a social movement through functioning as an inspiring example by “being the change”, rather than using a method of resistance and persuasion (Ergas 2010, 40; Susser 2016). The ecovillage mainly tries to create a sustainable and social alternative to an individualistic lifestyle, reflecting what Narotzky and Besnier (2014) call a ‘life worth living’. This, or a ‘life in connection’, also relates to the connection between the ecovillage and outside actors. In these collaborations they try to inspire outside actors and attempt to create alternative ways of ‘doing business’. These actors are invited to behold and participate in this alternative way, rather than pushing them towards change. All of these thoughts are collected in what the ecovillage describes as their projectplan.

The extent to which these utopian ideals of the ecovillage can be applied and enacted, is to a large extent dependent on the people and structures that are in place in the mainstream society (Beckett, Bagguley and Campbell 2017, 7-9; Butler 1997, 100). This relational character sometimes causes a gap between the ecovillage ideal, and what is possible to achieve in society. The ecovillage functions as a heterotopia in which striving for utopian visions is the main purpose, but it is also recognised that one has to deal with what is possible in the society in which the ecovillage is embedded (Foucault 1986, 23-24). This gap between the ideal and reality plays itself out on an internal level in the ecovillage in that the projectplan, as describing the ideal, provides freedom in interpretation. This is highly valued, but also causes differences

and frictions between the members because they value certain aspects differently. These different values and interpretations are related to the fact that the members of the ecovillage each have their own cultural baggage, acquired during their lives before joining the ecovillage (Mychajluk 2017, 181). When it concerns a gap between the ideal and the reality in collaborations with outside actors, it is due to different value structures of what matters and is important in a collaboration that friction arises. An example of this is the extent to which trust and/or political interests can and should play a role in a collaboration. All of this makes for the fact that the ecovillage has to consciously think with and act through decisions.

However, there are not always differences in opinions or value structures. On many occasions, the ecovillagers have a lot of fun and success amongst themselves and in collaborations with outside actors. It is this knowing that things will work out based on experience which keeps the hope alive in moments when things get a little tough. This hope and knowing are important factors for being able to continue (Bryant and Knight 2019; Hébert 2016). The moments when things get difficult are usually those when there are not many options, increasing the risk that people's values do not fit the chosen option, or if people are stuck in certain existing structures. For example, the Dutch context requires a lot of interactions with the municipality and other state organs, so with set actors, that you cannot avoid if you want to get something done. In short, it is about those moments when necessity leads the way and value structures can be different that difficulties can arise and morality comes to the fore (Zigon 2009, 79; Robbins 2007, 300-301). What is important to mention is that it is no surprise to the ecovillages that they will run into some problems and difficulties along the way. They know that by trying to create so much change, they will have to experiment a lot and make some mistakes. They do this in order to pave the way for others so they can use those new systems. Despite this knowledge that things will sometimes get hard, the ecovillage still has to consciously act through and make choices if they want to bring about this change. This throws them into the sphere of morality (Zigon 2007, 135).

Maintaining utopian ideals: Morality and strategies of dealing with morality

Before taking a look at how to act through the moments when differences come up, and hereby trying to go back to maintaining a utopian ideal, it is first important to understand what morality entails for an ecovillage. As Zigon (2007, 137) explains, when thrown into the sphere of morality, people can experience a moral breakdown. These moments on an internal level

occur when there are practical limitations, like a limited budget, which results in the fact that the ecovillage has to make a conscious choice selecting pros and cons, and with that, they are sometimes forced to choose a less ideal option. In collaborations with outside actors these moral breakdowns occur when the outside actor interferes with and 'breaks' the normal flow of things in the ecovillage, for instance the meeting structure. The ecovillage has to consciously act and think through this breakdown immediately to solve it in order to return to a normal flow of things. However, by focussing on direct relationships linked to morality, this research unveiled a very noteworthy result. Namely that morality for the ecovillage entails a much more continuous process instead of those snapshot moments. As it turns out, when the ecovillage tries to strive for utopia and wants to bring about change in relationships, morality must be understood in terms of continuity. This goes way beyond the snapshot perception of Zigon's (2007; 2009) concept. This continuous nature of morality for the ecovillage consists of the fact that they live in constant anticipation of how to act in order to prevent direct clashes between values which influences their actions on a day-to-day basis. By adjusting one's behaviour, and the accompanying tasks on a day-to-day basis, there are no beginning and endings, there are no direct issues that are resolved. This makes for the fact that the ecovillage lives within this liminal phase and flow of morality.

