
SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS IN ECOVILLAGES**BOGLÁRKA RITA NAGY^{1*}, ATTILA VARGA², ÁGNES SALLAY¹**

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ABSTRACT

In 2015 the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were ratified by 195 countries. To be achieved by 2030, the goals aim to transform our world by leaving no one behind. In 2017 the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) investigated how 30 ecovillages from 5 continents already contributed to the UN SDGs. The results were presented on the 2018 High-Level Political Forum (HLPF). Based on the GEN research outcomes, we examined 17 international Ecovillages. We aimed to understand how ecovillages relate to the UN SDG framework. The research was done with Ecovillages Around the World subject students. Before the analysis, students became acquainted with the SDGs' targets and their implications in different communities. The research methods were web-content analysis and self-assessment from the ecovillages' representatives, and the results were compared. The research proved that studied ecovillages already contribute to most SDGs; still, most do not know or intend to use the SDG framework. The results indicate a communication gap between the global political community and local ecovillages. Both global and local efforts aim to support sustainable development, but there could be vast differences in the interpretation of sustainability. Therefore, there is a significant need to establish communication channels and platforms to support the partnership between stakeholder groups working for sustainability at different levels.

Keywords: Ecovillage, SDGs, Empty Signifier, Sustainability

INTRODUCTION

Ecovillages are local communities that implement a complex ecological lifestyle alternative and are located as separate settlements or districts of settlements that serve as the residence of a community. Takács-Sánta defines a community as “a group of people who: (1) interact with each other on a regular and frequent personal basis, and communicate with each other in the same space at regular intervals; (2) they are linked by a similar set of values and worldview (i.e., the mindset of community members is fundamentally similar); and (3) have common practical goals and work together to achieve them. It is also important that (4) they consist of at least three (sometimes hundreds) adult members who represent at least two separate lines of kinship” (TAKÁCS-SÁNTA 2016).

The ecovillage concept and practice are determined by the need for autonomy in infrastructure, food and management. It is a small-scale community living in harmony with nature and resilient to global economic and social processes. The urban-consumer social dependence is replaced by dependence on nature. Ecovillages choose dependence on nature as means of voluntary simplicity. They are saving water as a valued resource, choosing agriculture or building materials that fit into the natural environment and adapting to the weather and the rhythms of nature (FARKAS 2017; TAKÁCS-SÁNTA 2017).

The 17 UN SDGs are to be achieved by 2030, and the two ambitious mottos of the program are: “Transforming our world!” and “Leave no one behind!” (UNSDG, 2021)

Ecovillages have been working for sustainability for decades, even before the UN SDG agenda. In 2017, GEN investigated how 30 ecovillages from 5 continents contributed to the 17 UN SDGs (GEN 2019). The GEN studied ecovillages' practices contribute to the SDG4 (Quality Education), SDG5 (Gender Equality), SDG6 (Clean Water and Sanitation), SDG11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), SDG12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), SDG13 (Climate Action), SDG15 (Life on Land), SDG16 (Peace Justice and Strong Institutions), and SDG17 (Partnerships for the Goals) (UN 2017). SDG as a framework could promote the good practices of the ecovillages in the wider territorial region. These communities are living laboratories that use good practices which contribute to the SDGs locally. Scaling up these good practices to the territorial or regional level would benefit global SDG efforts.

When SDGs try to exhaustively cover all global sustainability challenges, they inevitably become vague, highly variable, and unspecific, and become empty signifiers. Empty signifiers representing a vague, highly variable, unspecifiable, or non-existent signified (OXFORD 2018). Empty signifiers could emerge when a concept (in this case, sustainable development) becomes a central point of a social value system as all interest groups start to link themselves to this value in many cases without authenticity. Let us also consider that, as Laclau states, empty signifiers are often tools for implementing particular interests (LACLAU 1991), and SDGs are a product of protracted political negotiations. We could gain insight into why there is a significant possibility that SDGs work as empty signifiers for many stakeholders.

