Decision Making for Strategic Sustainable Development in Selected Swedish Ecovillages

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Abstract:

Despite of significant role of collective decision making in strategic community development towards sustainability, this area is seen to be generally underestimated by community planners and ecovillage members, comparing with, for example, legal, financial and technological aspects of community life. This study aims to understand how Strategic Sustainable Development (SSD) perspective can contribute to decision making procedures in ecovillages in Sweden. The research examines how decision making procedures work in ecovillages today and to which extent strategic component, viewed through SSD perspective, is currently incorporated. Secondly research explores how SSD perspective could possibly be incorporated into decision making procedures in ecovillages, in order to foster their development towards sustainability. To address this purpose decision making model was created, based on literature review; three ecovillage studies were conducted; and recommendations were offered, based on findings from literature and findings from current experience of selected ecovillages in Sweden.

Keywords: Strategic sustainable development, Sustainable community development, Participatory decision making, Decision making in ecovillages, Swedish ecovillages, Social sustainability
Statement of Contribution

This thesis was a truly collaborative effort from all three team members. Each member brought his or her personal skills, insights, strengths and perspectives to the process.

All major decisions regarding both thesis document as well as the creation of deliverables for “Ecovillages project” of the Baltic Sea Region Programme were made through a collaborative effort.

We had opportunity of travelling to some ecovillages in Sweden to provide information in the frame of our research by making interviews. Together we planned ecovillages’ background research, created connections and made interviews. During whole thesis work, tasks like literature review, planning of ecovillage trips, making interviews and writing of thesis paper were distributed according to team members’ backgrounds and strengths to ensure the most productive work progress.

Since this thesis required a strong validation of data all members reviewed and revised each other’s work and contributed to all aspects of the thesis. Each of the group members significantly and equally contributed to the final outcome.

Our journey overall has been an inspiring and life changing experience. We learned a lot from each other in sense of personal backgrounds, skills and mindsets. Experience and skills obtained during the process have contributed greatly to our personal and professional development.

Karlskrona. 2011-05-09

Kirill Kazbekov, Merve Titiz, Delfin Yılmaz
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Advisors’ guidance and insights in every step of project kept us on the track and made this work possible. We appreciate every effort they put to assist us in this inspiring and educative journey.

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Participation all people listed above during this year filled our hearts with genuine inspiration and strength.
Executive Summary

Introduction

This study aims to understand how Strategic Sustainable Development (SSD) perspective can contribute to decision making procedures of selected ecovillages in Sweden. The study was conducted in partnership with the ‘Ecovillages’ project of the Baltic Sea Region (BSR) Programme. The ‘Ecovillages’ project focuses on developing more sustainable ways of living in the rural areas of the BSR by offering a toolkit for initiators and developers of ecovillages.

Ecovillages are human-scale settlements where people with common understanding of nature and community spirit come together with the purpose of maximizing the value of the environment and diminishing excessive use of resources in addition to encouraging community interaction (Kanaley 2000; Gilman 1991; Kirby 2004).

This study focuses on decision making procedures in ecovillages, an important topic and not extensively researched to date. Decision making processes are an essential part of community life (Lasker and Guidry 2009). Through making decisions people organize their life together, create relationships and determine the future of their community. Therefore, decision making processes will likely have direct influence on how fast a community will move towards sustainability.

It is important to build a shared understanding among community members on how decision making processes are organized and how they could be improved.

Purpose of this research is to explore how Strategic Sustainable Development (SSD) approach could be applied to collective decision making processes of ecovillages in order to help these communities strategically move towards sustainability.

Research Questions

To address research purpose, following research questions were developed:
1. How are decision making processes structured and how do they function within selected ecovillages in Sweden?
2. How is success of decision making process defined and measured?
3. How Strategic Sustainable Development perspective is currently incorporated into decision making processes of these ecovillages?
4. In what ways could SSD be further incorporated into these decision making processes such that future decisions will have an increased probability of leading to more sustainable conclusions?

**Literature Review**

**Ecovillages and Sustainable Community Development**

Search for alternative ways of living led to the emergence of ecovillage concept, which is defined by Barton et al. (2003, 11) as whole system perspective including biophysical environment, social ties and community values.

Svensson (2002) defines ecovillages as intentional communities having a vision of sustainable lifestyle in harmony with living beings and earth. Ecovillages are further classified by Irrgang (2005, 27) and Jackson (2005) as sustainable intentional communities together with cohousing projects. Ecovillage settlements are often designed and developed by the future residents who have already committed to live in the community (Dawson 2006).

**Common Characteristics of Ecovillages**

There are quite a few ecovillages globally with diverse living styles and structures. With so many diverse communities, it is not possible to give one definition that will fit every ecovillage but some broad patterns can be identified within the movement (Dawson 2006). Common characteristics of ecovillages stated by Dawson (2006), Gilman (1991), Trainer (2002) and Kanaley (2000) might be categorized with five specific titles such as: local and human development, self-sufficiency, environmental consciousness, strong community connections and openness and sustainability.

**Strategic Sustainable Development Perspective**

The most commonly used definition of “sustainable development” was used in 1987 by the Brundtland commission report as “development that meets
the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED 1987). This definition is useful, because it provides a general guidance for sustainable development.

Nevertheless, the report itself does not specify explicit criteria that allow communities to evaluate their choices strategically. That is why Strategic Sustainable Development approach is used in this research to clarify connection between sustainable community development and decision making.

**Decision Making Guidance and Principles and Decision Making Model**

To support strategic community development it is important to choose, implement and continuously improve specific decision making process in the community. However, it is not an easy task for community members and might require many discussions, observations and agreements (Christian 2003). To support this process, different guidelines were developed by researchers and practitioners in the decision making field. These guidelines are listed in this section of the literature review and titled as decision making guidance and principles.

This list is not to be interpreted as final; rather, it is used to simplify the process of working with research data and making recommendations in this research. For convenience, in the paper this list is called: “Decision making model”. The model is divided into three main categories: context, process and design in order to represent different aspects of decision making processes in communities. The model is described in the respective section of literature review.

**Methodology**

In order to conduct research several steps were taken. On preparation phase exploratory interviews were made, interview and research questions designed and target ecovillages selected. On data gathering phase 3 ecovillages were visited and 12 people interviewed (4 people in each). All interviews were recorded and recordings were thoroughly transcribed.

Phase of working with data was conducted consecutively in five steps. First, components of decision making model were used to create codes and code data. Second, team members came together to discuss and finalize coding. Third, all data related to decision making processes were
summarized for each ecovillage separately. Fourth, relevant data from three ecovillages was put together and generalized. And fifth, results were thoroughly discussed and validated by team members. After finalization of results, relevant recommendations were made for possible improvement of decision making processes in existing and future ecovillages.

Results

Summary of research results is described in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decision making Model Components</th>
<th>Ecovillage 1</th>
<th>Ecovillage 2</th>
<th>Ecovillage 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clear and shared vision</td>
<td>Written but not shared or discussed</td>
<td>Not explicit</td>
<td>Not explicit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy for sustainable development</td>
<td>No general strategy and goals. Various group projects exist</td>
<td>No general strategy and goals. Various individual or group projects exist</td>
<td>No general strategy and goals. Individual projects exist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connection of vision with decision making</td>
<td>No clear connection</td>
<td>No clear connection</td>
<td>No clear connection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formalized criteria</td>
<td>No formalized criteria.</td>
<td>No formalized criteria.</td>
<td>No formalized criteria.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement</td>
<td>Half of the households attend meetings</td>
<td>Half of the members attend meetings</td>
<td>Everybody in the village (10 members) attends meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitator role</td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>No.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Space for disagreement and discussion</td>
<td>Community members have space to express opinions.</td>
<td>Community members have space to express opinions.</td>
<td>Community members have space to express opinions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mechanism for solving conflicts</td>
<td>Only discussion and majority voting are used</td>
<td>Only discussion and majority voting are used</td>
<td>Only discussion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information is spread timely and fairly</td>
<td>Yes, fair enough.</td>
<td>Yes, fair enough.</td>
<td>Yes, fair enough.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreement and understanding of the decision making model</td>
<td>General awareness on the model in use and how to use it.</td>
<td>General awareness on the model in use and how to use it.</td>
<td>General awareness on the model in use and how to use it.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
_evidence of the decision making procedures are quite formalized.

Activities related to economical association are quite formalized.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Procedure for evaluation and improvement</th>
<th>No specific procedure</th>
<th>No specific procedure</th>
<th>No specific procedure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Formalization of decisions and decision making procedures</td>
<td>Board activities are quite formalized.</td>
<td>Board activities are quite formalized.</td>
<td>Activities related to economical association are quite formalized.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Discussion**

The discussion part is organized according to research questions. First, general characteristics of the decision making structures and processes in ecovillages are described. Second, a current success definition and measurement of decision making in ecovillages is expressed. Third, a current level of integration of a strategic development perspective into decision making is depicted. Fourth, some recommendations are given on how this perspective could be incorporated in future.

**Conclusion and Recommendations**

Conclusion and Recommendation part of the paper contains overall reflections on found results and provides several recommendations for possible improvement of decision making processes in communities and for planning and conducting future researches.

Overall, authors believe that conducting more researches and having more discussions about decision making, as part of social organisation of ecovillages, might open great potential for further understanding and development of these communities. So far, many ecovillages are known as distinguished examples of new ways of ecological living and experimenting with eco-technologies. But authors believe that they could also be known for their advantageous and innovative social systems and social organisations. And these innovations could potentially make significant contribution to strategic sustainable development of the “mainstream” society.

Authors hope that findings of this research will provide meaningful assistance to other researchers and to sustainability practitioners, including ecovillage members and associations, and that more scientific researches and practical applications in the area of strategic planning and decision making will follow.
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1 Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This study aims to understand how the Strategic Sustainable Development (SSD) perspective can contribute to decision making procedures of selected ecovillages in Sweden. The study was conducted in partnership with the ‘Ecovillages’ project of the Baltic Sea Region (BSR) Programme, partly financed by the European Union European Regional Development Fund and the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument. The ‘Ecovillages’ project focuses on developing more sustainable ways of living in the rural areas of the BSR by offering a toolkit for initiators and developers of ecovillages. This study makes a contribution to the toolkit by enhancing understanding of decision making procedures in ecovillages.