In dealing with those snapshot moments and the more enduring phase of morality, the ecovillage aims to always overcome differences and go back to a state of inspiring change and chasing utopia. This requires that strategies are developed by the ecovillage in order to deal with those moral dilemmas and breakdowns.

Both on an internal and external level, the ecovillage institutionalises and needs to be flexible to adapt. This is a noteworthy result, especially in relation to outside actors, since this is not researched thoroughly within anthropological work. We used institutionalisation as a concept explaining how social practices become repeated, sanctioned and maintained by social norms and thus being a very important part of the social structure. In addition, we used institutionalisation in the same way as Kanters (2021), as a process, wherein people try to create social change and to create some stability during this process. In relation to outside actors, we see this in the sense that the ecovillage is becoming more business-like. This does, however, also contradict the aim of the ecovillage to some extent. Their utopian ideal is actually to influence collaborations positively in such a way that the outside actors change their current ways and structures. This would mean that the ecovillage does not need to take

up the task to start a kind of 'fight' when there are problems in the collaboration. Institutionalisation thus functions in a way to keep trying to achieve the utopian ideal, create some stability and cause social change, rather than giving up on creating change all together. Within the ecovillage we see that strategies are developed over a longer period of time and more thought through. A collective social learning process to effectively collaborate with each other, 'sharings', a clearing, *holarchie* and certain behaviour expectancies as nonviolent communication are initiated (Mychajluk 2017). This way they attempt to create a cooperative culture which is supported by personal development related to self-reflection, participation and trust (Mychajluk 2017, 181). Despite the fact that the set systems and strategies, in short institutionalisation, amongst the ecovillagers is further developed, they are still learning how and when to initiate common tools, especially when new group members join who shake things up. However, in the collaborations with outside actors, these set systems are more absent because it is more difficult to develop thought-through strategies based on experience. These collaborations have not yet lasted so long, and more things are new, so that they are prone to unpredictable and unforeseen moments. This involves more sudden moments wherein the actors have to come up with solutions.

We see that to prevent dilemmas within the ecovillage, every individual has to feel good at his position and differences between individual ideas are mostly no problem since freedom is highly valued. This is true as long as every individual acts according to the common code of conduct and is connected in this sense in order to successfully collaborate. However, in relation with outside actors, mainly the contractor, the ecovillage has to be more united and needs to act collectively to prevent moral breakdowns and to deal with moral dilemmas. This is only possible when the group is acting according to an institutionalised and professional code of conduct.

Limitations and recommendations

Looking back on our ten weeks in the field, we are very grateful for the many interesting conversations we had with our interlocutors and the openness they brought with them to every conversation. Despite this experience, there are some aspects that have not been researched thoroughly due to time and ethical limitations. The first one of these entails a time limitation concerning the timespan of this research. Every phase and/or new collaboration of the Ecovillage brings in new moral dilemmas and other ways of working through these. On the

internal level for example various common tools such as 'sharings' have been implemented but also changed and left out later on. It would be interesting to explore more thoroughly which tools are helpful, why and under what circumstances. This would be useful information for other initiatives going through comparable phases and problems. The changing character of the developing ecovillage means that the results found in this thesis might develop in such a way in the months to come, that our results could be enriched to a large degree. A solution to this would be to research over a longer period of time in order to get a more thorough answer to the phenomena discussed.

Alongside this time limitation, there are the responsibilities of an anthropologist concerning ethical behaviour. First of all, there are some new unanswered questions related to the construction of the discourse facing outwards about certain collaborations. These questions are unanswered because it was such a delicate issue that many people had difficulty talking about this. In considering the ethical commitments of an anthropologist, we decided not to push on this issue but to only let people talk about what they felt comfortable sharing. Researching this could be possible if we were there for a longer period in order to build up more rapport, or, in a few months once the dust settles down a little bit.

