

ECOVILLAGE AS AN ALTERNATIVE WAY OF RURAL LIFE: EVIDENCE FROM HUNGARY AND SLOVAKIA

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Abstract: This paper offers a case study of three selected ecovillages (two in Hungary and one in Slovakia). The main objective is to characterize, analyse and eventually compare types, trends and problems in the development of ecovillages and to discuss the possible impacts and effects of ecovillage movement on sustainable rural development. The authors used interviews, observation and inquiry for data collection and methods of document analysis, content analysis of different sources, and analysis of foot marks. They attempt to bring the worldview closer by introducing the basic ecovillage concept and framework, and by describing the ecovillage types, recent trends, problems and challenges. The analytical part begins with a short characteristic of the ecovillage movement in Hungary and Slovakia and follows with six thematic subchapters that investigate and compare the observed ecovillages according to the purposes and motivation for their founding, the communication models and public relations, local economic systems and self-sufficiency phenomenon, the employment structure and the existing infrastructure. Finally, the last part is devoted to assess the main research findings.

Key words: ecovillage, eco-philosophy, self-sufficient community, alternative way of life, rural sustainability

Abstrakt: Tento článok ponúka prípadovú štúdiu troch vybraných ekoddedín (dvoch v Maďarsku a jednej na Slovensku). Hlavným cieľom je charakterizovať, analyzovať a prípadne porovnať typy, trendy a problémy vývoja a rozvoja ekoddedín, ako aj diskutovať možné vplyvy a dopady hnutia ekoddedín na udržateľný rozvoj vidieka. Autorky použili pre zber údajov techniku rozhovorov, pozorovanie a anketu a metódy analýzy dokumentov, obsahovú analýzu rôznych zdrojov a analýzu fyzických stôp. Pokúšajú sa priblížiť svetové názory prostredníctvom predstavenia základného konceptu ekoddedín, ako aj popisom typov ekoddedín, súčasných trendov, problémov a výziev. Analytická časť začína krátkou charakteristikou hnutia ekoddedín v Maďarsku a na Slovensku a pokračuje šiestimi tematickými časťami, ktoré hodnotia a porovnávajú sledované ekoddediny podľa charakteru vzniku a motivácie vedúcej k ich založeniu, podľa komunikačných modelov a vzťahov s verejnosťou, lokálnych ekonomických systémov, fenoménu sebestačnosti, štruktúre zamestnaní a existujúcej infraštruktúre. Záverečná časť je venovaná zhodnoteniu hlavných výskumných zistení.

Kľúčové slová: ekoddediny, eko-filozofia, sebestačná komunita, alternatívny spôsob života, udržateľnosť vidieka

1. Introduction: ecovillages in context of sustainability challenge

Our society is faced with the biggest common challenge in human history, which is caused by the non-sustainable situation in the current socio-economic and ecological system. Whether we are talking about population growth, social inequity, environmental and ecological concerns, we are now witnessing unsustainable exponential growth in every realm of life, due to the free market arrangement of the economic system, development of global capitalism and the worldview of separation, fragmentation and reductionism (Burke – Arjona, 2015; Greenberg, 2015). The concern for our environment emerged already in the 18th century, when a number of writers, poets and philosophers talked about the negative effects of the environmental degradation. In the second half of the 20th century, this concern further strengthened where the environmental problems were not interpreted only as local cases but as a global crisis. The GEESE (2012) stated, that only systemic approaches are able to solve the current generation's global survival problems; carried out in a true spirit which believes that a culture of sustainability and peace is the only feasible path forward. As the challenge is so complex, the possibilities are equally comprehensive. An overall change of consciousness is needed in human thinking, which can free us from the materialist and reductionist worldview which ruled the previous centuries. The eco-

communities represent one answer to the socio-economic and environmental crisis in the world, since the main objective of the ecovillages is to become more socially, economically and ecologically sustainable. But there is really no simple, clearly agreed-upon definition of sustainability, although it has been a subject of international deliberation since as early as 1972. The most used definition on sustainable development is available in well-known Brundtland Report (UN, 1987) – development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Another definition (Brecher, 2013) declares sustainability has to be achieved in three areas: economic, social and environmental. This three-tiered objective also parallels the Global Ecovillage Network's three-legged stool model for ecovillage design. However, according to Litfin (2013) and Dessein et al. (2015) sustainability in terms of the “triple bottom line” or a three-legged stool is insufficient because it is missing the cultural/spiritual – inner dimension of sustainability. Litfin imagines sustainability as a house with four windows: ecology, economics, community, and consciousness (E2C2). Each window looking into a house, each representing a different vantage point. From each perspective, the house looks different and yet it is still the same house. Furthermore, Dessein et al. (2015) recognise that culture can be integrated within the sustainable development in three ways (or roles) – *in*, *for* and *as* sustainable development. First role – supporting, where culture is *in* sustainable development and has a role as a separate aspect, a free-standing additional pillar, which is linked but autonomous and independent dimension alongside the others. Second role – connecting and mediating where culture is *for* sustainable development and is a driver of sustainability processes and can be a go-between to connect the various dimensions of sustainability. Third role – creating sustainability where culture represents the whole sustainable development and is crucial for achieving the aims of sustainable development. By recognising this, authors conclude that culture is at the root of all human decisions and actions and the distinction between the pillars of sustainability have begun to fade. Regarding the role of ecovillages in sustainability matters, the importance of cultural dimension is emphasized e.g., in works of Trainer (2000, 2002) who understands ecovillages as an effective way how to contribute to the transition, and as a first step in a long process of building the new society. On the other hand, Fotopoulos (2000) distinguishes between power structures and culture and he argues that the unsatisfactory global situation of existing society cannot be overcome without pragmatic political movement for systemic change and required change in values and culture should be based only on process of interaction between institutional change and value change.

The ecovillage concept has also been defined in many ways and there are many definitions which seek to explain what the ecovillages are. However, no single definition tells the whole story, because the definition of the term “ecovillage” with any precision is difficult (Dawson, 2015). Subsequently, we have chosen just the most remarkable interpretations which are close to the current reality. The most famous and the most quoted definition of an ecovillage as a “great utopian design” comes from Robert and Diane Gilman (GEESE, 2012). According to Gilman (2015), an ecovillage is “a human-scale, full-featured settlement in which human activities are harmlessly integrated into the natural world in a way that is supportive of healthy human development, with multiple centres of initiative, and (which) can successfully be continued into the indefinite future.” Even though it is the most popular definition, many authors as Kasper, D. (2008), Jackson, H. [s.a] and Litfin, K. (2014) are considering it as a limited and a not precise one. Dawson (2015) states that the Gilman's definition describes an end state rather than a strategy for its realization. Kasper (2008) declares that the idea about the development which can successfully be continued into the indefinite time sounds too broad and is lacking a rational argumentation as the human needs and future at that time are unknown. The ecovillage according to the most comprehensive network of ecovillages (GEN, 2015) is a traditional or intentional community using local processes to holistically integrate economic, social, cultural and ecological dimensions of sustainability in order to regenerate social and natural environments. Authors like Miller – Bentley (2012), Taggart (2009), Sirna (2015) and Metcalf (2012) interpret the concept of ecovillages in a similar way: Ecovillages are urban or rural communities of people where like-minded residents share a commitment to live more sustainably with ecologically responsible practices like sustainable house building methods, advanced technology, sustainable resource management and social support to make and maintain lifestyle choices that are based on what is best for the environment in order to maximize their social and spiritual fulfilment. On the other