Ecovillages are human-scale settlements where people with common understanding of nature and community spirit come together with the purpose of maximizing the value of the environment and diminishing excessive use of resources in addition to encouraging community interaction (Kanaley 2000; Gilman 1991; Kirby 2004). They are self-organized structures that set themselves apart from the mainstream social order.

Ecovillages emerged as a grassroots movement in response to global sustainability challenge. They are intentional communities initially created with strong values of low-impact living and creating healthy relations with nature and among people. Being called as “laboratories of sustainable community development” (Dawson 2006); ecovillages are especially valuable for sustainability researchers and practitioners to work with.

This study focuses on decision making procedures in ecovillages, an important topic and not extensively researched to date.

Decision making processes are an essential part of community life (Lasker and Guidry 2009). Through making decisions people organize their life together, create relationships and determine the future of their community. Therefore, decision making processes will likely have direct influence on how fast a community will move towards sustainability.
Despite essential importance of collective decision making, many community leaders tend to underestimate its significance compared with other issues - for example, technical or financial aspects of community life (Christian 2003). As a result, flaws in collective decision making may lead to hidden structural conflicts, creating negative impact on common well-being and overall community development (Christian 2003).

This result can be faced in ecovillages. Therefore, it is important to build a shared understanding among community members on how decision making processes are organized and how they could be improved in order to assist ecovillage development towards sustainability.

In order to do this it is important to create understanding of what is strategic sustainable development and how decision making processes could be better organized. Also it is meaningful to build strong connection between sustainable development of communities and effectiveness of collective decision making. So members in these communities will have better understanding of how decision making processes can influence overall community development.

Purpose of this research is to explore how Strategic Sustainable Development (SSD) approach could be applied to collective decision making processes of ecovillages in order to help these communities strategically move towards sustainability.

1.2 Research Questions

To address research purpose, following research questions were developed:

5. How are decision making processes structured and how do they function within selected ecovillages in Sweden?
6. How is success of decision making process defined and measured?
7. How Strategic Sustainable Development perspective is currently incorporated into decision making processes of these ecovillages?
8. In what ways could SSD be further incorporated into these decision making processes such that future decisions will have an increased probability of leading to more sustainable conclusions?
2 Literature Review

This section consists of four parts. First part articulates an evolution, conceptualization and significance of ecovillage movement within more general field of sustainable development. In second part specific use of Strategic Sustainable Development perspective for communities or organisations is discussed. Third part presents main findings from literature about decision making theory, group decision making and guidelines for effective decision making in communities. Last part describes decision making model, which was based on guidelines and suggestions both from SSD literature and decision making literature.

2.1 Ecovillages and Sustainable Community Development

2.1.1 Sustainable Community Development

Before giving information about the evolution and definitions of the ecovillages, it is important to gain an understanding of more general field of sustainable community development. Sustainable communities’ intention is to raise the health and well being of their society and their environment by means of creating supportive relationships.

After a review of sustainable community development (SCD) literature, Hamstead and Quinn (2005) determined ideal characteristics of SCD.

- “Economic diversification and self-reliance
- Social justice through citizen empowerment and improved access to information
- Education and meaningful and effective participation
- Ecological sustainability through community-based stewardship and the minimization of all forms of consumption and waste
- Integration of economic, social and ecological strategies for and models of well-being and change.”

These features highlight citizen empowerment, diversification, effective participation and ecological sustainability. Thus, SCD policies encourage
the expansion of local production, exchange, cooperation and networking, while minimizing human impact to natural environment. The ideals of sustainable community development are also correspondent to the common patterns among the definitions of ecovillage. Therefore, ecovillages are called as “laboratories of sustainable community development” (Dawson 2006).

2.1.2 Ecovillage Movement and History

The search for environmental conscious, less materialistic and more human centred living started to be apparent in 1960’s and as Schor (1998) analysed it reached a broader scale in 1990’s. She points to the group of people who responded to consumerism and materialism with “downshifted” lifestyles, which underline consuming less and socializing more. In addition, after 1992 earth summit, small-scale neighbourhood experiments and living projects became the focus of many grassroots activists (Hempel 2009).

This search for an alternative way of living led to the emergence of ecovillage concept, which is defined by Barton et al. (2003, 11) as whole system perspective including biophysical environment, social ties and community values. Svensson (2002, 10) defines ecovillages as intentional communities having a vision of sustainable lifestyle in harmony with living beings and earth. Ecovillages are further classified by Irrgang (2005, 27) and Jackson (2005) as sustainable intentional communities together with cohousing projects. Ecovillage settlements are often designed and developed by the future residents who have already committed to live in the community (Dawson 2006).

The first attempt to develop housing projects using a holistic approach was through cohousing schemes such as Saettedammen in Denmark, founded in 1972 (Miles 2008). Several initiatives emerged afterwards, in order to create awareness and support to the ecovillage movement like centres and associations. Besides, networking within ecovillages has been formalized with the establishment of Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) at the beginning of 1990’s (Bates 2003). Pedagogues believing in alternative education techniques that lead the growth of a child into a responsible and aware adult have also supported the ecovillage movement. According to Dawson (2006); these pedagogues developed new concepts that helped align education to the living conditions of ecovillages.
2.1.3 Common Characteristics of Ecovillages

There are quite a few ecovillages globally with diverse living styles and structures. Together with its 997 official members, the GEN estimates the number of ecovillages worldwide as roughly 4,000-5,000 (Jackson 2004). With so many existing communities, it is not possible to give one definition that will fit every ecovillage, but some broad patterns can be identified within the movement (Dawson 2006). Most of the time, these patterns are the descriptions of the ideal state, however, according to Jackson (2004), no such ideal ecovillage exists because it is always a “work in progress”. The common patterns among the definitions of ecovillage cited below are also correspondent to the ideals of sustainable community development.

Five basic attributes common to most ecovillages, according to Dawson (2006, 34-36), are:

- “The value of community”. This feature addresses the need of living in an environment where you feel productive, useful and valued.
- “Future residents initiate ecovillages”. This factor encourages self-reliant action underlying the search for community involvement and self-sufficiency in every step of establishment and management.
- “People involved in ecovillage movement are in search of winning control over their resources and destinies”.
- “While sharing resources, people are also exchanging values” from tolerance, freethinking to diverse beliefs, rebuilding community etc.
- Ecovillages are acting as research and demonstration centres for the application of new ideas and technologies and models for sustainable lifestyles.

According to Trainer (2002), ecovillages aim for self-sufficient living. Some ecovillage members only envision this way of living for their own community, while others focus on the transformation of existing society. The decision making structure in ecovillages permits direct administration of local resources, participation and collaboration within the community. In order not to be dependent on big capital, they tend to use intermediate technologies and try to build local economies (Trainer 2002).
Kanaley (2000, 21) points out some common characteristics in ecovillages stemming from his case study research of ten European ecovillages. According to the study, ecovillages have an “understanding of nature, a shared vision and community spirit, produce food and other goods, and use internal decision making systems and conflict resolution methods”.

The most well known definition of ecovillages is the one stated in Gilman’s report titled “ecovillages and Sustainable Communities”, describing ecovillages as “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” (Gilman 1991, 7). The aspects of this definition will be analyzed below:

- “Human-scale” development encourages connectivity among people and participation in decision making in the community. The ideal limit for the population of this kind of settlement is argued to be 500 people in the report.

- “Full featured settlements” refers to a community life encapsulating every dimension of living such as residence, work, trade, social life, free time, etc., but this statement does not include being fully sufficient or being isolated from the existing society.

- “Human activities are harmlessly integrated into the natural world” implies the equality between humans and other forms of life and the effort for environmental sustainability.

- “Supportive of healthy human development” indicates incorporating all aspects of human needs such as physical, emotional, mental and spiritual to the individual life in balance. Gilman’s Report states that this integral way of living needs also to be involved in community life.

- “Successfully continuable into the indefinite future” signifies commitment to fairness and avoidance of exploitation of living systems towards all future life (Gilman 1991, 7-10).

Closely stated common characteristics of ecovillages might be categorized with five specific titles such as: local and human-scale development, self-
sufficiency, environmental consciousness, strong community connections and openness and sustainability.

**Table 2.1 Common characteristics of ecovillages.**

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Local and human-scale development</strong></td>
<td>“Human scale development”</td>
<td>“Future residents initiate ecovillages”</td>
<td>Internal decision making systems and conflict resolution methods</td>
<td>Direct administration of local resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self-sufficiency</strong></td>
<td>“Full featured settlements”</td>
<td>“Ecovillages are demonstration centres for the application of new ideas and technologies”</td>
<td>Production of food and other goods, and use</td>
<td>Tendency to use intermediate technologies and try to build local economies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Environmental Consciousness</strong></td>
<td>“Human activities are harmlessly integrated into the natural world”</td>
<td>“Search of winning control over their resources and destinies”</td>
<td>Understanding of nature</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Strong community connections and openness</strong></td>
<td>“Supportive of healthy human development”</td>
<td>“Exchanges of values” from tolerance, freethinking to diverse beliefs, rebuilding community etc.</td>
<td>Community spirit</td>
<td>Participation and collaboration within the community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sustainability</strong></td>
<td>“Successfully continuable”</td>
<td>“Models for sustainable”</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
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</table>

7
2.1.4 Guidelines for Ecovillage Development

Christian (2003) and Gilman (1991) examined the movement since its early days and suggested guidelines for ecovillage development. The British town planner, Hugh Barton and his co-authors Grant and Guise (2003) also published recommendations for the establishment of sustainable neighbourhoods relying on his expertise (Sizemor 2004). Common aspects of those guidelines were stated by Sizemore (2004 35-36) as; “shared visions and collective goals, the involvement of all the stakeholders, and defining administrative process from the start of the planning phase”.

2.2 Strategic Sustainable Development

Most commonly used definition of “sustainable development” is taken from the Brundtland commission report of 1987, referred in the section of Our Common Future. In the Brundtland report, sustainable development was defined as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED 1987). This definition is useful, because it provides a general guidance for sustainable development. Nevertheless, the report itself does not specify solid criteria that allow communities to evaluate their choices strategically.

These criteria are included in Strategic Sustainable Development (SSD) approach to move organisations and communities towards sustainability (Holmberg and Robèrt 2000). SSD is based on solid scientific understanding of sustainability and is used in the research to specify what it means to be strategic and what it means to be sustainable in community development area.

