



Cloughjordan Ecovillage: Community-Led Transitioning to a Low-Carbon Future

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INTRODUCTION

As the pressure mounts on governments and on citizens to take more radical and impactful action on climate change, concrete examples of how to undertake such change become ever more important. This chapter examines one such model, Cloughjordan Ecovillage (CEV) in County Tipperary, Ireland. In her book on ecovillages, Karen Litfin calls them ‘living laboratories ... running collective experiments in every realm of life: building, farming, waste management, decision-making, communication, child rearing, finance, ownership, aging and death’. She sees them as ‘opportunities for learning’, both for ecovillagers themselves and for the wider society (Litfin 2014: 18). The author of this chapter is a resident of Cloughjordan Ecovillage, and during the writing of this chapter, Litfin’s words took on a poignant quality as four members died, two of them very suddenly. As with so much else, this challenged us to grieve well as a community, to find appropriate ways of celebrating those we had lost and to

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begin picking up the pieces. This illustrates how ecovillages seek to engage collectively with the many challenges of life, but framed always by practices of sustainability and transitioning to an ever lower-carbon lifestyle.

The chapter begins by asking what is an ecovillage, drawing on the definitions of the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN). It then introduces Cloughjordan Ecovillage as a project in progress, its founding objectives, and how far it has got towards fulfilling those objectives in its 20 years of existence. The third section surveys current published research on the ecovillage project. The discussion then identifies the three features that define this intentional community as an ecovillage: its ecological building standards, its carbon-neutral district heating system (DHS), and its food system, centred on its community farm, run on the principles of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA). The central importance of community to the ecovillage's understanding of sustainability is next highlighted, introducing its governance structures, and charting the ups and downs of a community weathering many challenges, especially the severe economic downturn of 2008. The chapter finishes by outlining CEV's educational work and by looking to the future of the ecovillage.

WHAT IS AN ECOVILLAGE?

Cloughjordan Ecovillage is a member of the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) which defines an ecovillage as 'an intentional or traditional community using local participatory processes to holistically integrate ecological, economic, social, and cultural dimensions of sustainability in order to regenerate social and natural environments'. It sees them as one solution to the great problems of our times—the limits to growth and the unsustainability of our societies. It states: 'Ecovillages, by endeavouring for lifestyles which are "successfully continuable into the indefinite future", are living models of sustainability, and examples of how action can be taken immediately. They represent an effective, accessible way to combat the degradation of our social, ecological and spiritual environments. They show us how we can move toward sustainability in the 21st century (Agenda 21)'. In 1998, ecovillages were first officially named among the United Nations' (UN) listing of 100 Best Practices, as excellent models of sustainable living (GEN website).

Reflecting on her time spent in 14 very different ecovillages around the world, Litfin (2014) identifies community life as being the common feature distinguishing all of them—'the intangible kinds of sharing that are

the essence of community’. Based on this, she concludes that ‘the foundation for ecological sustainability is social sustainability, person to person. In many of the ecovillages I visited, I saw concrete demonstrations that a self-replenishing social order is based on relationships of trust and reciprocity’ (Litfin 2014: 16–17). This emphasis is echoed in Jackson and Jackson’s reflection on the history of GEN:

Ecovillages provide models for lifestyles that reduce our ecological footprint while delivering a better quality of life – lifestyles that are possible in all countries of the world. The models are based on solidarity and cooperation and may provide a prototype that can lead to global justice. In ecovillages we are learning how to solve conflicts, how to develop a global consciousness, how to create places where children can grow up in sane and healthy environments, how to use renewable, integrated energy systems, how to provide 100% organic food and how to live lives full of love and compassion. (Jackson and Jackson 2015: 217)

Transitioning to a low-carbon society will also depend on a lot of social innovation, requiring experimentation with new ways of living within our ecological footprint. In a paper for the European Union (EU) on transitional governance in the service of sustainable societies, Belgian political scientist Olivier De Schutter (2014: 17) emphasises the ‘role of social innovations empowering people to invent local solutions’. He writes that these social innovations abound and they are often local and territory-based. ‘They typically are based on hybrid governance structures, bringing together municipalities, the private sector, the “third sector” and non-governmental organisations or citizens’ groups’ (ibid.). He gives the example of transition towns and mentions Cloughjordan Ecovillage as an example, describing it as ‘a supportive social community living in a low-impact way to create a fresh blueprint for modern sustainable living’ (ibid.).