hand, Greenberg (2015: 270–271) defines ecovillages as “living laboratories – beta test centres – for a more sustainable future. In order to survive, humans need to both reduce the ecological impacts of the resource rich and raise the quality of life among the resource poor”. Greenberg (2015) quotes Agyemen who refers to these thresholds as humanity’s “profligacy ceiling” (carrying capacity) and “dignity floor”. Ecovillages have pointed out a middle ground between the resource rich and resource poor, and are trying to determine how we can live high quality lifestyles with low ecological impacts. However, there is no generally agreed-upon definition of an eco-village, in order to lay down the basic framework of the concept we need to rely on the most frequently used one. This is the Gilman’s report which defines an eco-village as a (i) human-scale, (ii) full-featured settlement 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 (Gilman, 2015).

2. Recent ecovillages: types and trends

Ecovillage projects are diverse in many ways, thus can be grouped variously. They exist in rural, urban, and suburban areas and in all parts of the world, among a variety of cultures. Although the term basically refers to the rural character, they can be embedded in a larger human settlement, such as a neighbourhood in a large city. There are many examples of ecovillages located in the inner city e.g., BedZED ecovillage in south London (Sirna, 2015). The ecovillages can be intentional eco-communities or traditional villages. While the first refers to the ecovillages in the Northern Hemisphere, the latter defines ecovillages located in developing countries (Litfin, 2012). In the Industrialized North (which also includes Australia and New Zealand), inhabitants of ecovillages want to live in a more ecological way and experience a sense of community in their lives. However, these are usually much smaller than true villages and don’t meet the criteria for villages or the well-known ecovillage definition. Accordingly, there is a more accurate term for them “emerging” or “aspiring” ecovillages². In contrast to the North, most ecovillages in the Global South are traditional, indigenous villages whose residents want to stop environmental destruction, preserve their traditional culture and generate sustainable local economies (Christian, 2008; Litfin, 2012). In the Global South local leaders understand the threat of the economic globalization and what to gain control over their cultural, ecological, and economic resources (Dawson, 2015)³.

The ecovillage initiatives can be grouped, according to their purpose of creation at the beginning – e.g., the social element, the ecological component, and/or spirituality motivated. As previously mentioned, all three motivations are now key elements in each of the ecovillages. Although many ecovillages were created by its own community, who were actively involved in the building, there are ecovillages which were developed by designers like BedZED in London (Jackson, 2016). The eco-communities are divided how they want to achieve low-impact way of life. The “low-tech” approach decreases needs and costs by focusing on manual labour and using local and recycled materials. The “high-tech” approach includes environmental technologies that are often more expensive and must travel further than conventional alternatives (Litfin, 2009). Ecovillages can be secular or spiritual/religious. Religion and spirituality in the ecovillages remains common as a base. Secular value systems can work also, but with more difficulties. To get a large number of people to embody a value system is difficult, it requires religion or some equivalently passionate personal commitment to a moral program. They are guided by a complex dream: establishing a world that is not only ecologically sustainable but is also personally rewarding through community, richness, pride, beauty and the real joy of self-sacrifice for a good cause (Anderson, 2015).

According to Dawson (2015), powerful shifts have been visible within the ecovillage movement worldwide over the last decade, which have basically changed the identity, role, and potential impact of ecovillages. In short, the ecovillage movement has moved from an inward focus on self-sufficiency to an outward focus on building alliances with neighbours, citizen groups and educational organizations (Lockyer, Veteto, 2015). The shift is more palpable among the intentional community ecovillages of the industrialized world, where the trend is more recent.

² Some examples: Munksoegaard in Denmark, Ecovillage at Ithaca in the US, Crystal Waters in Australia.

³ Examples include villages in the Senegalese Ecovillage Network in Africa and the Sarvodaya Movement in Sri Lanka.

Thus alliances are developing between ecovillages and local and central governments, as well as with other organizations in their vicinity that share similar visions and values. Furthermore, more and more ecovillage consultants are taking the technologies and expertise developed in ecovillages out into ordinary communities and organizations. Moreover, ecovillage educational programs are attracting participants from all over the world, and university students are gaining credits from conventional universities for semesters spent in ecovillages and degrees from ecovillage-based institutions through the recently organized Gaia University. Even international bodies as United Nations are entering into partnerships with ecovillages (Dawson, 2015)⁴. In the Global South an identical trend can be recognized, although it is a longer term. The most outstanding recent progress has been the decision by the government of Senegal to create a National Agency for Ecovillages. One of the ecovillage's main success is that they look less radical and distinctive than previously.

The international GEN Committee points out, that paradoxically at this moment when ecovillages are enjoying unparalleled impact and position, it has never been more difficult to create new ecovillage initiatives in the industrialized North. The primary reasons of this situation are land prices and planning regulations (Andreas, 2013). Therefore, the formation of new ecovillages has slowed down.

3. Materials and methods

The paper attempts to answer how the ecovillages can contribute to shape the concept of sustainability and whether they could serve as a good model of sustainable rural development. Ecovillages began a reform by example and created small sustainable communities based on a holistic worldview with the aim of transformation of self and society. They supported a modest, new, yet fulfilling lifestyle as an answer to the challenges facing us today (Litfin's, 2012; GEESE, 2012). Ecovillages are uniquely well placed, thus they are able to contribute to the re-imagination of human society from the ground up and their huge contribution towards sustainability could be also the creation of training, research and demonstration centres⁵.

The paper offers a case study of three selected ecovillages. The main objective is to characterize, analyse and eventually compare types, trends and problems in the development of ecovillages and to discuss the possible impacts and effects of ecovillage movement on rural development in the country. We used a qualitative approach for data collection and methods of document analysis, content analysis of different sources (books, local journals, documents, and online sources), and analysis of foot marks. The field survey was realized in the period from February 2015 to February 2016 using semi-standardized interviews with the "leaders" of the examined communities and/or with those inhabitants who have lived in the village long enough, as well as the observation and inquiry for residents. The interviews were conducted by prior arrangements within open days, religious festivals or private visits⁶.

For our specific research site we chose at the beginning 5 ecovillages (3 in Hungary, 2 in Slovakia) called Galgahévíz, Visnyeszéplak, Krishna Valley Indian Cultural Centre and Biofarm, Zaježová, and Lovinka. After the pilot visits and observation we could determine which eco-initiations belong to the best working and continuously developing ecovillages, and which are at the early stages of

⁴ For instance, the Findhorn Foundation based in Scotland and one of the oldest and most prominent ecovillages in the world, has ongoing collaborative projects with the United Nations and was named a UN "best practice" community (Lockyer – Veteto, 2015).