In this research two areas of Strategic Sustainable Development perspective were specifically marked out: “Vision building” and “Backcasting from principles”.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>into the indefinite future”</th>
<th>lifestyles”</th>
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8
These areas are important because they underline two significant aspects of community moving towards more sustainable life: a shared vision among community members and a strategic path mapped out for reaching that vision. A vision is an essential starting point for strategic development towards sustainability, because it incorporates overall understanding of what community wants to achieve in future and how community understands sustainability.

Both vision and backcasting approach will be discussed in following sections.

2.2.1 Vision Building

Creating a shared, vision of success, including clear definition of sustainability is an important aspect of community development process (AUMA 2007).

Within SSD, a shared vision means answering the question: “How community/organisation envisions itself to be in a sustainable society?”

This vision can be built by using three major elements: Sustainability Principles (Holmberg and Robèrt 2000), a Core Ideology and an Envisioned Future (Collins and Porras 1996).

1) **Sustainability Principles:** These principles define constraints which all organisations need to take into account in order to become sustainable.

Four sustainability principles are:

“In a sustainable society, nature is not subject to systematically increasing:

1. Concentrations of substances extracted from the Earth’s crust;
2. Concentrations of substances produced by society;
3. Degradation by physical means;
and … in that society,
4. People are not subject to conditions that systematically undermine their capacity to meet their needs.” (Holmberg and Robèrt 2000)
These four Sustainability Principles were developed based on the following criteria:

- “A scientifically agreed upon view of the world, Necessary to achieve sustainability, Sufficient to cover all aspects of sustainability, Concrete enough to guide actions and problem solving, and Mutually exclusive to facilitate comprehension and monitoring."
  
  (Ny et al 2006)

Four sustainability principles were thoroughly validated and scientifically grounded to ensure their relevance to defining and understanding sustainability (Holmberg and Robèrt 2000).

Framing vision with four sustainability principles helps decision makers to be more strategic in sustainable community development. This includes clear understanding of how community will look in sustainable future and which actions and strategies should be taken to support this development (AUMA 2006).

2) **Core Ideology**: represents main values based on which an organisation (a business, community or ecovillage) grounds all its activities and steps. Core ideology comprises two components: “core purpose” and “core values” (Collins and Porras 1996).

  *Core Purpose*: identifies an organisation’s reason for existence. It is a definition of essential benefit that the organisation brings to society. A core purpose must be attractive, clear and brief definition of meaning, which stands behind organisations existence. To define organizations’ purpose it might be meaningful to reflect on the question: “If organization will disappear, who will miss it”?

  *Core Values*: identifies the “personality” of organisation and main values that ground its operations and interaction with employees, suppliers, customers and other stakeholders.

3) **Envisioned future**: describes the organisations’ positive aspirations. It consists of the vivid description of organisations’ future and stretch goals that the organisation intends to achieve in its future (Collins and Porras 1996).
Main components of the vision in SSD approach are depicted in figure 1 below:

![Image](image.png)

**Figure 2.1 An Organisation’s vision (Collins and Porras 1996)**

### 2.2.2 Backcasting from Principles

In strategic planning process for sustainability, having right approach is very important. The approach used in the Strategic Sustainable Development (SSD) is called “backcasting”.

Generally there are two basic techniques, which could be used in planning for the future: “forecasting” and “backcasting”. Forecasting is an approach that is used to predict future, based on current trends. It could be an effective approach for some cases, but still it focuses on viewing future from current situation, which limits people imagination only to what is seen as possible, but not to what seen as desirable.

In backcasting approach, on the opposite, strategic planning is focused on understanding possible or desired future and then creating specific plan to reach this future (Holmberg and Robèrt 2000).

Backcasting approach could be used to build strategy in relation to either prediction of future – *scenarios* or desired picture of future – *vision framed*
with principles. Backcasting from desired future is seen as more valuable approach, since it does not limit creativity and freedom of community members to specific parameters of current situation (Holmberg and Robèrt 2000). It is also easier to agree upon desired future rather than agree upon various possible scenarios of future.

Backcasting from principles starts with imagining of successful outcome in the future (visioning) and is followed by question “what do we need to do today to reach this vision?” To answer this question it is important to create a list of creative compelling actions together with organization or community members, so they can relay to this vision and actions.

Last step in strategic planning based on backcasting approach is prioritizing actions and creating a set of indicators to evaluate progress of overall development (Holmberg and Robèrt 2000).

The whole process of strategic planning using backcasting method is depicted on Figure 2.2:
2.3 Decision Making Process in Community

2.3.1 Decision Making Theory

There are two main branches of decision making theories: prescriptive and descriptive (Resnik 1987). Prescriptive theories work with how ideal decisions should be made and what is an ideal decision making situation; whereas descriptive studies examine how decisions are actually made by people and communities.

Classical prescriptive decision making theory is based on idea of rational choice (Cook, Noyes and Masakowski 2007). It assumes that in a situation of choice individual would and should prefer options that in the end would maximize his or her interest. Therefore classical theories of choice are focused on types of alternatives presented, accessibility of information and rational basis of making decisions (Brunsson 2007).

One of typical examples of characteristics of an ideal decision process according to normative decision theory adopted by Brewer and Stern (2005 28):

- “It clearly defines the decision to be made (V, T).
- It considers all the objectives that matter to the decision maker in making the decision (V).
- It identifies or creates a set of attractive alternatives for the decision (T, V).
- It considers the consequences of the alternatives in light of the available evidence (T).
- It considers uncertainties and unknowns regarding the consequences (T).
- It identifies and considers preferences regarding the trade-offs among the consequences of the alternatives (V).
- It selects alternative(s) on the basis of information about their consequences and the decision maker’s preferences (V).
- It considers implications for linked and future decisions (T, V).

V = Achieving the ideal is strongly dependent on incorporating participants’ values.

T = Scientific and technical analysis provide essential insight for achieving the ideal” (adopted from Hammond, Keeney, and Raiffa (1999) by Brewer and Stern (2005)).
Despite of their scientific significance, classical prescriptive theories were many times criticized for their tendency to ignore irrational side of decisions made by people (Kahneman, Slovic and Tversky 1982; Ranyard, Crozier and Svenson 1997). Through experiments, it has been shown that people in decision making situations, especially related to complexity, tend to make decisions based on intuition or according to their own criteria, which could be very different from rational models, expressed in classical decision making theories (Kahneman, Slovic and Tversky 1982).

2.3.2 Decision Making in Groups

Decisions made in groups may be different from decisions made by individuals. For example Brewer and Stern (2005) state, “individuals (including experts) will often fall short of the normative ideal in making choices about complex issues involving uncertainties and value trade-offs” (Brewer and Stern 2005, p32). They assume that groups can potentially identify more aspects of decision making subject and thus could be more successful in making decision around complex issues.

However, in practice – groups are not always more efficient than individuals at making decisions (Hemmati 2002). This might partly occur because success of decision making process in groups depends on the quality of the group’s structure and interaction (Brewer and Stern 2005; Christian 2003).

2.3.3 Decision Making Guidance and Principles

There are no decision making models or processes that would be ideal for every situation or for every group. Therefore, a specific decision making process has to be consciously chosen, implemented and later continuously revised and improved by community members.

However, it is not an easy task and it might require many discussions, observations and agreements (Christian 2003). To support this process, different guidelines were developed by researchers and practitioners in the decision making field.

Christian (2003) lists characteristics that should be present in a community to successfully use consensus decision making:
“Willingness to learn the process. Consensus needs to be taught thoroughly, and its basic principles periodically reviewed.

Common purpose. Without a shared vision and common purpose to focus and unify your efforts, your group can bounce around endlessly between confusion, frustration, and grim battles for control.

Willingness to share power

Willingness to let go of personal attachments in the best interests of the group

Trusting in the process, and trusting each other.

Humility.

Equal access to power.

Physical participation and the right people present.

The right topics. Not all topics require that the whole group be present to decide. Some things can be decided by area managers or committees, based on the whole group’s input.

Well-crafted agendas.

Skilled facilitation.

Enough time” (Christian 2003, 58-60).

Eduardo Salas, Joseph Guthrie and Burke (2007) suggest following guidelines for improving team decision making (TDM) processes:

1. “TDM must be theoretically based
2. TDM must adopt a systems approach – before, during and after
3. TDM training must be learner-centred
4. TDM must provide relevant information; demonstrate effective decision making performance; create opportunities to practise; diagnose performance; receive feedback and remediate
5. TDM must guide the effective behaviours/cognitions and these need to be reinforced
6. TDM must clarify expectations, early
7. TDM must set a climate for learning
8. TDM must encourage participation/feedback (constructive) by team members – self-correct
9. TDM must create scenarios that provide opportunities to practise performance – ‘The scenario is the curriculum’
10. TDM must create events (or set of related) that allow diagnosis of performance – dynamic assessment integrating theoretically rooted
Hemmati (2002) provides a comprehensive analysis of social psychological studies of making decisions in groups.

Firstly, he argues that: “the type of communication structure determines leadership, roles and the status hierarchy within the group; group morale and cohesiveness; and it limits or enhances productivity” (Hemmati 2002, 77).

In addition, “the balance between task-focused and socio-emotional communication is crucial if a group is to be effective” (Hemmati 2002, 77). Different communication is needed for different tasks. For simple tasks, hierarchical communication with limited interactions might be more effective, whereas, complex issues, developed decentralized communication, such as networks, might be required (Hemmati 2002).

His second point is related to social influence. According to the results of classic experiments by Solomon Asch, people with lower status in a group tend to have less voice and less influence on collective decisions. At the same time, the vision of so-called “deviant” participants may be very valuable to the quality of group results (Lasker and Guidry 2009). To avoid marginalizing group members, Hemmati suggests implementing formal procedures, which will give every participant equal time and right to say (Hemmati 2002, 78).

Third point is about cohesiveness. Positive emotions, mutual regard and commitment tend to have great impact on groups productivity and performance. Cohesiveness may be an essential ground for high quality interactions and decisions within a group and could even be essential to a group’s very existence.