If we want to avoid SDGs becoming empty signifiers, continuous, open and two-way communication between the central level (e.g., UN) and local level (e.g., ecovillages) is needed, making it possible to interpret SDGs differently in various settings. Central level bodies should encourage regional organizations and local communities to reflect on SDGs and develop their own regional and local interpretation. They should choose the regionally and locally most relevant goals and targets and even define their own goals and targets linked to the SDGs.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research process examined the 17 SDG in 17 ecovillages from five continents (*Table 1*). It aimed to prove that ecovillages can play an essential role in achieving the SDGs.

Seventeen ecovillages from Hungary and abroad were chosen for the study. Some were partners of the GEN network (GEN N.D.), and others from personal and professional contacts (*Table 1*). As the GEN report did not name the involved ecovillages, we do not know if there were any overlap in the researched ecovillages.

The GEN (GEN 2019) research report was studied, and relevant data were collected from it. The ecovillages' self-assessment, the GEN data, and web-content analysis results were compared in Excel diagrams.

Table 1: Researched ecovillages

EUROPE		
1	Switzerland:	Schloss Glarisegg
2	Germany:	LandGut Girtenmühle
3	Tenerife:	As. Manantial de Tara
4	Denmark:	Ecovillage Dyssekilde
5	Germany:	ZEGG
6	Hungary	Nyim ecovillage
7	Hungary	Auromag
8	Hungary	Krisnavölgy
9	Poland:	Aranya
10	Ireland:	Cloughrojdán ecovillage
AFRICA		
11	Senegal:	Adunam ecovillage
AMERICA		
12	USA:	Our ecovillage
13	Canada:	Ideal Society
ASIA		
14	China:	Southern Life Community
15	India:	Auroville
16	Jordan	Alia Ecovillage
17	AUSTRALIA	Alia Ecoi-village

Web-content analysis:

The research was conducted with the students of the Ecovillages Around the World subject. As a preparation for the web-content analysis, the students became acquainted with the SDGs' targets and their implications in communities, and lecturers from six communities presented their activities, good practices, and aims through the 17 SDGs.

The ecovillages' online communication materials on their websites, online publications, and social platforms were examined. For each SDG, we mapped the planned and implemented activities, good practices and aims of the ecovillages. We compiled the found information in word documents, from which the needed data were dissembled into excel sheets.

Questionnaire-Ecovillages' self-assessment

The ecovillages answered a questionnaire. The core of the questionnaire was built on the nrg4SD 2018 HLPF research report (NRG4SD 2018). Before the survey, initial interviews were held with six representatives of international and Hungarian ecovillages. Based on the interviews, the questionnaire was modified. Questionnaire data were compiled into Excel spreadsheets, including explanatory answers from the "Other" options.

SDG 6 Localizing workshop assessment

The ecovillages self-assessment showed an empty signifier and irrelevance perception of SDGs. The SDG 6 Localizing Workshops were used to test if the SDG perception of 20 members of two Hungarian ecovillages can be shifted. In the workshop, the eight targets of SDG6 were filled with local content. The representatives indicated the SDGs relevant to the aims and activities of their communities before and after the workshop.

RESULTS

In the questionnaire, the communities identified each SDGs' relevance to their aims and work. The 2018 GEN research (GEN 2019) and the 17 studied ecovillages had nine

examined SDGs in common, and the results of GEN were higher on those SDGs (Figure 1).