Related to this, there is the limitation in the participants we had access to. Given our focus on the relational character of the ecovillage and the mutual influence each actor has on the other (Ergas 2010, 33) we have taken up the point of view of the neighbours, an actor of the municipality and someone working for a large company. There is one actor, however, that has consciously been left out: the contractor. We have made the choice to leave out their perspective because that could have put serious strain on our contact and rapport with the ecovillagers. Because the stakes were so high, talking about the contractor was perceived to be a difficult task in itself for the ecovillagers, let alone if we presented the ecovillage with some issues that were laid before us by the contractor. Because the ecovillagers are the main focus of our research, we decided to position ourselves alongside the point of view of the ecovillage in order to retain good access to our research population. It would, however, have been interesting to get the perspective of the contractor to get a better understanding of what morality entails when social change is experienced on the side of the actor who is more related to the perceived mainstream society and who supposedly needs to be inspired by the ecovillage.

Continuing on the role morality has played in our research. We have found a particularly interesting discovery when morality is applied to ecovillage Boekel. Namely, that morality in the form of a moral breakdown is too narrow a concept to capture the experience of the ecovillage on a day-to-day basis and that a focus should be more on the continuous nature of morality for initiatives that want to create change. The scale of this research is however small, and we have just examined the few issues of morality linked to social change and utopia that were happening during the time of our research, or during the past year about which people reflected. We therefore recommend that other ecovillages in the Dutch context are researched in order to see if there is a certain degree of generalisability in this experience of enduring morality which would support our claim that a moral breakdown is too narrow a concept. Not only this, the question arises if other initiatives that focus on creating social change in the sphere of sustainability, who are also to a large extent embedded in the current societal structures, share this experience of morality? Or: How are moral breakdowns and dilemmas experienced by other sustainable initiatives outside of the Dutch context? This latter question is specifically relevant because there are many other countries in which ecovillages, or comparable initiatives, are rising but might not be as embedded in societal structures as in the Dutch context. This might not foster such frequent contact between the different actors involved (Bosch 2017, 55-59) which could, to a high degree, influence the experience of morality on a day-to-day basis. This is because it is precisely the frequent direct contact between the actors that regulates their decisions and constantly drives them towards moral reasoning.

We would like to make a final recommendation to other ecovillages that are starting up or are still in the process of coming into fruition. It is important to start with searching for those lone wolves, pioneers or the departments of innovations of those organisations with which the ecovillage will need to collaborate. This is because these people might align more with ecovillage ideals and are willing to go out of their way to make it happen. Moreover, in order to realise the utopian ideal as much as possible, it is important to maintain the connection with each other during this process. A continuation of the learning process to achieve this together involves development of individual competencies as well as using and sticking to different common tools which suit different needs to work through disagreements and strengthen connections. As described, it can be useful when some people take up this responsibility to solve an enduring moral dilemma because of conflicting ideals. In the end,

everyone also goes through a personal learning process whereby one has to be flexible and adaptive to the common vision. A common learning attitude and adaptability is necessary, especially because the utopian ideal is likely to be adjusted on the way. The key is to accept this and focus on the core aspects which are achieved:

“During the journey from the beautiful dream to reality, things work out differently than you expected and hoped for. However, the basis of being an inspiring example for sustainable life is still here.”⁹⁴

⁹⁴ Interview Roos 18-02-2021

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Attachments

Attachment 1. Vision, mission and objectives

Projectplan Ecodorp Boekel (Ecodorp Boekel 2020, 4-5)

2.1 Visie

Wij zien een wereld, waarin het mogelijk is om:

- In verbondenheid te leven, waarbij het voorzien in levensonderhoud, ontspanning, leren, zorg, en aandacht voor elkaar verweven zijn (Integraal holistisch leven).
- Vanuit vrijheid de verantwoordelijkheid te nemen voor de kwaliteit van je eigen leven (Verantwoordelijkheid).
- Samen meer te bereiken, dan we als individuen kunnen (Gemeenschapsvorming).
- Te zorgen voor de Aarde en haar geschenken in dankbaarheid te ontvangen (Duurzaamheid).
- Je persoonlijke levensmissie te ontdekken en deze tot uitdrukking te brengen (Persoonlijke groei).