However, too much cohesiveness could also be harmful if it leads to group think and conformity, when decisions are no longer made to improve situation and pursue results, but to satisfy “unclouded” atmosphere between group members (Hematti 2002). This situation is dangerous because it may lead to more severe conflicts and threats in the future because all visions, which oppose commonly accepted opinion, are simply ignored, misread or not represented at all. Therefore special procedures that give space to
constructive criticism and “devil’s advocates” should be implemented (Hematti 2002, 88).

In order to face and resolve conflicts constructively, Seibold (1999) describes six rules for “a non-competitive method of reaching a group decision in which all members eventually agree to agree, notwithstanding individual preferences”:

1- Avoid arguing for favourite proposals,
2- Avoid using ‘against-them’ statements,
3- Avoid agreeing just to avoid conflict,
4- Reject specific decision rules,
5- View differences as helpful,
6- View initial agreements as premature and suspect.” (Siebold 1999 in Hematti 2002, 93)

Hemmati concludes that, “trust building is an essential prerequisite of successful groups of high diversity” (Hematti 2002, 98).

“Employing formal procedures of communication and decision making within groups of high diversity is certainly beneficial, for several reasons. First, they raise communication standards (being clear; speaking equitably; listening to others; taking each other seriously etc). Second, they ensure that everybody gets the same amount of speaking time, helping to create more equitable discussion. This can help to keep factors of social influence such as power and status, charisma, eloquence, and so on in check”. (Hematti 2002, 98)

All these authors bring valuable ideas and suggestions on how decision-making processes might be organized and function in order to serve better for communities’ interests. This information was structured into specific categories, highlighting various aspects of decision making. Results of this organisation are listed in the following section.

2.4 Decision Making Model

For purpose of better understanding decision making procedures in community, a list of guidelines and principles were created, based on literature. This list is not to be intended to be final or exhaustive, rather, it is
used to simplify the process of working with research data and making recommendations in this research.

This list was organized into three main categories context, process and design (as illustrated in Figure 2.3). These categories are interrelated and interconnected. Together they used as an attempt to create holistic understanding of how decision making processes could be organized in order to help communities strategically develop towards sustainability.

Figure 2.3 Decision making model

Context

The context part is related to issues that help to set common ground, boundaries and strategy for the community. It is related to overall strategic development of community towards sustainability and aligns this development with collective decision making:

- Having clear and shared vision (Holmberg and Robèrt 2000)
- Having clear and shared strategy for sustainable development (Collins and Porras 1996)
- Having clear connection of vision and strategy with decision making criteria (AUMA 2006)
- Having shared criteria for making decisions towards sustainability (Hematti 2002)
**Process**

Process components indicate important mechanisms, elements and actions of decision making itself:

- Involving people into decision making (Christian 2003; Lasker and Guidry 2009)
- Power distributed fairly, assuring equal right to influence decisions (Christian 2003; Lasker and Guidry 2009)
- Having special role for facilitator or other supportive role (Hemmati 2002; Christian 2003)
- Giving space for disagreement and discussion (Hemmati 2002; Christian 2003)
- Having explicit and fair mechanism for solving conflicts and disagreements (Hematti 2002)
- Spreading information timely and fairly; assuring equal access to it for everyone (Hammond, Keeney, and Raiffa 1999; Salas, Guthrie and Burke 2007; Christian 2003)

**Design**

Design components are related to the overall approach for creating and improving decision making process in community. It mainly means that regardless of which decision making model community is using, it is important to have following:

- Shared agreement and understanding of what decision making model is used and how to use it (Hematti 2002)
- Special procedure for evaluating and improving decision making model (Hematti 2002)
- Formalized decisions and decision making procedures (Hematti 2002)

This decision making model was designed in the research for three main purposes:

- Firstly, it is used to scope, code and structure results.
- Secondly, it is used to understand which sides of decision making in ecovillages could be improved and how to improve them.
And thirdly, it could be used as relevant guidance for ecovillages that wish to become more strategic about their decision making.

Strategically improving decision making process in community, discussing and accepting it might take time and it is not necessarily easy. However, if decision making processes are properly organized, the outcomes could be very beneficial. For instance, it may even help support commitment and involvement of community members, improve efficiency of collective decisions, avoid unnecessary conflicts and eventually become an effective mechanism for community development towards sustainability (Lasker and Guidry 2009, Hematti 2002, Christian 2003).
3 Methodology

3.1 Research Preparation and Scope

In order to prepare research and define scope, several major steps were taken: exploratory interviews, designing research questions, selecting ecovillages and interviewees, and designing interview questions.

**Exploratory interviews** were conducted with key experts in the area:
- Robert Hall - coordinator of “ecovillages” project in Sweden, board member of Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) and former head of Swedish ecovillage network - Njord.
- Deniz Dinçel - board member at GEN
- Torbjörn Lahti - experienced consultant in the area of sustainable community development, and co-author of: “The Natural Step for Communities: how Cities and Towns can Change to Sustainable Practices”.

These interviews helped to form a better understanding of social side of sustainable community development and to shape research questions.

**Research questions** were designed through an iterative process, as described in Maxwell’s interactive model for research design (2005). Their relevance is ensured throughout ongoing discussions with advisers and team members. Additionally, research questions were presented to and discussed with fellow students and staff on 23 February 2011 in the Master program called Strategic Leadership towards Sustainability at the Blekinge Institute of Technology in Karlskrona, Sweden. All necessary comments and feedback were incorporated.

**Ecovillages** were chosen for case studies according to the following criteria:

- People live at the ecovillage all year long (not just coming and going)
- The ecovillage exists for a minimum of five years
- People are making decisions together (developed social organisation)
- The ecovillage has an explicit ecological orientation (sustainable vision)
- Initiators are future residents

For interviewees selection following criteria was applied:

- People, who are actively involved into decision making
- People, who live in the ecovillage for at least two years

Interview questions were designed according to research questions and decision making model described in the literature review. Relevance and clarity of interview questions were validated through multiple discussions with advisers and peers. Full list of interview questions can be found in Appendix A.

3.2 Gathering Data

Three ecovillages were selected according to the criteria mentioned above (section 3.1). All research visits were organized in March 2011. Altogether twelve people were interviewed in these three ecovillages (four interviewees each).

Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner. During interviews, additional questions were sometimes included and different interviewees were asked different questions regarding their specific duties in ecovillage (for example, board members and regular community members could be asked slightly different questions).

Interviews were focused mainly to create overall understanding of decision making processes in ecovillages, and not to compare opinions of different interviewees.

3.3 Coding and Analysing Data

All interviews were recorded and recordings thoroughly transcribed.

The process of working with data was conducted consecutively in five steps.
In step one, components of the decision making model were used to create codes and code data. Codes were created in the following order: one component matched one code. This was made to choose data specifically related to research focus. Two different team members coded each ecovillage separately.

In the second step, coding results were discussed and finalized by all three team members. Two team members who coded data for the same ecovillage discussed their codes and the third team member validated their decision.

In the third step, all coded data related to decision making processes was summarized for each ecovillage individually.

In the fourth step, relevant data from all three ecovillages was put together and generalized. Direct quotes from interviewees were used to support and strengthen argumentation.

In the fifth step, results were carefully discussed and validated by team members. It was important to assure that assumptions and generalizations were made accurately and subjective biases were avoided as much as possible.

After finalization of results, relevant recommendations were made for possible improvement of decision making processes in existing and future ecovillages. These recommendations were based on knowledge derived from literature and from findings of the research.

### 3.4 Validity

Validity of research was assured through continuous discussions of methodology, interview questions and results with experts, advisers and peers. Each step of research was carefully discussed and validated.

Interview transcriptions from ecovillages were coded separately and each code was verified at least three times. Multiple discussions were held about validity and consistency of results and recommendations. Research paper was shared several times with peers and advisers and their reflections on it were thoroughly incorporated.
At the same time - it is still impossible to achieve absolute objectivity while working with such a complex topic as collective decision making. Different approaches could be used and there could be many possible views of this area.

Decision making model, even if it was carefully designed and validated, is still only one of many possible approaches for making decisions in community. It is virtually unrealistic to create model which would be perfect for everyone. Each ecovillage has its own history, culture, and character and therefore decision making processes would also have specific attributes in each ecovillage and should be designed with care and respect.

Although the authors worked hard to assure clarity and objectiveness of results, some biases and incorrect assumptions may still have occurred. It is recommended to see results of this research as a possible contribution to understanding and improving decision making processes in communities, but not as ultimate and prescriptive solutions.
4 Results

Components of decision making model were used to structure results. These components were not used to evaluate decision making procedures, but only to organize results in a way that it will be easier to bring model and current reality together.

The results part starts with introduction, where brief information about ecovillages is given in order to create an overall understanding of explored communities. Then data gathered from interviews is described and organized according to decision making model. Each subsection starts with a brief summary and then has larger argumentation, supported with interviewees’ quotes.

In order to preserve confidentiality, each ecovillage and interviewee are coded with numbers according to the sequence of their appearance in the research. Thus ecovillages are named as: ecovillage 1, ecovillage 2 and ecovillage 3. Interviewees are coded as interviewee 1, interviewee 2 and so on. Within in-text quotes, number of ecovillage is written first and number of interviewee follows. For example, an in-text quote: (int. 1.4) means that it is a quote from the fourth interview in first ecovillage. In-text quote: (int. 3.2) means that it is a quote from the second interview in the third ecovillage.

4.1 General Overview of Ecovillages

4.1.1 Ecovillage 1

Ecovillage 1 was established in 1987 by a group of individuals, who were concerned about environmental problems and wanted to do something about it. It is one of the first and oldest ecovillages in Sweden. Because of its pioneer role at the time it took nine years and many efforts for people to plan, approve and build this ecovillage. The ecovillage was built together with HSB (Cooperative Association of Housing in Sweden) and with the help of architect with special experience in working with ecological architecture (int. 1.4).
Every inhabitant is a member of the community. Ecovillage has official structure is an association, which serves as a means for financial and legal representation for the community. Land of the ecovillage belongs to the association, while households are owned privately.

Today the community consists of fifty households and approximately 150 inhabitants (int. 1.2). Demographics of the community show a diverse population, it includes retired people, children of different ages, families, singles and single parents.

The experience of living in the ecovillage is described by interviewee 1.2 as “living in an old-fashion village”, where everybody knows and helps each other.

Specific feature of ecovillage is 20 different working groups (int. 1.1, int. 1.4), “groups of interest”, which created to maintain regular duties in the community. Everybody in the community is expected to join one working group (int. 1.1; int. 1.3; int. 1.4).