⁵ However, there is no single and unified approach to understanding the contribution of ecovillages to general social transition and value change in order to achieve a sustainable society. Regarding the mentioned debate between Trainer and Fotopoulos, the focus on education and the desire to integrate ecology, spirituality, community and business development are interpreted as common features of all ecovillages. On the one hand, they are understood as a set of diverse initiatives, which involve people in trying to build better life circumstances for themselves and involve ideas and practices that must be focal in a sustainable society. (Trainer, 2000, 2002) On the other hand, the effectiveness of ecovillages and ecovillagers as agents and actors of systemic change is understood as questionable. They are interpreted as various movements based on alternative ways of local organisation, which aim mostly at secure surviving within the existing society, rather than replacing it. They do not have a real chance to create a new society and they are bound to be absorbed or marginalised (Fotopoulos, 2000).

⁶ Together 58 people from three target groups responded (7 community leaders and "old" inhabitants, and 51 residents.

formation. We were determined to choose the best eco-examples to provide different, already working alternatives to the mainstream society. For this reason the ecovillage in Galgahévíz (HU) and Lovinka (SR) had to be excluded from the survey. The observed ecovillages are: Visnyeszéplak and Krishna Valley (Indian Cultural Centre and Organic farm) in Hungary and Zaježová in Slovakia (Fig 1, Fig 2.).

Visnyeszéplak is a tiny village located in the South-Danubian statistical region of Hungary, in Somogy County, and in the micro region Kadarkút. Krishna Valley is also located in the South-Danubian region, in Somogy County, but in the micro region Lengyeltóti. The latter practically creates an individual part of the village Somogyvámos, to which it administratively belongs. Visnyeszéplak does not have a self-government status, because in the settlement plan it was qualified as an inhabited outskirts of the village Visnye. However, during the past period the local association working on Visnyeszéplak undertakes a number of government duties. Visnyeszéplak is in the immediate vicinity of the Zselic Protected Area that is the second largest protected area in Hungary. It is a windy settlement, but is not a widely spread village as the farmhouses stand quite close to each other. In the 18th and 19th century, it was used as a vineyard. Due to its beautiful nature the inhabitants of nearby villages moved here, but it never became a regular village. The locals simply call it Széplak (NiceDwell). To the village Visnyeszéplak a several kilometre long forest road leads. The village cannot be reached by public transport, and the nearest settlements are about 5–7 km away, even the closest bus stop is 3 km far. On the other hand, Krishna Valley is located approximately 1 km from the village Somogyvámos and it is easily accessible as it is not far from the main transport routes.

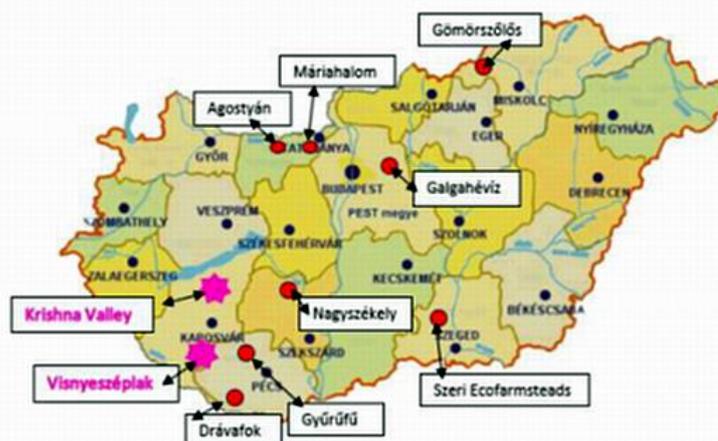


Fig 1. Ecovillages in Hungary (2016). Source: by own elaboration

Valley of Zaježová is in the middle of small hills in central Slovakia. It is a widely spread village consisting of several hamlets administratively belonging to the municipality of Pliešovce. There are about 200 farmhouses and each of the smallholdings has its name – Polomy, Sekier, Častobrezie, Podlysec – just to name some. The municipality is located in the district Zvolen. Zaježová was created by combining several farm houses which gradually emerged in the area in the 19th century. Residents of surrounding villages farmed here and later the seasonal residences gradually became permanent. In 1905 they were merged into settlements and only in 1959 Zaježová became a separate municipality. Historically, the largest number of inhabitants in Zaježová was 659 in 1961, but this number gradually declined. Due to lack of job opportunities, the youth left in the 70s and 80s, and those who stayed and did not work in agriculture had to commute daily to larger villages or to Zvolen. In 1990, Zaježová with approximately 200 inhabitants again affiliated to the municipality of Pliešovce, only the cadastre remained separate. Everything seemed to indicate that Zaježová will die out, and it will become only a cottage area. But it has evolved out differently.

The selected ecovillages are not separate, individual villages, but they are part of bigger municipalities. In terms of the number of inhabitants, the biggest municipality (together with the ecovillagers) is Pliešovce with 2213 inhabitants, then Somogyvámos (825) and the smallest

municipality is Visnye with 269 inhabitants. Currently, the biggest eco-community is in Krishna Valley with 126 people living in the valley and 87 in the main village, Somogyvámos. The second biggest is in Visnyeszéplak with 180, and in Zaježová 86 people belong to the eco-conscious community.



Fig 2. Ecovillages in Slovakia (2016). Source: by own elaboration

4. Results and discussion

Ecovillage movement in Hungary and Slovakia⁷

After the Velvet Revolution in Slovakia and the political regime change in Hungary, the period was characterized with enchantment of freedom, creative enthusiasm, and the youth were determined that they can “change the world”, but there was also an arising confusion from the collapse of the old social structures. In both post-communistic countries, people easily got inspired for new and interesting projects. In Hungary, the early green movement has played a decisive role in the late 1980s, on the other hand in Slovakia it was the desire to learn traditional handicrafts from the older generation in order to preserve them. Members of the movement were mostly urban, young intellectuals who have realized that none of the former socialist-communist system nor in that time – emerging – capitalism is a viable option, in reality they both led to a dead end of humanity. Thus, they launched an alternative community living movement in the early 1990s, which became known later in the media as an ecovillage movement. The ecovillage initiatives in Hungary and Slovakia began more than two decades ago. Although each of them have their own path, work on different principles and they are on diverse stages of development, they share a common idea which want to offer an alternative way to the existing consumer society, and to create a small-scale, community-oriented, harmonious lifestyle with nature.