Own translation:

2.1 Vision

We see a world wherein it is possible to:

- *Live in connection, wherein earning a living, leisure, learning, care and attention for each other are interwoven with each other (an integral holistic life)*
- *To have the freedom to take the responsibility for the quality of your own life (responsibility)*
- *To achieve more together than we are able as individuals (community building)*
- *To care for the Earth and thankfully achieve her gifts (sustainability)*
- *To discover your personal life mission and to express this (personal growth)*

2.2 Missie

Wij verwezenlijken onze visie door:

- Te streven naar zelfvoorzienendheid.

- Onze eigen huizen in eigen beheer of zelf te bouwen, met duurzame materialen en methoden.
- Het realiseren van duurzame processen en projecten.
- Het opbouwen en exploiteren van innovatieve installaties voor de opwekking van duurzame energie.
- Opbouw van een lokale economie in win-win situaties met de omgeving.
- Bijdragen aan het herstel van biodiversiteit m.b.v. voedselvoorziening door Permacultuur.
- Dat wat we ervaren/leren delen met anderen m.b.v. educatie.
- Het water dat we gebruiken multifunctioneel en spaarzaam te benutten, waarna het weer schoon terug kan naar de Aarde.
- Kinderen kennis te laten maken met een leuke, gezellige, gezonde en natuurlijke omgeving.

Own translation:

2.2 Mission

We realise our vision by:

- *Striving for self-sufficiency*
- *To have our houses under own management or build these ourselves, with sustainable materials and methods*
- *To realise sustainable processes and projects*
- *To develop and exploit innovative installations for generating sustainable energy*
- *To develop a local economy in win-win situations with the surroundings*
- *To contribute in restoring biodiversity using food supply by permaculture*
- *Experiencing and learning to share with others, using education*
- *To use water multifunctional and sparingly, whereafter it can return clean to the Earth*
- *To introduce children to a nice, cosy and healthy natural environment*

2.3 Doelstellingen

Wij drukken onze waarden uit door:

1. Te zorgen voor onze Aarde en voor de mens. en alles wat om ons heen leeft.
2. Te wonen in een gezond en duurzaam huis in een voedende leefomgeving.
3. Leven van gezonde voeding.
4. Een leefomgeving te creëren waarin bewoners (en dieren) in elke levensfase deel uitmaken van de gemeenschap.
5. Zelfvoorziening te realiseren waar mogelijk (voeding, water, energie en bouwen).
6. Ontplooiing van persoonlijke kwaliteiten en talenten.
7. De voetafdruk van onze bewoners af te stemmen op wat de Aarde dragen kan.
8. Een vitale lokale economie op te zetten in gezonde relatie tot haar omgeving.
9. Actief op zoek te gaan naar win-win situaties in het bereiken/uitdragen van de doelstellingen.

Own translation:

2.3 Objectives

We express our values by:

1. *To care for the Earth and human, and everything that lives around us*
2. *To live in a healthy and sustainable house in a nourishing living environment*
3. *Live from healthy food*
4. *To create a living environment where inhabitants (and people) can participate in the community during every life stage*
5. *To realise self-sufficiency where possible (food, water, energy, building)*
6. *Developing personal qualities and talents*
7. *To align the footprint of our residents with what the Earth can carry*
8. *To establish a vital local economy with a healthy relation to its surroundings*
9. *Actively seek out win-win situations during the achieving and promoting of the objectives*

Attachment 2. Manners

(Ecodorp Boekel 2020, 13)

4.3 Onze omgangsvormen

In Ecodorp Boekel...

– **kijk ik eerlijk naar mezelf** (*zelfreflectie, vertrouwen*)

waardoor ik werk aan mijn persoonlijke ontwikkeling. Als ik emotioneel geraakt word, neem ik de tijd om te onderzoeken waarom dit mij zoveel doet, wat ik ervan te leren heb en wat ik vervolgens wil bespreken.