Decision making procedures are organized in two main ways: board and community meetings.

Board consists of six or seven people, including chairman, his reserve, secretary, accountant and other. On the board, there is also one representative from HSB. The board is elected once in two years and meets every month to discuss issues, mainly related to legal and financial aspects of community being.

Community meetings are less formal and also held every month. Everyone is invited to participate, but every household have only one voice in decision making process.

There are also annual meetings, where financial report is presented by board and major issues of community living are discussed.

Every meeting has agenda, which is send before meeting. Protocol of meeting is kept and then sent out after meetings in a community monthly paper. Decisions are mostly made through voting, but in some cases consensus decision making method may apply. Community members have free access to protocols both from board and community meetings.
4.1.2 Ecovillage 2

Ecovillage 2 is situated in Orust Island approximately two hours away from Goteborg. The village land consists of the old marsh in the middle and surrounding forest on the hills. The houses are mainly built on the slopes of the hills.

The planning of the ecovillage started in 2001 (int. 2.1). First work on the infrastructure was initiated in 2005 (int. 2.1). Right now, there are eleven households. The age range of the inhabitants is stated to be thirty-five-seventy (int. 2.2). The ecovillage has an economic association, which also owns the land. Every member has a share in this association (int. 2.2). They also have the right to own their houses (int. 2.2).

Houses are set apart from each other and quite big. Every member designs his or her own house and use mainly organic and local materials with the concern to adapt the homes to the site's nature.

The life is described as a mix of private and collective (Utsikten 2011). Interviewee 2.2 stated that there are no homogeneous relationships among all the villagers and it is not possible to be best friends with everyone. She also said that it is not easy for people to work collectively because people are very focused on their own houses. Interviewee 2.3 mentioned that before, there was a regulation according to which every member had to work for forty hours monthly. However, it has been changed because not everyone conformed to this requirement. Now, there are responsible people for specific work areas (int. 2.2).

The decision making procedures are structured and organized by the board. The board is made up of five people. It organizes meetings, spreads information and formalizes decision making processes. The Chairman of the board makes a meeting call to members approximately two weeks before the meeting. The call includes the agenda of the meeting and a part called “adding questions”. People who have ideas to discuss in meetings bring them first to the board, and then the board integrates them into the meeting agenda.

The meetings are held every six weeks and they last around two to three hours. The decision making system used is majority straight voting; but, most of the time, decisions are made with full agreement. Discussion is
encouraged in the process. Board members are writing decisions made in the meetings and send them as a protocol afterwards. These decisions serve as suggestions to the board. Sometimes the board finds the issue two big to discuss in one meeting and bring the same issue to the several consequent meetings. The ones that are not attending (to the meeting), give right to represent them to other people (so their opinion is also included in the meeting). And those that are not satisfied with the decisions taken in the meeting can call for an extra meeting. It is enough to gather one-tenth of the community to vote for an extra meeting.

4.1.3 Ecovillage 3

Ecovillage 3 is situated in mountainous woodland, which is approximately one-hour distance to the closest town centre. It was established by a group of ten people who bought the land in 1998 (int. 3.4). At first, people came with their wagons and started to live there. Interviewee 3.2 thinks that it is hard for people to decide to stay there because it is far away from city.

Today it consists of four households. Not all residents live in the ecovillage year-round. Number of people, who live in the village all year-round, varies from time-to-time, depending on members’ working conditions and preferences (int. 3.3). Interviewee 3.3 said that there were times when she and her family were the only ones living in ecovillage. She also mentioned that there are more people who live there in the summer time.

Ecovillage has ten members, their ages are between twenty and forty. Those who are currently living in the ecovillage are seven grownups and three children.

Houses are not so far from each other and they do not have separate gardens. They were all built in different styles and from different materials. Some were built with straw bale and others with wood. All of the houses were designed with ecological considerations (int. 3.3).

The way of life was defined as relatively cheaper, more humane; and, at the same time, chaotic and frustrating by interviewee 3.3. Respondent 3.1 stated that the ecovillage community members are waiting for the right people to come. That is why they see themselves as the most peaceful ones. One of the main ideologies of the ecovillage was “never take loans (do not give money to banks)” (int. 3.3). The community owns the land and no one
can sell his house without first receiving every member’s approval. It is stated that this helps to protect integrity in the community (int. 3.4).

Decision making procedures are structured in meetings, which are organized by responsible persons. The call for the meeting is sent to the members two weeks before. It includes the agenda, which is open for suggestions of topics to discuss.

There are both formal and informal meetings. Formal meetings are focused on economic issues and duties of association. Informal meetings are related to other aspects of community living (social life, planning projects, etc.)

The meetings took place on Saturday, starting approximately at eleven in the morning. The duration of short meetings is four hours and of long meetings is eight hours. The meeting starts with reading decisions that were made on the previous meeting. After the meeting ends, the protocol is sent to the members by mail. Everything is discussed in the meeting until participants reach full agreement.

For bigger issues, a different type of meeting might be organized, which is called “round meeting”. During round meetings, the person presents his idea or, in the case of membership application, himself. Then proposal is being discussed and decision is made by all community members.

**4.1.4 Summary**

All of the three ecovillages were initiated with high level of concerns on environment and social bonds. Ecovillage 1 and 2 are close to a city, and Ecovillage 3 is quite far from any city.

Ecovillage 1 is one of the oldest ecovillage in Sweden, it was established in 1987. Ecovillage 3 was founded at the end of 90’s. Ecovillage 2 was the most recent one initiated in the beginning of 2001. In Ecovillage 1, though initiators were active in the planning phase, buildings and infrastructure were developed according to one standard with the partnership of HSB. In ecovillage 2 and 3, houses are designed and built independently by the owners.

In all the ecovillages, the communities own the land, and every member owns a share of it. In addition, community members could have ownership
of their houses. While house owners in ecovillage 1 and 2 have the right to sell them, in ecovillage 3, this is only possible with the consent of all the community members. In all of the ecovillages, neighbourhood, connectivity, and collaboration are emphasized as main values of living there. In ecovillage 1, there are working groups responsible for specific areas since the initial phase. In ecovillage 2, previously there were these groups but then this implementation shifted to responsible persons for special work areas. In ecovillage 3, responsibility of a work area is also given to one person instead of a group.

Ecovillage 1 has the most mixed demographic structure and it is the most populated, with 150 inhabitants permanently living there. There are thirty inhabitants in ecovillage 2 and ecovillage 3 has the lowest populated with 10 members and seven grownup inhabitants.

4.2 Decision Making in Ecovillages

4.2.1 Context

Vision

It is typical for members of all three ecovillages to have strong environmental and social values. However, only one (ecovillage 1) of these villages has a clearly stated vision. In ecovillage 1, they also admit that this vision might not be as shared today as it was before. At the same time interviewees from ecovillage 1 share understanding that having common and clear vision is something that is needed and would be good for their community.

At ecovillage 2 two interviewees noticed that having a shared vision might be a good thing for a community, but so far they find it hard to build common understanding of ideas among all members. For example, interviewee 2.1 stated that:

“At the high idea level, people have same understanding but when it comes to how to do things (implementation/action) it is more difficult. Not everybody is working for the same project; there are different responsibles for different projects.”
The same interviewee also declared that the common understanding of the vision started to change with the new comers (new members). Interviewee 2.3 even stated that they worked on a visioning process for too long and she now thinks that it might be a time to stop sharing ideas and start acting:

“We had a vision group on and on. We have done visioning for 10 years. I feel that we should act now not talk a lot about ideas.”

Interviewees at ecovillage 3 talked less about shared vision of the community, but more about the high value of living together and creating good relationships between community members.

“It is really important to find people and find hope. Finding your own tribe, these people are helping a lot (int. 3.2).”

“It is really making it possible to live your dream in a way that you have a space for yourself and it does not cost so much money. And also you are not alone, you are together with your friends (int. 3.3).”

**Strategy for sustainable development**

None of the three participating ecovillages have shared goals or strategies on a community level. Planning and development are reduced to day-to-day tasks and individuals or groups lead single projects.

“Decisions are more on daily tasks and needs of the living (int. 3.1).”

“It is very common that person thinks – well, we have to have this! And then he goes to the meeting and say: I think that’s important. And okay, the most common is: ‘okay, make like a little study and come back’, so ‘I’ve studied about this it is that, it is this’. Or maybe a person can say: ‘this is how we can do it here’ (int. 1.3).”

Formal structures like boards (ecovillage 1 and 2) also do not propose goals for mid- or long terms development. In ecovillage 2, three of the interviewees that are currently working in the board or worked on the board in previous years responded negatively to the question of whether they have a clear strategy and they are setting goals. In ecovillage 1, the response interviewee 1.2 comprises procedures of the board and in general:
“No, if you are looking at the board or in general – no. I wouldn’t say. No there have been no kinds of follow up, no kind of indicators or even set goals. If you want to reach this and this level.”

At the same time interviewees from the first two ecovillages noticed that it might be needed to have formalized goals and criteria to evaluate annual progress. However, right after they added that developing long-term strategy appears to be “hard” for their communities. For example, interviewee 1.4 from ecovillage 1 said that they tried to have a discussion about future of their community on monthly meeting a year ago. But “No one said anything” - he says. And he assumed that it is because:

“It is not so easy to look ahead like that. You have to take each thing when it comes (int. 1.4).”

Interviewee from ecovillage 2 said that they do not have elaborated planning process, because it takes time to plan and implement actions and they try to keep it “organic”:

“It is more organic movement. Then it takes three years to take one decision. Democracy is hard and takes time (int. 2.1)”

Another interviewee (int. 2.3) from this ecovillage sees lack of money as an obstacle for setting clear goals. At ecovillage 3, interviewees assume that developing common goals is hard, because it is hard to put ideas of different people together:

“Because we did not know what “we” want, people were in different part of their lives. We could not have a plan where everybody agrees. Some people would like to live one day to another while others would like to settle immediately (int. 3.3).”

“At the beginning there were lots of wills but at the end it turned out that there is not so much will anymore. That is why now we are trying to encourage personal projects (int. 3.4).”