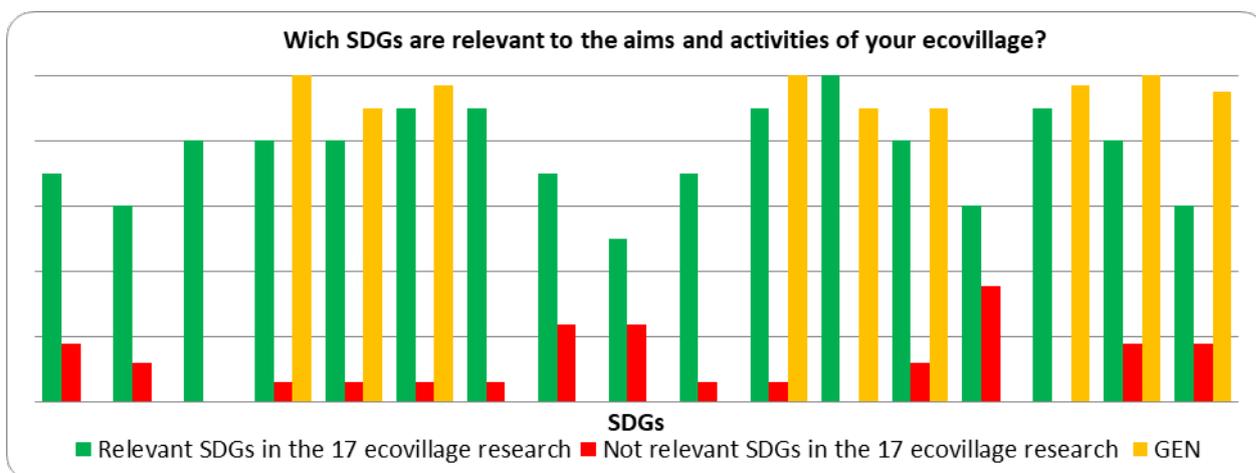


Figure 1. Self-assessment on SDG relevance

The research aimed to identify how many goals are perceived as irrelevant to the community’s aims and activities (Figure 2).

Among the 17 ecovillages, seven identified all SDGs as relevant to their aims and works, and four mentioned only one SDG as irrelevant. However, the chart shows that 35% of the communities identified more than one goal as irrelevant. One ecovillage marked as many as 12 goals as irrelevant to the community’s aims and works. Different information was found through the web-content analysis, where we found matching activities, good practices, or ambitions related to each SDGs at most ecovillage (Figure 3).

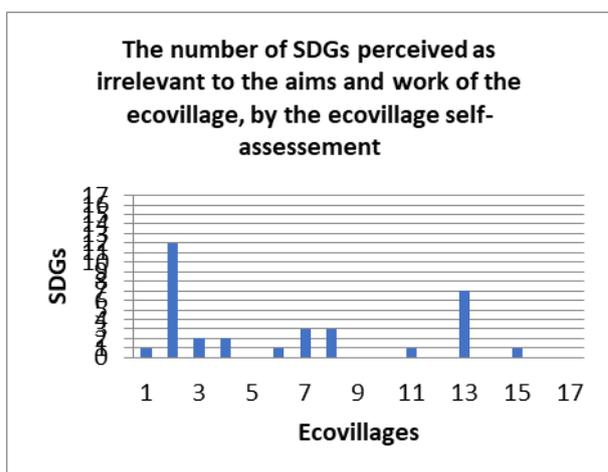


Figure 2. The number of irrelevant SDGs by the ecovillages’ questionnaire

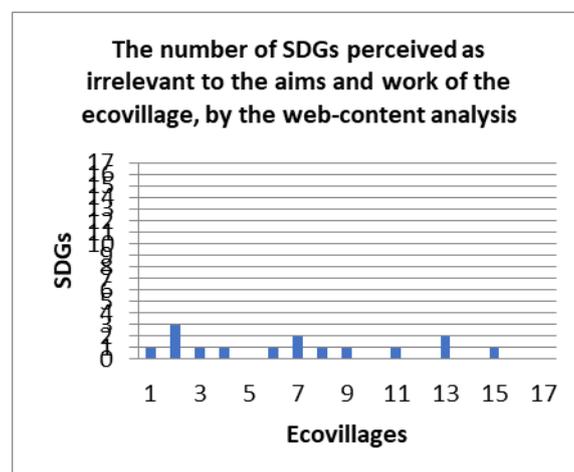


Figure 3. The number of irrelevant SDGs by the web-content analysis

In many cases, the web-content analysis did not correspond with the ecovillages self-assessment. Students who studied SDGs with all their targets and indicators found that many ecovillages were unaware of the SDGs’ detailed meaning. For instance, several communities working with organic agriculture indicated SDG 2 (Zero Hunger) as

irrelevant. On the UN pictogram of SDG 2, „Zero Hunger” is written; however, this goal has five targets relevant to organic agriculture practices.

We were curious to see how strongly these communities use the SDGs to refer to when describing their activities.