The exact number of ecovillages in Hungary and Slovakia is unknown, because every available source defines a different one, and what makes it even harder that many ecovillages do not like to call themselves as ecovillages. According to the Global Ecovillage Network, which serves as an umbrella organization for the ecovillages all over the world, in Hungary there are 6 and in Slovakia are 3 ecovillages. Unfortunately, we cannot fully rely on this source of information, because the further research showed that some of them are outdated (non existing websites, and the “real” ecovillages have not heard about them since their foundation) or incomplete projects (they are in really early stages), furthermore some communities are not formally registered as ecovillages. Hungarian eco-communities like to be named as “living villages” and most of them are part of the Hungarian Living Village Network, which define 11 working, and up to now existing ecovillages – living villages and initiatives (Fig 1.). Today in Slovakia, several communities aim to develop self-sufficiency. One of the most famous is Zaježka in the municipality Pliešovce, and the association Alter Nativa near the village Brdárka (Fig 2.). Besides them, there are various smaller local initiatives geared towards establishing an eco-community like Lovinka in Cinobaňa, Greenheart in Trenčín, and the Ecovillage near Bratislava. Communal and environmental

⁷ <http://www.zajezka.sk/>; <http://www.zivica.sk/>; <http://krisnavolgy.hu/>; <http://www.visnyeszaplak.hu/>; <http://iskconnews.org/>; <http://elofaluhalozat.hu/>; <http://gen.ecovillage.org/en/about>

activities are also developing on some organic farms for example, on the Ranch Transylwahnja in Nižná Kaloša, on the family farm Mašekov Mlyn and Zelený Mlyn. Nevertheless, the latter mentioned initiations are at very early stages of formation.

Establishment of observed ecovillages: different and/or changing motivations

The Krishna Consciousness Community in Hungary after two years of unsuccessful land searching, in 1993 found the perfect site to practice their faith. It was a so called green field investment. At the beginning, the leaders of the church looked at several areas in the country. They looked for a territory, where there was an appropriate size of contiguous area for agriculture and for living space creation, and also the accessibility to drinking water. Krishna Valley Indian Cultural Centre and Biofarm was established in 1993 by Sivarama Swami in Somogyvámos with 120 hectares, less than half the current size, and only four or five devotees living on site. But more devotees began moving to the community, and within a few months, around forty were living in the local village of Somogyvámos. From the first year with the help of 20–25 devotees the village construction (construction of the temple, residential ashrams, family homes, and plant cultivation) started, it was the beginning of a complex process of regional development. The Krishna Consciousness Community in Hungary wanted to create a self-sufficient farming community according to the Vedic model of social structure and lifestyle. From the 1970s, several ISKCON (International Society for Krishna Consciousness) farming communities have been established all over the world with the main idea of “simple lifestyle, elevated thinking”. The Hungarian ISKCON farming community in Somogyvámos is one of the most successful all over the world. In these farm-communities, the Krishna believers (devotees) are able to realize the land-based life and all aspects of the Vedic social model, which contributes to the completion of their spiritual exercise as well. For the residents, the biggest motivation to move to Krishna Valley was the religion (spirituality), the possibility to practice their faith in a beautiful environment and the proximity of Krishna conscious school for children. However, some members of the community had no other choice, they had to come to Krishna Valley. We can conclude that even the variety of answers, one motive of the ecovillagers is common – the desire to be part of a cooperative community that lives with respect to all living things.

The foundation of the ecovillage in Visnyeszéplak was different. In this case, we cannot talk about a group of strongly religious people, but about young people who knew each other from folk dance classes and from the green club of the Technical University of Budapest, who decided to move away from Budapest, away from the city life. The decision making of the new settlers played a decisive role to move to an already existing community, and to avoid building a whole new village. After conscious search for a suitable area, they decided for an almost “died out village”. Visnyeszéplak is a settlement that was sentenced to death in the '80s. The conventional (chemical, monoculture, large shield) agriculture could not take root here, the area has no significant industrial facilities, and it is avoided from busy roads. The group of young people from Budapest recognised the exceptional natural conditions of Visnyeszéplak and were determined to settle in, create a village community and make a new era, which began for Visnyeszéplak. When they moved there, from the original 600 inhabitants there were only 35. In the first round, 3–4 families moved to Széplak. From the mid-1990s more families followed them and the village has continued to attract new inhabitants. The new settlers created the Village Conservation and Cultural Association in 1996 with the aim to deal with the tasks of the community. However, Visnyeszéplak is considered as an ecovillage, the residents like to call their village as a “living village”. In the case of Visnyeszéplak, the new settlers from the beginning put a greater emphasis on the community and spiritual values. Traditional spirit is the inhabitants' guideline that focuses on the revival and exercise of the slowly forgotten Christian traditions (make alive the sacred holidays, traditional crafts), on the other hand, to achieve a self-sufficient and harmonious life in the nature. The most frequent personal motivations to move to the ecovillage in Visnyeszéplak were the tranquillity of the area and in terms of children's education and healthy life “*it is the most suitable area*” answered our question.

In contrast to the aforementioned ecovillages, Zaježová was not found by individuals who wanted to permanently settle in a rural area, and to live an alternative way. It was found firstly by a group of people who were eager to find a beautiful place to organize weekend craft courses under

the name of “The school of folk culture” (ŠLK). For the first “explorers”, Zaježová seemed deserted and beautiful. They did not hesitate and in 1990 bought two houses: one in Podlysec and one in Polomy. Within the NGO Tree of Life, two kind of groups brought activities there – a group with a focus on natural construction that wanted to create a meeting centre in the house in Polomy, and the second group with craft activities which wanted to work in Podlysec. Local people called them “*stromáci*”. The group in Polomny was noisy and disturbed the peace in the area, thus the inhabitants did not like them, on the other hand the group in Podlysec with focus on calmer, traditional crafts was older and more open to local people as they wanted to learn from them. For the young incomers, the locals were inspiring and wanted to learn and preserve their traditions. Due to the contacts of those who took part on the traditional craft courses, Zaježová became a synonym for “traditional culture for people”. In Zaježová, besides the mentioned two (traditionalists and natural builders) a third movement emerged – the ecological. The “The school of folk culture” indirectly invited people with alternative thinking and with rejecting consumerist lifestyle. Later, at the end of 1994, the organisation bought a farm in Sekier, and moved its activities there. Although “The school of folk culture” could fluently continue, it did not happen, the life from Podlysec disappeared. So the crisis was deeper and it was not only caused by the diverse opinions. “The school of folk culture” ended due to the lack of organizational management, as people did not know how to manage non-governmental organizations few years after the velvet revolution, and it may have happened that people’s attitude burned out and it did not work anymore. With “The school of folk culture” in Podlysec the natural builders in Polomy disappeared as well. The motivations in Zaježová have changed since its beginning. One of the current residents speaks eloquently about it: “*The initial impulse to move here was to totally disconnect ourselves from the system and to get rid of all those senseless demands and pressures in life. We have come to such extremes that we refused to use toothpaste because it is a product of the system. From this idealistic dream I have been taken over. It is presumptuous and naive to think that it is achievable. At least not entirely. However, my love of nature remained, and Zaježová allows me to explore and work on myself. And now I brush my teeth with an ecological toothpaste...*”. Simply, we can put them into 3 categories: (i) individuals in some crossover in their life (e.g., to find a place to settle; start a family); (ii) people with commitments (e.g., children- who can grow up without fear and in trust; life partner – by themselves would not choose this place); (iii) people preferring nature, beautiful environment. The current aim of the newly settled population is to make Zaježová even a more enjoyable place to live. For this reason, the population, which is intensively involved in various informal and formal projects in Zaježová call themselves “Zaježka community”. They are connected by the goal to live freely, cooperate, protect local landscape and nature, and create conditions for a holistic, worthy life. It encourages people to seek their own path based on freedom, responsibility, and respect.