**Formalized criteria for making decisions**

None of selected ecovillages have explicit criteria or guidelines for making
decisions in the community. It is common for every community that we interviewed to leave it up to individuals or to groups themselves to use their own personal criteria for making decisions. Communities do not usually provide any additional guidelines or regulations. It appears to be that decision making processes in all three ecovillages is relatively informal both on individual and collective levels.

Even if a meetings’ agenda is formalized by necessity (e.g. for a board meeting in ecovillages 1 and 2 or for a meeting of the economic association at ecovillage 3), it does not necessarily mean that decision making criteria and principles would be also formalized. In fact they typically stay informal and sometimes are not even discussed.

However this does not mean that members of ecovillages have no criteria for making decisions; each one of them has his or her own consideration on how he or she makes decisions and how decisions in the community should be made. For example, interviewees in ecovillage 1 mostly mentioned social and ecological criteria.

“It is ecology yes and that as many as possible of those living here could join it, could accept it – it is also a criteria (int. 1.4).”

They state that, when they are making decisions, they mostly think about what would be good for community and good (not harmful) for the environment. However, they do not tend to explain explicitly what does “good for community and good for environment” mean. Three of the four interviewees in ecovillage 1 also mentioned that financial and legal restrictions could as well serve as criteria for making decisions in the community.

These issues, together with environmental awareness, could be also used among criteria for making decisions in ecovillage 2. In ecovillage 3, one of the main criteria for making decisions appears to be maintaining good relations between people and every one’s acceptance of these decisions. Interviewee 3.4 answered the question of whether they have some rules in the community as: “Not that many. We are friends. Not so much limitations.”

**Connection of vision and strategy with decision making**

Members of all three ecovillages noticed that they are trying to reduce
negative impact on environment in their community. They are trying to buy ecological food, plant trees, use biodegradable cleaning materials etc.

However no evidence in the interviews was found related to an intention for aligning decisions with goals and vision of the community (if any), or using decision making processes as a means to reach the envisioned future.

4.2.2 Process

Involving people into decision making

Based on the observations and especially on the statements of interviewees in ecovillage 1 and 2, it appears as if that involvement in decision making is perceived typically as insufficient. In ecovillage 1, only half of the households (there are fifty households) are represented in meetings. In ecovillage 2, half of the members (there are approximately thirty members) are attending the meetings. In ecovillage 3, even though almost everyone living in the ecovillage gathers in the meetings, members that do not live in the ecovillage all year-round are not attending every meeting (int. 3.4). There are only four adults and three children living in the ecovillage all year long (int. 3.3).

All the ecovillages seems to experience a decrease in the level of involvement among members over the course of time. In ecovillage 1, int. 1.4 stated that:

“...during these 20 years, as far as I know, it has worked until now. But it is always a danger that there always should be enough people who are feeling this responsibility...” “It was I think several years ago when less and less people come to Sunday meetings.” “For instance you have heard about our meeting on Sunday afternoon each month and usually there comes around twenty-five representatives from households and that means that half of the households are represented.”

In the ecovillage 2, interviewee 2.2 thinks that in the very beginning they had many more meetings, people worked much more. Interviewee 3.3 also said that, at the beginning, there were a lot of willpower and interest in ecovillage 3, but at the end, it turned out that there is not so much motivation anymore. And she stated that:
“The decisions on issues related to the bigger issues can take longer time because members are not so keen to take initiative and to take responsibility.”

Respondents’ statements for reasons of low involvement in the decision making process differed from each other. In ecovillage 1, interviewee 1.3 said that some people lived there for a long time think that they put their effort into it quite some time and it is not important anymore as it was in the beginning. In ecovillage 2, Interviewee 2.2 declared that those who were not coming to the meetings have stated that they had lot of meetings and they did not like meetings. She continued by saying that sometimes even though the decision is made, it is not really understood by those that have attended to the meetings. Interviewee 2.3 stressed that people who do not always attend to the meetings do not really have an opinion afterwards. Interviewee 2.3 sees the biggest challenge for the decision making process of ecovillage 2, as not enough engagement by the others. Interviewee 3.3 stated that making decisions on bigger issues could take longer time because members are not so keen to take initiative and responsibility.

Interviewees suggested making meetings more informal and interesting as a way to increase involvement to them. Interviewee 1.4 stated that drinking coffee and eating cake together at meetings affected positively attendance in ecovillage 1. Interviewee 2.2 thinks that if the meetings become more interesting, maybe there will be more participation and engagement to decision making process of ecovillage 2. Interviewee 3.4 stated that they were planning to have a new type of meeting, which will be less formal where they will discuss daily issues of ecovillage 3.

In ecovillage 3, interviewee 3.1 stated that everybody has an opinion about what is going on and something to talk about. In order to involve everybody to the decision making process respondent 3.3 said that they are using consensus. Interviewee 3.2 declared that even though somebody is not yet member but living there, he or she has the right to participate to the discussions.

**Power distributed fairly, equal right to influence decisions**

Even though there are some mechanisms in all three ecovillages for the fair and timely distribution of power none of the ecovillages are working
intentionally on monitoring and developing mechanisms for improving power distribution. First of all, access to the meetings is typically flexible. Everybody living in the ecovillage 1 can participate in the meetings (int. 1.2). In ecovillage 3, interviewee 3.1 states that everyone has the right to speak and people can ask freely and are equally and fairly informed about any case. On the other hand, in ecovillage 2, only members can participate to the decision making process but not everyone living in the ecovillage is member (int. 2.4).

In all ecovillages there are some mechanisms to organize fair and timely distribution of power. Interviewee 1.1 stated that sometimes members feel excluded from the decision making process for specific issues. But, interviewee 1.2 underlines the conditions that are not letting few people dominate meetings and to speak all the time. In this sense the decision making process is seen as working well and very democratic by interviewee 1.2. Interviewee 1.3 thinks that the way of presenting the idea is important to overcome conflicting views.

In ecovillage 2, interviewee 2.2 stated that people having a discussion point could bring it to the meetings through the board. Interviewee 2.3 declared that if a member does not agree on the decision taken in the meeting, he or she could gather a one-tenth vote and call for another discussion meeting for the specific issue. She also pointed out that members have right to select a representative for the meetings when they are absent. Then again she underlined that the board takes the decisions for those that will implement specific issues after the meetings and this creates some laybacks in the participatory decision making. So, she thinks that they can decide on things directly instead of talking partly and letting the board decide.

For ecovillage 3, interviewee 3.3 stressed the importance of optimizing communication since people are different; ‘some are not so extrovert, some talk little bit less, some talk a little bit more and different questions engage different people’. Interviewee 3.4 thinks that things/issues are changing, instead of trying to find out the best of everybody, they are trying to be open and flexible and involve as many people as possible in the decision making process.

**Special role for facilitator and other supportive roles**
None of the participating ecovillages have a special role for facilitator. Ecovillage 2 and ecovillage 3 did not try to have a facilitator in any of the decision making processes. In ecovillage 1, one interviewee (int. 1.2) stated that they once tried to have a facilitator and it was appreciated and needed. Interviewee 1.2 stated that:

“No the facilitator would be needed. But it is not common. I am a trained facilitator so sometimes I am taking the role. It was much appreciated. I mean usually in our daily jobs we are not facilitators. And here, where structure is more informal, it is more difficult to take on a role because you need a group to accept you, taking that role. In a company or organisations where it is hierarchy so you have a facilitator.”

Space for disagreement and discussion

In all of the ecovillages, community members have space for disagreement and discussion. They are allowed to and know how they can propose a disagreement (on a mail, on a meeting) and community members have respect from others when they discuss a topic. In ecovillage 1, interviewee 1.2 stated that:

“If there are bigger things we are aware of it, so that’s why we have this type of questionnaires or send out an email with questions to everyone. That is sent out I think a month ahead, everyone gets the report to read through.”

In ecovillage 1 questionnaire are being sent to community members for discussions and necessary time is provided for people to reflect on a discussion topic. Also, disagreements and discussion can happen in the meetings. Interviewee 1.2 also said that:

“And then at the meeting we can ask questions. And they cannot change a fact of it, but they can have opinions. Or they can ask questions like: where did that money go or why did we invest in this and so on. And since minutes are open anyone can bring an idea or objection. And on the monthly meetings there is always a part here – questions to and from the big meeting, the house meeting.”
In ecovillage 2, community members do care about discussions. Mailing is very important to continue the discussion (int. 2.1). Interviewee 2.2 stated that:

“There is always a part called ‘adding questions’ you can add and mail to board, they say yes and add it to the meeting (int. 2.1).”

In ecovillage 3, interviewee 3.1 sees the process organic and easy to discuss, she stated that:

“If we stuck on something, we are solving it with extra meetings and if they think it is a big discussion issue, then we have to wait for the next meeting. Everyone can have an opinion. Everybody should speak; everybody has their time to talk. It is a small group you know; it is quite easily solved (int. 3.2).”

Explicit and fair mechanism for solving conflicts and disagreements

None of the three ecovillages have an explicit and fair mechanism for solving conflicts and disagreements. But in time all of them have found some ways of resolving conflicts and handling challenges that occur because of disagreements. In ecovillage 1, interviewee 1.2 stated that one way is:

“And one way of showing it if they are not satisfied – is not voting for the board. But I do not think that everyone is very happy about the decisions. I do not think so. (…) Sometimes people may say – okay, fine. But maybe they are not happy about that. But not that I know of people are going alone being mad at each other.”

Members of ecovillage 2 are going with the flow of the discussions, the time and intensity of discussions and conflicts vary depending on the issue. For some issues, the decision is easily made but for other issues, gaining consent of a majority can take two to three years.

For example, achieving agreement from the majority on starting a forest restoration project, which is primarily a project focused on transforming one part of their forest into a grazing land, took approximately three years (int. 2.2).
There are some mechanisms used by ecovillage 2 in order to facilitate discussion in groups, such as dividing discussion topics into relevant sub-themes and splitting participants into different discussion groups (int. 2.2).

“It is tough, having lots of discussions, meetings. People have different ideas how to manage. Sometimes it breaks through. Sometimes it leads to lots of conflicts. Some issues are easy can go fast, some issues can take years, and it takes new and new rounds (int. 2.1).”

“When people do not like something they say, it is not my cup of tea but you do that I do not have to do it. So something like that. These are knowledge-based conflicts; some people say this, others say that. Who knows best? It solves naturally (int. 2.2).”