– **deel ik zodat ik kan verbinden** (*meedoen, vertrouwen*)

Door te vertellen als ik eraan toe ben, wat er in mij leeft, verbind ik mij met de ander.

– **vertrouw ik op ieders goede intentie** (*vertrouwen*)

Ik ben er voor mezelf en voor de ander met de bedoeling om ons samen verder te helpen. Ik weet dat de ander deze bedoeling ook heeft.

– **werk ik mee aan de onderlinge verbinding** (*meedoen*)

Dit doe ik door het gesprek aan te gaan en open en aandachtig naar de ander te luisteren. Ik probeer hierbij los te komen van eventuele oordelen. Ik ga met zorg met mezelf en de ander om.

– **draag ik bij aan het geheel** (*meedoen, zelfreflectie*)

Ik doe mijn best om mijn kwaliteiten, binnen mijn mogelijkheden, effectief in te zetten om zo positief bij te dragen aan ons project. Ik doe dit vanuit intrinsieke motivatie, waar ik zelf zorg voor draag.

– **vraag ik om hulp als ik er zelf niet uit kom** (*zelfreflectie, vertrouwen*)

Ik ga zelf na bij wie ik het beste aan kan kloppen en weet dat ik terecht kan bij cirkel verbinding en het stappenplan, dat erop gericht is om de verbinding te herstellen.

– **maak ik samen met de anderen voorstellen en beslissingen** (*meedoen, vertrouwen*)

Ik doe dit holarchisch vanuit mijn cirkels en rollen.

– **ben ik een inspirerend voorbeeld voor duurzaam leven in verbinding** (*meedoen*)

Dit draag ik uit op mijn eigen manier.

Own translation:

4.3 Our manners

In Ecovillage Boekel...

- I look honestly to myself (self-reflection, trust)

Because of this I work on my personal development. When I am disturbed emotionally, I will take time to discover why this disturbs me so much, what can I learn from this and consequently what I would like to discuss

- I share in order to connect (participation, trust)

Through telling what keeps me occupied, I connect to the other

- I trust everyone has proper intentions (trust)

I am there for myself and the other with the intention to help us both moving forward. I know the other has the same intentions

- I contribute in the connection between one another (participation)

I practice this by starting the conversation and listen openly and carefully to others. I try to distance myself from possible judgements. I treat myself and others carefully.

- I contribute to the whole (participation, self-reflection)

I put effort to use my qualities, within my possibilities, effectively and through this I positively contribute to our project.

- I ask for help when I cannot solve something myself (self-reflection, trust)

I consider which person can help me the best and I know I can go to circle connection and the step-by-step plan which is aimed to restore connection.

- I make proposals and decisions with others (participation, trust)

I do this in line with holarchie, in line with my circles and roles

- I am an inspiring example for a sustainable life in connection (participation)