Although all the three examined ecovillages were established differently, in all cases they were initiated and created by young, educated individuals from cities who wanted to find a more natural way of life. Each of them started as a civil initiation in the 1990’s and the founding organizations, in terms of their legal form, were non-governmental and religious organizations. One question of the inquiry asked whether the residents are satisfied with their life in the selected villages. In Krishna Valley, there was a unanimously response. They answered with a steady “yes”. Though in the other two ecovillages, the residents are satisfied, but they know that they have to improve, and work on their personal relations in order to create a place that they have dreamed of. “*We are continuously working on it, but this is the first place in my life where I do not hang out from the queue,*” one of the respondents replied in Visnyeszéplak. “*Here, I feel a sense of belonging and I cannot imagine my life somewhere else*”, one interviewee in the Slovak eco-community concluded.

Communication mechanisms and public relations

The flow of information within the communities is partly spontaneous (small talks, advices to each other), and partly through regular trainings and presentations. Internal and external lecturers are invited to give trainings in a variety of topics (nature medicine, farming, architecture, environmentally conscious lifestyle, etc.). With these lectures and talks, they want to enhance the community power and to promote the residents' value search. The ecovillages have their own local notice board, newsletter (printed or online), and magazines. Visnyeszéplak and Krishna

Valley are part of the Hungarian Living Village Network circular online letter, where the members can read about events, happenings in the world of the Hungarian ecovillages. In Zaježová and Visnyeszéplak, the regular association gatherings are also important. The main topics of these meetings are the school, the organization and operation of village curatorship, discussing the association's affairs, and holiday preparations. These associations work on a democratic base. In 2016, a new communicational platform was launched for those, who belong to the community and to the friends of Zaježka. Its name is "Kitchen", because the kitchen is the place where the meetings and discussions of different serious and less serious topics happen. The online kitchen has in itself transparent calendar of events, discussions are divided into several groups, there is a section for voting, advertisements, photo galleries and many other features. They prepare a connection among the main community website (www.Zajezka.sk) and some of the features of the Kitchen available for the public as well.

Relations between the ecovillage inhabitants and the original residents and surrounding villages are always an interesting topic, if the ecovillages and their relations are examined. The answers to the question how the locals perceive the ecovillage initiations were similar. We learned that at the beginning in Visnyeszéplak, the locals were afraid of them, they did not understand why they want to live outside the village, almost in the forest. In that time, in the 80's and 90's, many people left the surrounding villages and moved to bigger cities, because there were no jobs and industries there. Thus the locals did not understand why people wanted to live on an outskirt area. *"Even today, the original population cannot get used to us, therefore we try to cooperate with the newcomers,"* said the guide. The situation was the same in Krishna Valley, but when the locals saw what a beautiful place they were intending to create from an empty field, they started to accept and cooperate with them. But again *"there are villagers who really like us, and those who really do not like us,"* summarized the interviewee. In Zaježová, the situation was a bit different. Most of the original inhabitants were happy that the forgotten area of Zaježová was discovered again. But there are also inhabitants who do not understand why the new settlers want to go back in time, why they want to do everything manually, and why they do not use modern tools. They did not like that the new settlers want to introduce methods as they once were.

The studied ecovillages closely cooperate with local governments. The strongest cooperation between the local government and the ecovillage is in Visnyeszéplak, because the current mayor is also a member of the eco-community. In Krishna Valley, since 1998, the devotees are part of the municipal council. Currently two persons are active in the local government, one as a member of the municipal council and the other as a Deputy Mayor. The members of Zaježka community also have a good relationship with the mayor. It is due to the fact that he has been the mayor of Pliešovce for 25 years, thus he saw the social changes in Zaježová. He is happy that young people are coming back to Zaježová.

The ecovillages with creation of different networks are trying to share their experience. The biggest network is the Global Ecovillage Network, wherein some of the Hungarian and Slovak ecovillages are part, too. Except for Visnyeszéplak, both Hungarian and Slovak eco-initiations are part of the mentioned worldwide organization. In Hungary, the umbrella organization that connects the ecovillages and initiatives is the Hungarian Living Village Network, which focuses on active membership, common thinking, and information and knowledge exchange. They have a common website (<http://elofaluhalozat.hu/>), e-newsletter, magazine and regular meetings. The examined Hungarian eco/living villages were both between the founders and they serve as an information centre. As in Slovakia, the "eco-movement" is in the early stages of formation, there is no common associating organization. The Zaježka community is part of the GEN international mailing list, where good practices are exchanged and they are in touch with other ecovillages abroad, as they are sending young individuals there through the European youth volunteer service programme. Furthermore, all of the ecovillages cooperate on a certain level with universities (University of Debrecen; Szent István University, Gödöllő; Corvinus University; University of Kaposvár; University of Pécs, Slovak University of Agriculture in Nitra and Technical University in Zvolen), orchards networks and organizations for animal protection, etc. According to the aforementioned activities, we can say that the studied ecovillages are slowly building bridges with the surrounding villages, and locals. However, the guide in Visnyeszéplak said *"the hardest thing to be a prophet at home..."*.

In most ecovillages, the intention to show themselves and to educate people is presented. They have been part of the so-called “green movement” that goes against the mainstream society, and most of them are eager to create an alternative model, transfer the knowledge and present themselves as much as it is possible. All three observed ecovillages in some extent wish to present themselves and their activities to the wild public. The smallest tendency and openness to welcome the curious visitors in the Hungarian Visnyeszéplak can be observed. It is caused by the fear of losing their privacy with the flow of visitors and lack of finances. On the other side, in Krishna Valley, it was obvious how much the devotees and the whole place want to give an example of a totally different life and to introduce a spiritual world in the middle of nowhere. Compared with the other ecovillages, huge efforts are being made in the development of tourism in the valley. As we got to know from the devotees, they see it as a mission. They say in a materialistic world with permanent crises, it is inevitable to show the people a sustainable and achievable lifestyle. Events and activities organized for the public are officially initiated and carried out by non-governmental organizations operating in the ecovillages. In the case of Krishna Valley, the church is responsible for public happenings, where the commercial activities are executed by two legal entities called: Biovölgy Bt. and VÉNU Ltd. In Krishna Valley and Zaježová, wide range of activities are organized for the public. While in the first the activities are connected with religion or environmental awareness, in the latter the visitors can choose from traditional craft courses till shamanic exercises.

Local economic models

The residents of the examined ecovillages created their life in a way that they absolutely take into account the natural potential of the landscape. The form of carrying out economic activities is not the same in the ecovillages. In Krishna Valley, every activity is done together (devotees execute activities according to their abilities), with the help of each other and in close cooperation, and everything is owned by the church. In contrary, in Visnyeszéplak and Zaježová everybody owns their own garden and realize activities on the family level.