Ecovillage 3 has a more organic and flexible way to solve conflicts:

“We just continue discussion until everybody is happy. We have to talk when people are not getting along. Of course we have to talk. Just be aware and use common sense. I do not know any alternative really (int. 3.1).”

Another way for handling a though conflict is by means of personal attitude for another member:

“There are lots of challenges. For me, this way, you have to deal with people that tried to make their own way, but you learn to listen, take care of each other. If you really listen and have open mind you overcome because at the end they are not big problems (int. 3.4).”

**Information is spread timely and fairly; everyone has equal access to it**

In all three ecovillages, information is spread timely and fairly; everyone has equal access to it. Information about decisions that are made is distributed via a paper printed out and hung on the board of a common house so everyone can see it (ecovillage 1), via mailing lists within the community (ecovillage 2 and ecovillage 3), and through announcements (ecovillage 1).
“Every month it is in the paper what we have decided and if there is something to decide about. So we are all well informed. And most people who are not on the meeting they get what we have talked about (int. 1.1).”

And about equal access to documents interviewee 1.2 stated that:

“The minutes from the board meetings are all open for anyone to read. They are not sent out, but they are printed and in the common room in common house, so anyone who is interested can go there and look.”

Ecovillage 2 is using mailing lists to spread information. The agenda of meetings is sent two to three weeks before the meeting and meeting protocol is sent immediately after the meeting via mail.

“People are informed about meeting agenda beforehand (they are noticed three weeks before the meeting). If people have idea and initiatives to discuss in the meeting, they are bringing before in the mailing list (int. 2.1).”

Interviewee 2.2 statement on made decisions is:

“They got the protocol. It goes out to everyone. They know about what happens.”

In ecovillage 3 the way that community use for announcement of upcoming meetings’ agenda and made decisions is the same as ecovillage 2. Despite this similarity, ecovillage 3 members can call or text the other members in situations when they feel the need to take a decision immediately:

“If I am in a hurry, I can call everyone. Once I was in a plant shop and I sent text message to everyone, I asked is it ok if I buy these plants because it could be poison, there are kids (int. 3.1).”

In ecovillage 3, it is very important to make members living abroad aware of what is going on in the village. Interviewee 3.3 states:

“Then we try to be very careful, especially in big issues we are immediately calling them and informing about the issue.”
4.2.3 Design

Shared agreement and understanding of what decision making model is used and how to use it

Members of all three ecovillages do not typically have discussions about which decision making model to use and how to use it. Interviewees did not mention any types of training on how to use the present model for decision making or another one. However, all interviewees are generally aware of how the process works and how they are able to participate.

They also more or less agree with how the decision making process functions today, even if they recognize that maybe not everyone in the community share this agreement.

“They say: ‘I do not like meetings, I had a lot meetings, I do not like meetings, make it short’ (int. 2.1).”

“We have these discussions here. With one of other members of the board we discussed that maybe we should try to understand how democratic we are. Because not everyone attends meetings, and even if we have questionnaire not everyone answers the questions (int. 1.2).”

At the same time there are different attitudes as to whether there should be more discussions or not about how decision making process functions. One interviewee from ecovillage 1 (int. 1.1) considers that the process they have (meetings, voting) is pretty much typical for every community everywhere in the world. And other interviewee from the same community thinks that it might be good to have a discussion again on how to make decisions together:

“To say – okay, to avoid unnecessary conflicts and arguments and stuff, let’s decide on how we will make decisions in this group (int. 1.2).”

Interviewees from ecovillage 2 acknowledged that the process today might not be so ideal for them, but they did not mention if they need to have more discussions about it or not. It appears that, since 2005, they changed their model from consensus to voting because one person was always
disagreeing. They accepted their decision making model “as it is” and have not tried to change it again until today. Some of them still admit that ‘consensus is better, but it does not work’ (int. 2.2).

Interviewees from ecovillage 3 seem to be well satisfied with a model they have so far, even if sometimes bringing people together might not be an easy task (int. 3.3):

“We are relaxed and we talk very soft and smooth. I think it is very good. It is not a problem and not so complicated (int. 3.1)”.

**Special procedure for evaluating and improving decision making model**

None of the three ecovillages that the thesis team visited had developed any special procedure for evaluating and improving decision making.

Nevertheless, some sorts of changes in decision making processes are happening in all of them. For example, ecovillage 1 provides coffee and cakes at community meetings to improve attendance, ecovillage 2 changed their model from consensus to voting in 2005, and ecovillage 3 introduces a new type of meeting called a house meeting. These meetings will be less formal and more focused on daily issues and on facilitating implementation by making resources (cash money etc.) more accessible (int. 3.3).

These changes are not the results of a systematic process for improvement, but more or less implemented occasionally.

The same approach seems to be applied for the evaluation and assessment of decisions and the decision making process itself. There are no specific procedures represented in all three ecovillages. People assess decision making processes individually and subjectively and their satisfaction or dissatisfaction could be reflected in voting or not voting for a board on annual meetings (ecovillage 1), supporting or resisting implementation of common projects or simply in participating or not participating in regular community meetings.

**Decisions and decision making procedures are formalized**
Every ecovillage formalizes their decision making process in some way. However depth of this formalization is different for each community.

In Ecovillage 1 board meetings are quite formalized, where they have “fixed” agenda, which they follow. This agenda is provided by the housing agency and the board does not have too much flexibility in changing it. Community meetings are less formal and sometimes may be “too anarchistic” (int. 1.2). Although, community meetings also have structured agenda, they strive to follow.

Every board and community meeting has a chairman and secretary. The chairman and secretary of the board are elected every two years, and the community meeting chairman and secretary change each month because households, which are responsible for organizing meetings, change every month. The type of decision making model is also changing each time and there is no special rule for that. Every time they just decide on how they want to make decisions, either consensus or voting (int. 1.1; int. 1.2). Minutes from meetings are thoroughly written down at both types of meetings.

Members of ecovillage 1 assume that all this process might be written somewhere, but they do not know where this paper is located. During interviews, most interviewees reflected that some sort of formalization of process might be a good thing to do.

“I think sometimes it would help to have a bit of structure to help make decision (int. 1.2).”

“The thing is what I think now – maybe it would be good for the village to write down something... (int. 1.3)”

In ecovillage 2, members are also keeping protocol for every meeting. Meetings happen every six weeks and the chairman is present in every meeting. The board is organizing meetings. The meeting type is also set as straight majority voting.

This may be the reason that some members of the community think that they “are well organized” (int. 2.1), whereas other people think that there might be more structure and organisation needed. For example, interviewee 2.3 suggests that the board be more prepared in organizing background
information before bringing new issues to the meeting so that discussions do not take such a long time (int. 2.3).

In ecovillage 3, the level of formalization is also different for different activities. In the economic association, decisions have to be formalized because they are related to financial and legal parts of community living. The meetings start with reading protocols from the previous meeting and verbal agreements are formally confirmed:

“...Then we have to make it formal with the maps for economical association and confirm agreements such as “did we mean this or that” (int. 3.3).”

At these meetings, decisions are also thoroughly discussed and written down. At the same time, regular community meetings are much more informal and flexible. Some community members also believe that “too much formalization” might not be necessary for the community. "The best is to make people follow what they want to do instead of too many written rules." (int. 3.4)

Table 4.2 Summary of results from all three ecovillages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decision making Model Components</th>
<th>Ecovillage 1</th>
<th>Ecovillage 2</th>
<th>Ecovillage 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clear and shared vision</td>
<td>Written, but not shared or discussed</td>
<td>Not explicit</td>
<td>Not explicit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connection of vision with decision making</td>
<td>No clear connection.</td>
<td>No clear connection.</td>
<td>No clear connection.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Formalized criteria</td>
<td>Involvement</td>
<td>Power distributed fairly and timely.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Formalized criteria</strong></td>
<td>No formalized criteria. Shared values and some norms exist.</td>
<td>Half of the households attend meetings.</td>
<td>No formalized criteria. Shared values and some norms exist.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Involvement</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>Half of the members attend meetings.</td>
<td>Every inhabitant attends meetings (only 10 inhabitants)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Power distributed fairly and timely.</strong></td>
<td>Enabling mechanisms exist.</td>
<td>Enabling mechanisms exist. Some challenges are stated by interviewees.</td>
<td>Enabling mechanisms exist.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Facilitator role</strong></td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>No.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Space for disagreement and discussion</strong></td>
<td>Community members have space to express opinions.</td>
<td>Community members have space to express opinions.</td>
<td>Community members have space to express opinions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mechanism for solving conflicts</strong></td>
<td>Only discussion and majority voting are used.</td>
<td>Only discussion and majority voting are used.</td>
<td>Only discussion is used.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Information is spread timely and fairly</strong></td>
<td>Yes, fair enough. Everyone has access to information.</td>
<td>Yes, fair enough. Everyone has access to information.</td>
<td>Yes, fair enough. Everyone has access to information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Agreement and understanding of the decision making model</strong></td>
<td>No discussion on it. General awareness on the model in use and how to use it.</td>
<td>No discussion on it. General awareness on the model in use and how to use it.</td>
<td>No discussion on it. General awareness on the model in use and how to use it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special procedure for evaluating and improving decision making model</td>
<td>No specific procedure for evaluating and improving decision making.</td>
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<td>No specific procedure for evaluating and improving decision making.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formalization of decisions and decision making procedures</td>
<td>Board activities are quite formalized. Protocol is held in all meetings.</td>
<td>Board activities are quite formalized. Protocol is held in all meetings.</td>
<td>Activities related to economical association are quite formalized. Protocol is held in all meetings.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5 Discussion

The discussion part is organized according to research questions. First, general characteristics of the decision making structures and processes in ecovillages are described. Second, a current success definition and measurement of decision making in ecovillages is expressed. Third, a current level of integration of a strategic development perspective into decision making is depicted. Fourth, some recommendations are given on how SSD perspective could be incorporated in future.

5.1 Research Question 1

How are decision making processes structured and how do they function within selected ecovillages in Sweden?

The typical model of collective decision making in selected Swedish ecovillages is based on distinction between formal and informal structures. Formal structures (like boards) are generally focused on resolving legal and financial questions, while informal structures (like community meetings), are typically focused on deciding on social and environmental aspects of common life.

In all three ecovillages, decision making is member-based, however not every ecovillage requires mandatory membership.