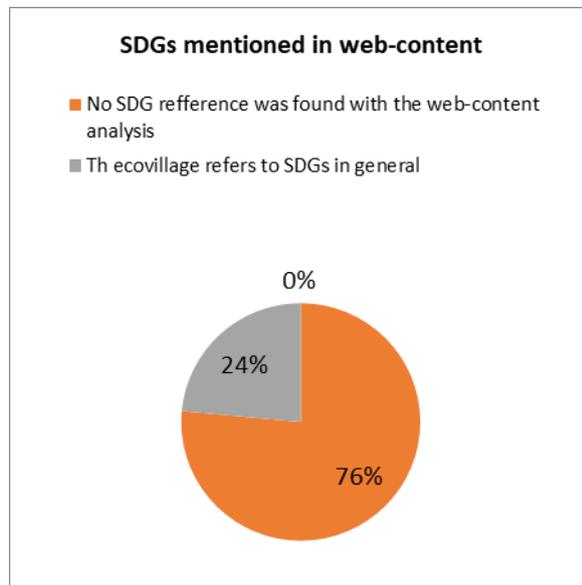


Figure 4-Communicating SDGs- web-content analysis

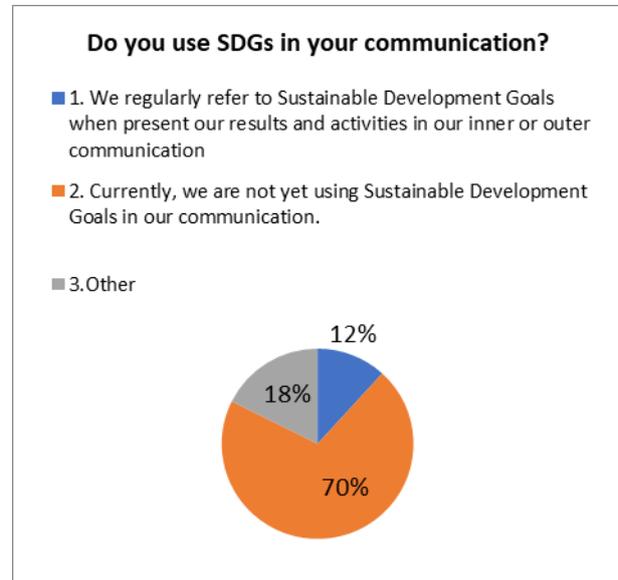


Figure 5-Communicating SDGs- Questionnaire

The web-content analysis found no community that used SDG to refer to their work. Four ecovillages web-content had general information on SDGs but did not refer to the communities' SDG-related work. While in 13 ecovillages, we did not find any publications mentioning the UN SDGs (*Figure 4*). The same question was asked in the questionnaire. *Figure 5* shows only a few ecovillages who claimed to refer to the SDGs when communicating their activities and achievements

As a final step, we compared the results of the web-content analysis with the ecovillages' self-assessment and classified the studied ecovillages into five SDG relation categories (*Figure 6*). None of the studied ecovillages fall into the category of "Uses SDGs to refer to the ICs work and aims".

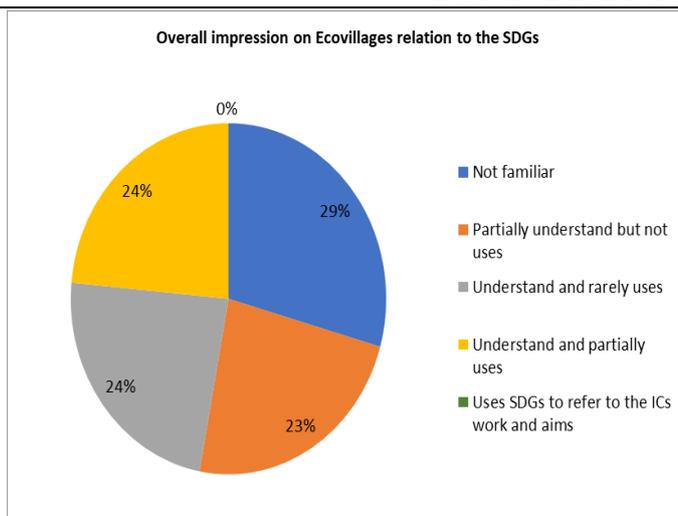


Figure 5. Overall impression on ecovillages SDGs relation

The overall impression was that while each ecovillage does outstanding work for SDGs’, only a few are aware of it. Their answers suggest that SDGs are not known, used and valued as a framework for communicating their aims and achievements. Most ecovillages do not see SDGs as a potential tool to collaborate for common goals; they see it as an empty signifier used by the mainstream regime. A survey with 20 members of Hungarian ecovillages examined if SDG attitude can be shifted.