All the three ecovillages apply organic farming from the beginning of their creation, due to conceptual and economic reasons. The main conceptual reason is that they respect the land and they do not want to exploit it with artificial methods so they do not use any dangerous pesticides and fertilizers. The economic reason for organic farming is the price. Smaller communities or families who want to become self-sufficient in food, for them the organic solution is cheaper. A person has to scarify his/her time and energy but he/she does not have to buy expensive pesticides. Although many people put an emphasis on the maintenance and revitalization of traditional local farming, the local production is organic, whereas the ecovillages use the elements of permaculture design, for instance, plant binding, intermittent grazing and energy catching. In addition to the agriculture, in Krishna Valley and some families in Visnyeszéplak believe that the Moon has a stronger influence on the plant life cycle than the Sun. Thus gardening, sowing, planting, harvesting are based on the moon calendar because it can have more beneficial consequence on the plants. What is interesting, that however ecovillages wanted to do agriculture right from the beginning, they all needed help from the locals as most of the new settlers were city people. They taught them how to cultivate the land, how to work with horses, and how to milk the cows. And after some time in each ecovillage, things began to develop nicely.

Currently in Krishna Valley, the arable land size is 25–30 hectares and the size of the meadows and pastures is 80–90 ha. The produced cereals on average are 54 tons/year (wheat, yellow peas, white mustard, spelled, barley, rye, oats) and the cultivated vegetable species are 40. They also own a 2 hectares big fruit garden. However, the economic activities of the inhabitants in Visnyeszéplak and Zaježová are done separately, at the level of families, in the first the residents cultivate grain together on several hectares and they own a community garden, as well. In Zaježová, the inhabitants have jointly grown potatoes for 3 years, but it failed and currently there is no common plant cultivation. They say that it is easier to take care of their gardens separately. The families do not have to buy vegetables in Visnyeszéplak and many times they have to provide their sale and exchange. Moreover, they have kiwis and figs and the latter gives an enormous amount of crop. They have significant surplus from fruits and almost all year they have fresh fruits except for March and April. Summer and autumn fruits are eaten freshly and the rest is processed

in the form of dried fruits, jams, juice and preserves. From green apples, they make apple vinegar. Even the lowest quality fruits are processed, they are given to the animals or they make palinka (brandy) from them. Zaježová due to its location has never been an area, where people could easily survive on agriculture. In the past, there have been dozens of farms which were more or less self-sufficient, but their maintenance required immense hard work and even though their inhabitants had to live very modestly. Currently, the new settlers have smaller gardens with some seasonal vegetables, orchards and some animals.

In both, Zaježová and Visnyeszéplak, people breed mainly sheep, goats, cows, horses, and poultry. In Krishna Valley, instead of cow breeding, they have cow protection. They have cows, oxen and a bull. They look after them with love and respect, because as the land, the cows are also honoured as their mother. The devotees protect them and do not let them get hurt or killed and if they are ill, they take care of them. The aim is not the exploitation of the cows. Somogy County has always been an important place for beekeepers, due to its exceptional natural characteristics. The bees provide the ecovillagers full and healthy sweeteners, source of vitamins and healing materials. Furthermore, they are important in lighting, cream production and wood scar treatment. Not to mention the pollination of fruit trees and other plants. For these reasons, the beekeeping was already established in the year of the foundation in Krishna Valley and also in Visnyeszéplak. In Krishna Valley, the production of organic honey is not possible, because their bees are not collecting only in the area of their organic farms, but also they visit the surrounding areas. On the other hand, in Visnyeszéplak, there are some beekeepers that produce certificated organic honey. In Zaježová, the beekeeping could not be developed. It is a big step towards self-sufficiency, when a community is able to produce for itself its vegetable seeds and other reproducing materials. Krishna Valley and Visnyeszéplak has its own seed bank, where they try to collect those seeds which can be replanted. Moreover, they organize events for exchange of such seeds between different ecovillages.

The food production is such a need, if it is not provided locally, then its production requires huge energy and money. According to the devotees within a cooperating community the food production can be provided easily – with cooperation, physical work, minimum money, good management and of course expertise. In all the examined ecovillages, the food production was observed, but its extent differs. Generally, dairy products, jams, dried fruits, compotes and preserved vegetables are produced the most. The most popular locally produced household goods are the cleaning and washing products in Krishna Valley and Visnyeszéplak. According to the interviewees, the residents of the Hungarian ecovillages like to use green products to protect their sewage system and of course the nature. As they are trying to be self-sufficient, they are eager to use natural products for cleaning and washing, such as lye ash, vinegar from any kind of fruit (apple, plum, and pear), baking soda, citric acid, washing soda, cow manure, etc. In Somogyvámos and Krishna Valley, the devotees established a small community called “blenders team”, where the use of domestic materials and cosmetics are discussed (soap cooking, detergents production, harmful ingredients of the commercially available products, etc.). They already made a few home made products, for example, detergents, deodorants, lip balms, toothpaste, soaps, shampoos, hand creams and sun lotions. They plan the production of homemade remedies and healthy foods (healthy and nutritious delicacy). For the production of these products they use local commodities or which are easily accessible.

In most of the ecovillages, plenty of activities and services are offered to the public. In the selected ecovillages, a specific form of rural tourism is carried out which includes eco, religious, agro, conference and educational tourism. If we compare the studied ecovillages, the biggest number of visitors are welcomed in Krishna Valley, where in 2015, 18,803 guests arrived and the smallest number of guests were counted in Visnyeszéplak with 307 people. Although in Visnyeszéplak there is no tourism, in the previous years the number of guests slightly increased due to the craft courses and family camps organized there. In Zaježová, 80% (around 4 000) from the total number of visitors came to the events organized by the NGO Živica. Even though the highest number of guests was in Krishna Valley, the highest number of night stays was not recorded there. According to the guide, only approximately 3% of the tourists stayed for a night in Krishna Valley in 2015, whereas in Zaježová almost 40% of the visitors spent a night in the ecovillage. Accommodation facilities only in Krishna Valley and in Zaježová are provided. In the area of

Krishna Valley, 2 guesthouses offer its services. Although there is no electricity and internet in the valley except for the office building, the guests can use such “commodities”. In Zaježová, the housing is provided according to the guests’ interest.