I carry this out in my own way

Attachment 3. Samenvatting

In dit onderzoek hebben wij gekeken hoe initiatieven die zich richten op het veranderen van de huidige stand van zaken omtrent duurzaamheid hun idealen opzetten en hoe zij deze proberen te onderhouden. De idealen die Ecodorp Boekel na probeert te streven, waarin een positieve toekomstig duurzame en circulaire levenswijze en economie centraal staan, kunnen begrepen worden als het werken naar een utopia (Hébert 2016, 2). Deze idealen zijn immers nog niet gerealiseerd. Door de verweven relatie met de samenleving, denk bijvoorbeeld aan menig contact wat nodig is in Nederland op gemeentelijk/provinciaal niveau om vergunningen te krijgen en zaken te regelen, is het ecodorp ook afhankelijk van de mensen op deze posities en de huidige structuren die heersen in hoeverre zij hun idealen na kunnen streven. Deze relationele relatie met de samenleving, maar ook de focus op verandering teweeg te brengen, zorgt ervoor dat het ecodorp als een heterotopie gezien kan worden (Foucault 1986). De link tussen deze begrippen en het ecodorp laat zien dat er wellicht een ruimte is tussen het ideaal en hoe mensen dit in werkelijkheid tot uiting kunnen brengen. Wat er precies gebeurt in dit gat tussen ideaal en werkelijkheid analyseren we door het begrip moraliteit te gebruiken. Moraliteit biedt de ruimte om te kijken naar het nastreven van dat wat iemand ziet als 'juist' en de bijbehorende praktijken (Zigon 2007, 135). Daarnaast biedt het de ruimte om te kijken naar hoe mensen zo'n gat tussen ideaal en realiteit ervaren, waar het vandaan komt en hoe zij hiermee omgaan. Het ecodorp ervaart ook precies dit 'gat' op zowel intern niveau, dus tussen de leden van het ecodorp, als ook in relatie met de mensen buiten het ecodorp. In de momenten waarop het ecodorp plots door een situatie moet handelen en bewust moet nadenken, als er bijvoorbeeld verschillende ideeën heersen over hoe iets uit te voeren, is dit een 'moral breakdown' (Zigon 2007, 137). In relatie tot de externe actor de uitvoerder, komen deze moral breakdowns vaak neer op een scheuring van het vergaderschema waarin normaal elke twee weken vergaderd wordt maar waar nu plots beslissingen genomen moeten worden, ondanks dat dit niet de afspraak was, noch de voorkeur heeft. Op intern niveau uiten de moral breakdowns zich in momenten van onenigheid omdat er een verschillende interpretaties en percepties van het projectplan bestaan onder de mensen aangezien ieder een eigen 'culturele bagage' heeft (Mychajluk 2017, 181).

Echter, doordat het ecodorp op een groot niveau verschil wil maken, en hier constant mee bezig is om dit te bewerkstelligen door zich altijd te proberen te gedragen op zo'n manier dat het anderen in de samenwerking inspireert, biedt een moral breakdown niet genoeg

ruimte voor de gehele ervaring omtrent moraliteit en hoe dus goed te handelen. Het zijn de voortdurende momenten in relatie tot externe actoren, waarin er een verschillende perceptie van hoe 'vertrouwen' toegepast kan worden in een relatie heerst, die het handelen op dagelijks basis bepalen. Kortom, de 'aanhoudendheid' komt voort uit het feit dat er een verschil in waarde structuren heerst die niet zomaar opgelost is (Robbins 2007). Dit voortdurende aspect omtrent moraliteit benoemen wij als een moreel dilemma en geeft hiermee kritiek op de te nauwe perceptie van moraliteit zoals beschreven door Zigon (2007).

Op zowel extern als intern niveau zien we dat het ecodorp institutionaliseert en professionaliseert om deze problemen omtrent moraliteit op te lossen. Dit alles om meer structuur en stabiliteit aan de samenwerkingen te geven. Hierin is institutionalisering een proces en neemt institutionalisering ook de continuïteit van het nastreven van utopische idealen en het omgaan met verschillende percepties van moraliteit in acht.

Kortom, we zien dat Ecodorp Boekel een dynamisch proces doormaakt in hun reis naar het realiseren van hun gemeenschappelijke utopische ideaal van een ecodorp als inspirerend voorbeeld van een 'leven in verbinding'. Wij stellen dat in Ecodorp Boekel vaak het ideaal van vertrouwen de basis vormt van zowel de opbouw van relaties met externe actoren als de inrichting van het ecodorp. Het is echter ook juist dit ideaal, en dit ideaal willen behouden in samenwerkingen, dat soms de morele dilemma's creëert die ze proberen te voorkomen. In het proberen om morele dilemma's te overwinnen, wanneer een verschillende perceptie van idealen tussen verschillende actoren in het spel is, kan worden gezien dat institutionalisering plaatsvindt in de ontwikkeling en introductie van instrumenten voor besluitvorming, conflictoplossing en sociale verbondenheid. De groep doorloopt een proces van sociaal leren waarbij de ontwikkeling van sociale competenties en professionalisering belangrijk zijn om een coöperatieve cultuur te creëren en te behouden en om de gemeenschappelijke en individuele utopische idealen te bereiken, zowel binnen het ecodorp als in relatie tot externe actoren.