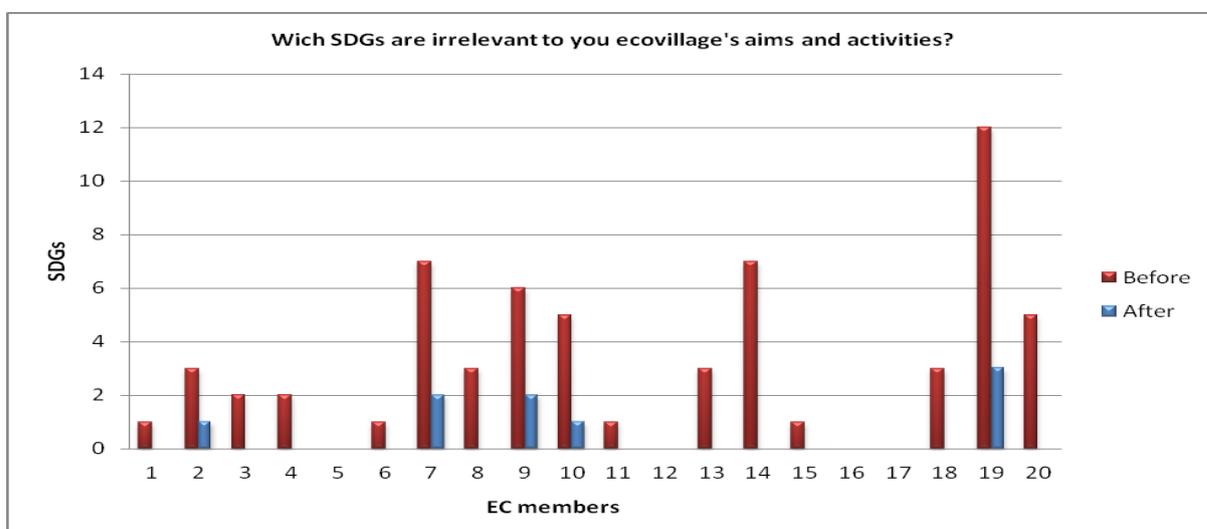


Figure 6. Change in owning the SDGs attitude before and after the SDG6 localizing workshop

Representatives indicated the relevant SDGs to their communities’ aims and activities before and after an SDG6 Localizing Workshop. This workshop filled up the SDG 6 targets with local context in a participatory manner. The difference was striking, as before the workshop, only a few SDGs, but after the workshop, most SDGs were marked as relevant to the community’s aims and work (*Figure 7*). The number of SDGs perceived as irrelevant significantly reduced after the workshop.

DISCUSSION

The studied literature claims that Ecovillages, by their very nature, contribute to the achievement of SDGs. They have experimented with solutions that are worth upscaling in their local geographical and socio-cultural environment.

The web-content analysis of the 17 studied ecovillages proved that each community works for sustainability in its local environment. The studied ecovillages' aims and works were set without knowing the SDGs; still, their activities correspond and contribute to most SDGs' local and global achievement. Our research confirmed that ecovillages inherently serve to achieve SDGs by their very nature.

We found significant differences between the web-content analysis and the ecovillages' self-assessment regarding the SDGs. In most cases, the web-content analysis result was not in match with the self-assessment results. IC representatives tended to identify more SDGs irrelevant to their aims and activities than their web content showed. From the ecovillages' online communication, we can see that the communities' activities are linked to the SDGs. Still, they do not express their achievements and actions in SDGs on their online platforms. The research results suggest that many ecovillages do not perceive the intended meaning of SDGs. A possible interpretation of this phenomenon could be that the studied ecovillages perceived SDGs as empty signifiers. Our research showed that their perception changed when SDGs were identified and filled with their local contexts.

Ecovillages could play an essential role in the regional and global SDG work if their SDG relevance is known and communicated. The studied ecovillages contribute to the achievements of the SDGs but are unaware of the SDGs relevance to their aims and activities. Awareness-raising is needed to draw attention from the ecovillages, and local and global stakeholders on the importance and potential role of ecovillages in achieving the SDGs.

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