The employment in the investigated ecovillages is closely linked with the activities carried out within the ecovillage. The most specific employment situation is in Krishna Valley. All the devotees (missionaries and monks) living in the Valley are employed by the church. Every missionary serves 6 days a week and 7 hours a day and for this work they receive a quota which can be used in their local shop. According to their abilities, they are divided into different groups to carry out tasks that fit their personality the most. In Visnyeszéplak, the residents peculiarly see the employment. *“Here everybody works all day, but nobody actually has a job,”* explained the guide. For them, the self-sufficiency is more important than the employment. Although, those who choose this type of lifestyle, they have more time for their families, they work together, what they produce belongs to them. If they help each other, then they can achieve that everyone will have a place to live, there will be a joined grain production, common orchards and eventually the unemployment become unknown. Despite the fact that the percentage of self-sufficiency in the Slovak ecovillage is not high and the newcomers are not eager to *“work in the garden all day”*, they all try to arrange their life in a way where their jobs will not absorb them completely. From the “classic” job opportunities in Zaježová, it is relatively few. The former cooperative in Zaježová went bankrupt in 2007, at the stone-pit and in the forest not the locals are employed, consequently many people have to commute to work to Zvolen, which is 35 km far. The diversity of jobs arising, whether they have children or not, whether they live alone or jointly with others, but also whether they live in rented accommodation, or currently reconstructing or building their houses.

In all the examined ecovillages, some form of community currencies have emerged during their foundation. In Zaježová, the Local Exchange Trading System (LETS) started in 1999 and worked intensively for 5 years. The exchange system in the community (Visnyeszéplak) is a crucial activity which ensures the self-sufficiency of the residents. This system works on mutual trust and a trustee is not needed for leading the records about the exchange. The aim of the payment agent is to increase the local exchange of goods and to take care of each other in this way. The functioning of the community currency is different in Krishna Valley. Hence all the devotees work for the church, and do not need to exchange anything between each other, because there is no private property, thus in Krishna Valley, we cannot really talk about the LETS.

Strategies for self-sufficient living

Many times the words “self-supplying and self-sufficient” are used as synonyms. However, it is important to clearly differentiate them. “Self-supplying” can be understood as one of the form of the “self-sufficiency”. A person can be self-supplying, if he or she earns money for his/her work, thus that person can buy what is needed. A person who is not able to work is not even self-supplying (Kun, 2012). One of the main aims of the ecovillages worldwide is to achieve self-sufficiency, and be independent from the mainstream society. Most of the eco-communities are trying to be self-sufficient, which means that with a minimum use of money, and minimum dependence on the state and without purchasing goods at the shops, they are able to produce, manufacture and create what they need. In Krishna Valley, from the beginning self-sufficiency was the main aim as well. In 2000, this aim was almost achieved in food production, though in that time the diversity of food plans was smaller than today. However, between the aims of the first visitors of Zaježová, it was to realize independency from the world, and however they tried many methods to achieve it, it did not happen. They found out that crop production without pesticides and mechanization is harder than they had thought before. Currently, just several families of the new settlers own small farms producing vegetables, dairy products and other products, but none of them is food self-sufficient. *“It is a matter of priorities, if you have to be outside in your garden all day to provide food for your family, then there is no time left for the community work, for quality time with my children. It is easier to buy, for example, potatoes from the neighbour,”* explained the local guide. Paradoxically, the original inhabitants are still more self-sufficient than the newcomers in Zaježová.

Tab 1. Estimated self-sufficiency level of observed ecovillages. Source: observation/inquiry, by own elaboration

	Water	Groceries	Power supply (from renewable and non-renewable energy)	Heating (wood)
Visnyeszéplak	wells, rain water	100%	70%	70% (depends on family)
Krishna Valley	wells, rain water	100%	70%	35%
Zaježová	wells, rain water	20%	70%	N/A (from local forest)

It is important to point out there is no self-sufficiency in water since we get it as a readymade product. In each ecovillage, the houses have their own wells or they share a water reservoir. In Zaježová and Visnyeszéplak, the rainwater is used daily for irrigation, or after filtering for flushing, washing or even drinking. In Krishna Valley, the direct use of rainwater is not possible, just after 8 days according to the guidance of scriptures. In order to increase the independency from the national energy suppliers, the ecovillages use different alternative energy sources, these are the solar panels, solar heater pipes, wind mills and wind generators, biomass and dark painted metal containers. Furthermore, in Visnyeszéplak, there is an expert who lives there and works with solar panels, so they are planning a complex solar system construction as well. Although most of the houses are connected to the national electricity system in Visnyeszéplak and Zaježová, they try to minimize its usage, e.g., light demanding jobs are scheduled for the day, and instead of lamps, self-made candles are often used.

Tab 2. Energy supply in observed ecovillages. Source: observation/inquiry, by own elaboration

	Visnyeszéplak	Krishna Valley	Zaježová
Connected to national electricity system	yes	no	yes
Renewable energy sources	solar panels, windmills, biomass	solar panels, windmills, wind generators, biomass	solar panels, biomass
Non-renewable energy sources	gas tank	diesel oil, gas tank, oil	gas tank
Other	dark painted metal container, animal power	oxen power, home pressed oil from seeds	horse power

According to the devotees, the best solution for lighting is the use of vegetable oils. In the future, the devotees are planning to produce energy from vegetable oil, biogas and oxen power. Farmers are also largely independent of non-renewable sources of energy. Where it is possible, direct labour power and animal power is used. Only within exceptional tasks the examined communities use tractor and combine harvester. If we compare the firewood self-sufficiency of the ecovillages, Visnyeszéplak is the most self-sufficient. Those who have been living in Visnyeszéplak for more years have their own small wood from where they can ensure their firewood. Because of the village space limitations, the newcomers do not have enough space for local forestry, so they have to provide their firewood from the nearby forest, but generally the inhabitants help each other with fire wood supply. Zaježová is also ideally located because in the vicinity they have a forest. Although it is not owned by the eco-community, the residents can ensure their firewood supply from there. Currently in Krishna Valley, just about 35% comes from their forest, while the rest is purchased outside.

All ecovillagers practice separate waste collection. What is more on the area of the ecovillages, the containers for separate waste collection are provided, except Krishna Valley. The devotees

have to take their separated waste to Somogyvámos. In Visnyeszéplak, the waste, which cannot be separated, is taken from the houses by a horse carriage. In Zaježová, till 2009, a place for recycling functioned. At this place all the waste from the region was taken there and then it was manually separated and stored, because in the early 90's, recycled waste processing firms did not exist in Slovakia. The "recyklačko" was supported by the municipality, it provided the building and a tractor who collected the waste from the households. Due to the unwillingness of the original inhabitants to cooperate in waste separation, the NGOs working in Zaježová initiated the construction of a shelter, bought containers with the financial help from Tesco and currently the municipality finances the separated waste collection from Zaježová. "We consistently separate, but the original inhabitants sometimes mix it," concluded sadly the respondent.