Decision making in all three ecovillages is set to involve all community members. The villages use meetings as the primary form of organizing. They tend to have low or no classical hierarchy during meetings or outside of them. That is a remarkable attempt to allow every member of community to have equal impact on common decisions and common being. Although, in practice, the level of commitment, involvement and influence may still strongly vary between different members.

Decisions in all ecovillages are typically made in regular meetings, where agendas are set beforehand and some sort of formal organisation of meetings is present (timing, chairman role, use of protocol). Members of ecovillages are typically responsible for organizing meetings, and this responsibility rotates on a regular basis (one member/household - one
meeting). Approaches for making decisions are typically consensus (Ecovillage 3), majority voting (Ecovillage 2) or both (Ecovillage 1).

Members of all three communities are typically aware of how decision-making process is designed and how it functions in their community and have no major objections to it. However, some level of criticism is also present, when people keep reflecting on how democratic, fair, efficient etc. their decision making process is.

5.2 Research Question 2

How is success of decision making process defined and measured?

No clear definitions of the success of decision making process and attempts to measure it were found. It seems to be that decision making procedures in all three ecovillages tend to evolve “naturally” and all changes to it are introduced on an irregular basis.

Collectively made decisions are also typically not subject to regular evaluation and measurement and the quality of implementation is generally left up to the discretion of people or groups, who take responsibility for them.

Community members have a certain ability to influence decision making processes and provide feedback (e.g. not vote for a board for next period or initiate discussion at a regular meeting). However, no evidence of special procedures for improving decisions and decision making was found.

5.3 Research Question 3

How a Strategic Sustainable Development perspective is currently incorporated into decision making processes of these ecovillages?

According to a Strategic Sustainable Development perspective, overall strategy includes creating a long-term vision and clear definition of success, backcasting from sustainability principles, developing strategic guidelines for ecovillage development and prioritizing actions according to these guidelines (Holmberg and Robèrt 2000). These components are partly
reflected in development of explored ecovillages, but rarely presented in full force.

Decision making processes are typically designed to address day-to-day issues of community living (financial, legal, social and other aspects of community life). Members tend to be more focused on short-term development planning and on working on single projects, rather than having any overall strategy for holistic community development for the long run.

Most members of selected ecovillages seem to have common values and in some cases, a stated vision, even though this vision might not be clearly shared and its values not expressed.

However, lack of clarity in vision and strategy may make it hard to track overall success and create specific guidelines for making decisions collectively. That is why maybe success for decision making also tends not to be clearly defined and measured, as mentioned above.

Generally speaking, it seems that decision making processes in selected communities tend not to be seen as means for strategic development towards sustainability and members of these communities tend not to clarify possible connections between quality of decision making processes and quality of community development and growth.

5.4 Research Question 4

In what ways could SSD be further incorporated into these decision making processes such that future decisions will have an increased probability of leading to more sustainable conclusions?

After observing present experiences in selected ecovillages in Sweden and gaining inspiration from literature review and from the model, certain recommendations can be expressed for potential improvement of decision-making processes in intentional communities with a sustainable development focus.

These recommendations are addressed to people who already have created an ecovillage or people that plan to do so. The aim of these
recommendations is to underline the importance of a strategic approach in designing decision making process for the community and in aligning a community vision and goals with general principles of collective decision-making.

In order to align community development towards sustainability and collective decision making processes, following recommendations might be considered:

First, having clear and shared vision, including a clear understanding of sustainability may be beneficial for communities, since it may help them to build a shared agreement around what steps should be collectively taken to reach common goals and how these steps could be evaluated and measured.

Second, creating a shared understanding of what is success for community development towards sustainability and how this success is related to success of decision making can help community members align collective decision making with a common envisioned future. This could create a positive feedback loop between these two big areas.

Third, it might be useful to create a clear connection between envisioned success of community development and day-to-day decisions (backcasting), by implementing shared and measurable guidelines for communities’ decision making (framed by the four sustainability principles).

Fourth, it might be useful to regularly evaluate and improve (when necessary) decision making processes in relation to a community’s vision and strategy (depending on if the decision making processes help or hinder community development towards sustainability).

And finally, having fair distribution of power and creating conditions for people to equally influence decisions and decision making may help create a positive and supportive atmosphere and foster community capacity to move towards sustainability.

In order to practically implement these steps, following supportive actions could be taken.

It may be meaningful to initiate additional discussions in ecovillages around how members make decisions and how do they envision their community in the future. A series of workshops could be initiated around
visioning and decision making. These workshops can be held in different forms (open space, pro-action cafes, world cafes, semi-formal discussions etc) and can be facilitated either externally or internally.

Additional educational materials may be provided, explaining the importance of decision making processes and suggestions for their improvement. These materials could be included in larger guidebooks for strategic community/ecovillage development (together, for example, with suggestions around possible financial, political, technological improvements etc.).
6 Conclusion and Recommendations for Further Researches

Creating and developing an ecovillage is not an easy task. It requires collaborative efforts of many people and long term discussions may be needed to reach solutions that will be beneficial and accepted by everyone (Christian 2003).

At the same time, surprisingly, decision making and, perhaps, social organisation in general, is not a main focus of ecovillage inhabitants, regardless of how big or how old a community is. It is typical for all three explored ecovillages to leave decision making processes more or less to operate “on their own”, revising them and making changes only when it seems absolutely necessary. There is lack of evidence of intentional effort to create clear and regular structures around them.

Lack of a strategic approach to decision making processes might be connected to general lack of long-term visioning and strategy. Most of ecovillage members are willing to live together, but not always have clear understanding of how this life should be organized and how do they want their community to be developed during next several years. However, establishing clear connections between decision making and strategy were not within the scope of this research and might be a matter of interest for additional future researches.

It is also important to remember that this research was conducted through focus on only three ecovillages out of more than fifty in Sweden, so results of the research couldn't be considered comprehensive enough to make assumptions about other ecovillages in Sweden or abroad. Significant diversity of existing ecovillages is also related to this issue. It is hard, or perhaps even impossible, to create one generalized unifying picture of all of them surrounding decision making processes.

It could also be a matter of interest for future researchers to replicate this work with other ecovillages and increase the amount of ecovillages involved in order to both validate and question its findings.
Additionally it could be beneficial to increase the number of interviewees and include in future research not only current inhabitants, but also people who left these communities by any reason.

Considering the decision making model, it might be valuable to better explore connections between different components. For example, how formalization of decision making is related to involvement or how a special role of facilitator is related to equal power distribution, etc. It might be also interesting to explore if the decision making model is comprehensive enough so that it could be developed further by including more theoretical approaches or more results from other ecovillages.

Overall, authors believe that conducting more researches and having more discussions about decision making, as part of social organisation of ecovillages, might open great potential for further understanding and development of these communities. So far, many ecovillages are known as distinguished examples of new ways of ecological living and experimenting with eco-technologies. But they could as well be known for their advantageous and innovative social systems and social organisations.

Authors hope that findings of this research will provide meaningful assistance to other researchers and to sustainability practitioners, including ecovillage members and associations, and that more scientific researches and practical applications in the area of strategic planning and decision making will follow.

Authors hope that this research will help to stimulate discussion around decision making processes in intentional communities and will serve as a stepping-stone for further exploration and practical elaboration in this area. Both the uncertainty and importance of topic are significant and it may require collective efforts of many researchers and practitioners to develop better decision making models for strategic sustainable development of ecovillages. And even then there might be always a room for experiment and innovations, because of organic and evolving nature of this subject.

Authors also hope that findings from this research will provide meaningful assistance to other researchers and to sustainability practitioners, including ecovillage members and associations, and that more scientific researches and practical applications in the area of strategic planning and decision making will follow.
References


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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Question Samples

1. Is there a general process that is followed for most or all of your meetings?
2. Do you follow any general process to structure your meetings? (Agenda, timing, etc.)
3. What general procedures are you using to making decisions? Are they explicit and formalized?
4. How many people are participating in decision making? Who can participate?
5. Do you have a strategy for your decision making processes?
6. What criteria are you using to make decisions in your community?
7. Do you have a shared vision in your community?
8. “How do you see that the vision is shared by everyone?”
9. How can you assure that everyone shares the vision?
10. ‘Has this vision changed over time?’
11. How do you align decision making procedures with your vision?
12. Are you setting goals for the healthy development of your community: (towards its vision)?
13. How do you assess effectiveness/ efficiency of your decisions? Are there any specific criteria/indicators?
14. How do you measure success of your decision making procedures?
15. In which situations/issues are you making decisions collectively?
16. How do you involve people in making decisions?
17. How do you inform members of community about made decisions?
18. How do you regulate implementation of commonly made decisions?
19. How do you manage disagreements and conflicts about made decisions (on decision making phase and on implementation phase)?
20. Which criteria are you using to make decisions about managing common resources?
21. Do you have any sort of “good” decision making procedure that you are applying in order to reach “success”?
22. How had your decision making process evolved through time? Why?
23. What are the main challenges that you are facing in decision making process in community? How do you overcome them?
24. What principles and tools (techniques) are you using to make better decisions?
25. Are you generally satisfied with decision making processes in ecovillage?
26. What do you think could be improved and how?
27. What do you value about decision making process in your community?
Appendix B: Interviewee Profiles

Ecovillage 1

- Interviewee 1.1: Living at ecovillage since it was build, participated in part of planning phase.
- Interviewee 1.2: Secondary secretary at the board. Lives in ecovillages for 3 years.
- Interviewee 1.3: Lives in ecovillage for more than 3 years. Part of group that is responsible for taking care about trees.
- Interviewee 1.4: One of the founders of ecovillage. Lives there most of the time, since it was created.

Ecovillage 2

- Interviewee 2.1: Part of planning team of ecovillage since 2001 and a member since 2005.
- Interviewee 2.2: Has been living in ecovillage since it was built.
- Interviewee 2.3: Lives in ecovillage for two and a half years. Former member of the board.

Ecovillage 3

- Interviewee 3.1: A new member but stayed at ecovillage for one year before becoming a member.
- Interviewee 3.2: Not a member of ecovillage, but has a right to share ideas and participate in activities. Living and working in ecovillage for one year and has a long-running relationships with the community.
- Interviewee 3.3: Came to the ecovillage in 1999 and living there since that time.
- Interviewee 3.4: One of initiators of the ecovillage and living there from the beginning.