

**Marie Skodowska-Curie Post-Doctoral Fellowship**  
**ECOLABSS**  
**ECOVillages as LABORatories of Sustainability and Social Change**

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**Abstract**

In an historical moment where citizens of the world are called to take action to face ‘multiple crises’ - the emergency of climatic change, high and rising socio-economic inequalities, and the upsurge of intolerance and racism within and between countries - the study of transformative grassroots initiatives becomes crucially important and timely. ‘Ecovillages as Laboratories of Sustainability and Social Change’ (EcoLabSS) is conceived as an international, inter-sectoral and interdisciplinary project aiming at producing a theoretically grounded and methodologically innovative study of one of these grassroots initiatives: the ecovillage movement. EcoLabSS provides a multi-level and mixed-method study of the ecovillage movement that combines the comparative study of two local ecovillages, respectively in Denmark and Italy, with a systematic analysis of the actions and networks of the transnational organization Global Ecovillage Network (GEN). The review and the fieldwork is then used to develop a comprehensive theoretical and analytical framework centred on the path-breaking definition of ‘community-based prefigurative social movements’. The empirical analysis is structured along three mutually informing levels of analysis: micro-individual level, meso-community level, and macro-societal level. The first level is focused on the study of individual life trajectories and biographies of ecovillage inhabitants. The mesocommunity level is analyzing the everyday practices and processes involving organization, decision-making and creation of future-oriented norms and codes of conduct inside the two case studies. Finally, the macro-societal level is centred on the study of how the ecovillage movement - represented by the transnational organization GEN - translates and diffuses its practices, narratives and visions of a just and sustainable society to policy-makers, institutions, other civil society actors and the wider public.

**Research Questions**

EcoLabSS aims to make a substantial contribution to the current debate *theoretically, methodologically* and *empirically*. The first part of the research programme is devoted to systematically mapping the existing literature. Empirically, EcoLabSS provides a multi-level and mixed-method<sup>1</sup> study of the ecovillage movement that combines the comparative study of two local ecovillages, respectively in Denmark and Italy, with a systematic analysis of the actions and networks of the transnational organization Global Ecovillage Network (GEN). The review and the fieldwork will be successively used to develop a comprehensive theoretical and analytical framework centred on the path-breaking definition of ‘community-based prefigurative movements’<sup>2</sup>.

EcoLabSS is structured around the following *three levels of analysis* and the related main research questions:

**Macro- Societal Level:** How does the ecovillage movement - represented by the transnational organization GEN - translate and diffuse its practices, narratives and visions of a just and sustainable society to policy-makers, institutions, other civil society actors and the wider public?

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<sup>1</sup> Alan Bryman, “Integrating qualitative and quantitative research: how is it done?”, *Qualitative Research*, 6(1) (2006): 97-113.

<sup>2</sup> Kathleen M. Eisenhardt & Melissa E. Graebner, “Theory building from cases: Opportunities and challenges.” *Academy of management journal*, no 50.1 (2007): 25-32.

**Meso-Community Level:** What are the everyday practices and processes involving organization, decision-making and creation of future-oriented norms and codes of conduct? In what way they prefigure a holistically sustainable society and facilitate (or hinder) the enduring and growing over time of the ecovillage?

**Micro-Individual Level:** How are life trajectories of ecovillage members characterized? How are different spheres of life (work, family-private life, communal duties) interrelated and reconciled (if so)?

Put succinctly, EcoLabSS has the following four specific objectives:

**Theoretically**, to contribute to the existing debate by developing the definition of ‘community-based prefigurative movements’ and coming forth with a theoretical and analytical framework that can be tested and applied to other initiatives, like, for example, consumer-producer cooperatives, food networks and Transition Towns;

**Methodologically**, to introduce and adapt ground-breaking quantitative and qualitative methods, namely sequence analysis and collective mapping, to the study of community-based, prefigurative initiatives;

**Empirically**, to provide with a comparative study focused on the longitudinal, processual dimension of how ecovillages develop, thrive over time and network with other actors by focusing on three levels of analysis (macro, meso and micro);

**Policy-wise**, to offer policy-makers, experts and practitioners with an overview of what can be learned from ecovillages in the effort to achieve environmental, social and economic sustainability by 2030.