Local infrastructure to support stronger community

In the studied ecovillages, there is no municipal office, medical station and pharmacy. Due to the high number of children in the eco communities (in Visnyeszéplak more than 50% of the ecovillage inhabitants), all the villages have their own educational system, and their education is provided by them from the nursery till the highest grade in the elementary school. In Krishna Valley, the nursery is connected with the kindergarten and the maximum number of children in the facility is 14. The children's education is carried out by teachers of Krishna Valley. In addition to the National Curriculum, the students learn about Vedic sciences, organic gardening, self-sufficiency, ecological lifestyle, drama, music, arts, crafts and much more. The school children collect herbs and create jam. They are taught to respect the treasures of nature, animals, people, because each and every one belongs to God to Krishna. In Visnyeszéplak, since the 90's, they have been trying to create their own educational system, as they are strictly against the national school system and do not want to send their children to a state school, and to commute there for long hours. This has motivated the creation of local kindergarten and school. Unfortunately, the independence, despite many attempts due to strict regulations has failed. However, from the autumn of 2007, some of the local children can learn in Visnyeszéplak through the cooperation with the Hungarian Mezőörs Foundation. Most of the children are saved from commuting to schools, because the closest school is 25 km far and the closest bus stop is a several km long walk from the ecovillage. Officially, there is just one school with the grades 6–8 and it is functioning as an outsourced institution of the foundation. Since within the inhabitants, there are many professional teachers who created a group of teachers and undertook the teaching in the village, their given marks and exams are nationally accepted. The children are taught in private houses, and besides the regular classes, they are often outside. These teachers/parents do not get paid from the state, the locals compensate their effort in some way – money or other services (firewood cutting, garden brigade). Smaller children are taught in the village house, as a one-class school with grades 1–4, but it is not official. In Zaježová, the forest kindergarten and the one-class elementary school ensure the education for the children in the community. Forest kindergarten is an informal local initiative for preschool children and their parents. Their adult guides prepare for them creative programmes and games, during which available natural materials and terrain (forest, stream, meadows) is mainly used. It is not an official kindergarten, it was established in 2011 as the first of this kind in Slovakia. The original elementary school of Zaježová was closed down in 1977. In 2007, a group of locals reopened the school as a one-class school for grades 1–4. The little number of students makes a warm atmosphere and the education is modified to the needs of the individual pupils.

In the area of post and telecommunications, mobile and internet usage are the most favoured. In the villages, there are no post offices, except Zaježová where the post office is open for 1 hour from Monday to Friday. Every resident has to pick their post-up from their post box in the village centre. The ecovillagers in order to be available for others prefer the use of mobile phones instead of telephone landlines. The internet plays an important role in the organization of community activities, carpooling and the spread of internal newspapers in Visnyeszéplak and Zaježová. In these ecovillages, the internet is commonly used, but in Visnyeszéplak the children are not allowed to use it. In this way, they want to protect their families from the mainstream society. In Krishna Valley, the internet access is only available in the office and temple; moreover, its use is limited. In all the three ecovillages, there is no television usage. In Visnyeszéplak, the guide

added, *“there are some children in the village who do not even know what is television, and they are more than happy”*.

5. Conclusions

For centuries people have lived modestly in communities close to nature, and many of these communities exist up to now, but are fighting for survival. Ecovillages are now being created intentionally, thus people can again live in communities connected to the Earth. If we would like to describe how a typical ecovillage looks like, we could not because a typical/standard ecovillage does not exist. Each of them is different, with its own character, culture, location, size and so on.

The residents of ecovillages are city people who became farmers as a result of their personal choice and conscious decision. They need greater determination and endurance as they struggle to find partners on both local and international level. Alternative farming, schooling, detachment from the national networks supply and building of self-sufficiency require from the communities a serious moral strength. The most prosperous communities in Hungary are based on strong religious beliefs, but the Slovak example of an ecovillage shows that this is not necessary. Permaculture, community farming, land management and the use of renewable energy sources are available also to secular communities. The religious background according to our observations helps to endure the internal tension and it is a support in conflict situations. Although the examined villages were created differently, they all share common features which corresponds to the motivations of new-settlers to move out from the city, these are: sustainable life; community spirit; restore social structures, control over energy, food and water resources; breaking away from the constant buzz of city and from the consumer society; and living in harmony with the nature and with themselves. Life in the outskirts area attracts people for whom the accumulation of money is not a priority in their life. In their value scale, the personal development, family and social life is on higher level than the money and employment. Hence, the ecovillagers are environmentally conscious people, following the “eco” lifestyle does not really require from them conscious attention, since it comes almost automatically.

The topic of ecovillages is usually sceptically perceived. One could ask if it is a return to the traditional way of life. In our opinion, it is definitely not and we oppose the statement that ecovillages equal to traditional/tiny villages. It is true that we can learn much from traditional villages and certainly the ecovillage movement is eager to keep alive the “traditional way of life” based on traditions, revival of forgotten crafts and agriculture. Notwithstanding, the movement is inspired by modern technologies especially in power supply and telecommunications. The ecovillages want to create such living environment which support the harmonious human development, new ideas and provide diverse opportunities for all the residents. But do we really need to create more ecovillages and should everybody move to such places ...? The answer is not simple. We think in Slovakia the whole eco-initiation has only just started, and there is a real possibility to create more eco-communities even within existing villages. In Hungary, there are more starting or already thriving eco-communities, thus it would be better to concentrate on those initiations that have been created previously. In our view, not everybody should move into ecovillages, because it is not the solution. Moreover, it is not feasible due to high land prices, land regulations and basically the up to now protected nature would lose its character, if too many people moved there. On the other hand, concerned and committed citizens no longer need to abandon their towns and villages to create new communities in order to engage with like-minded people in sustainability-related activities. We all cannot start to build new ecovillages, but we can apply the principles of ecovillages in our homes, communities, working places and schools.

It is crucial to highlight that the ecovillagers are not eccentric and the ecovillages are not “isolated enclaves”. All the observed ecovillages want to serve as role models for other villages, thus they are highly engaged in public education and they are active on local, national even international level. The main questions that they are working to answer are “How can we show that what we do is beneficial to the whole of society? How can we ensure public and political support for our work?” They plan on the level of a municipality and they carry out reforms in every field of life. The ecovillages display all the characteristics and problems in small areas that are found at higher levels in the society and world. As other authors also point out (e.g., Lüpke, 2012; Lockyer –

Veteto, 2015) they offer a solution to many environmental and social problems of the society by showing at local level the techniques and methods which support the sustainable way of life. Although they do not know exactly how a sustainable society looks like, ecovillages are striving to create such type of communities. For this reason, they are trying to locally embrace all four dimensions of sustainability (environmental, economic, social and cultural) by applying innovative elements in their everyday life. The nature of innovations includes both - “doing things in new ways” and “doing old things in a new way”. So the sustainability is shaped within these communities by introducing local alternative economic models, new environmental technologies and rural services, and also by implementation of new innovative strategies (e.g., reinventing traditions, designing new models of lifestyle, creative mixing of arts and IT, revisiting existing market and growth models by using scaling-down strategies, and cooperating at different levels and platforms), that could be inspiring for sustainable rural development. We think therefore ecovillages have the potential to be real role models for other villages because our doubtful society needs an already working proof that it is possible to live in a more nature friendly way, with more reasonable consumption and behaviour which does not strain the environment so much. The ecovillage movement is a model, a way of life that is possible and feasible for everyone. It shows how we should live so as not to jeopardize our social structures and our environment. In addition, it seems it can provide satisfying life conditions for sustainable lifestyle.

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