The importance of bottom-up experimentation in creating new approaches towards sustainability has also come to the fore in the 2018 report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). Pathways towards a low-carbon society, as presented in earlier IPCC reports, have been criticised for their dependence on as yet unproven technologies, particularly BioEnergy with Carbon Capture and Storage (BECCS). This dependence has been described by Anderson and Peters as ‘an unjust and high stakes gamble’ due to its reliance on ‘a highly

speculative technology’ (quoted in Hickel 2019: 56). However, the 2018 IPCC report on the 1.5 °C target for global warming, in speaking of the scale of transformations required, makes clear that these cannot be limited to a narrow view of decision-making focused on technical solutions because this ‘tends to crowd out more participatory processes, obscures contested values and reinforces power asymmetries’ (Roy et al. 2018: 459). It states that what it calls ‘past development trajectories’ do not go far enough because they ‘can constrain adaptation futures by reinforcing dominant political-economic structures and processes, and narrowing option spaces; this leads to maladaptive pathways that preclude alternative, locally relevant and sustainable development initiatives and increase vulnerabilities’. The profound transformations needed, it concludes, ‘call for examining the values, ethics, attitudes and behaviours that underpin societies. Infusing values that promote sustainable development, overcome individual economic interests and go beyond economic growth, encourage desirable and transformative visions, and care for the less fortunate is part and parcel of climate-resilient and sustainable development pathways’ (ibid.: 475). Ecovillages provide spaces where such transformative visions beyond business-as-usual scenarios can be promoted and implemented, and rich lessons learnt.

A PROJECT IN PROGRESS

The Cloughjordan Ecovillage project emerged 20 years ago among a group of pioneers around the Dublin Food Co-op who were concerned at how unaware the public was about climate change impacts and the need to build sustainability. They wanted to show what could be done by developing Ireland’s first ecovillage. The project primarily addressed global concerns about climate change and how to address them at a local level. Furthermore, the ecovillage seeks to model economic sustainability and show how this can contribute to social regeneration, especially in rural areas.

The first step was to establish a company in 1999, Sustainable Projects Ireland Ltd. (SPIL),¹ with the overall goal of creating and managing a sustainable village in Ireland, as a model for sustainable living into the twenty-first century and as an education, enterprise, and research resource for all. All ecovillage residents are members, the company is a not-for-profit co-operative, and all decisions are made by members at monthly meetings. Subsidiary goals, as listed in the company’s Constitution, are:

- 1) To minimise pollution to the air, water, and land;
- 2) To demonstrate a new approach to rural regeneration;
- 3) To maximise the potential for earning a living, both inside and outside the village, by facilitating systems whereby people can create local and sustainable work;
- 4) To provide for the cultural, artistic, and non-material needs of the residents of the village and surrounding community.

A 67-acre site behind the main street of Cloughjordan was identified in 2003 and bought in 2004; a plan for a residential area of 132 housing units was drawn up and outline planning permission received from North Tipperary County Council. Finance was raised from members, from an ethical investor and by borrowing. Infrastructure was installed in 2007–08 and building began in 2009. Once Cloughjordan was chosen, a participatory process was initiated with residents of the existing village to imagine how the ecovillage would look and would integrate into the community. Eventually, 55 houses were built by 2013, but 28 site owners have not been able to build and 47 sites remain for sale. A district heating system was installed to heat all the homes in a carbon-neutral way, and a green enterprise centre was built in 2011. Cloughjordan Community Farm was established in 2008 as a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farm to develop a resilient food system. In 2014, the ecovillage commissioned Tipperary Energy Agency to measure its ecological footprint (EF) using a methodology based on that of the Global Footprint Network. The average ecovillager's EF of 2 global hectares (gHa) compares favourably to an EF of between 2.9 and 4.3 for other Irish towns and an EF of 5.2 for the average Irish person, as measured by the Global Footprint Network. This means that living as an average ecovillager requires 1.1 Earths, whereas living as an average Irish person requires 3.14 Earths (www.globalfootprintnetwork.org).

The major recession that hit the Irish economy from 2008 onwards, centred on the housing market, had a severe impact as the sale of sites halted. This eroded the company's financial basis, forcing it to cut costs drastically to survive. Despite this, the ecovillage has strengthened its identity as a unique networked hub of organisations, sometimes referred to as 'an ecosystem of innovation', thereby helping to fulfil the objectives it sets itself. Among these are Cloughjordan Community Farm, one of Ireland's most developed CSAs, and Cloughjordan Community Arts,

which has built an amphitheatre within the ecovillage. The amphitheatre was opened by President Michael D. Higgins in April 2017. Cloughjordan Community Cooperative, founded in 2016, uses the food produced by Cloughjordan Community Farm and the bread baked by RiotRye bakery in the ecovillage to produce wholesome meals in the co-op's Middle Country Café on Cloughjordan's main street. Cloughjordan Co-Housing is another pioneering co-operative, planning a co-housing development within the ecovillage to offer low-cost and low-energy homes with shared services. Among the micro-enterprises that flourish within this ecosystem are Django's Ecohostel; the WeCreate green enterprise centre which incorporates a 'fab lab'; VINE, which provides internet services in the ecovillage; and RiotRye bakery and baking school. These enterprises cooperate to enhance their businesses and model a form of resilient economic and social regeneration. As an aid to biodiversity, 17,000 native trees were planted as a wild woodland area. As a result of a disease that affected the ash trees in 2016, a major replanting took place in 2018, this time including varieties of oak trees. A labyrinth in the woodland area provides a space for meditative walking. The ecovillage is committed to promoting the Irish language and all street names are in Irish only. Various activities through Irish, including a regular PopUp Gaeltacht, are a feature of the community's life.

Cloughjordan has also gained national and international recognition. It won the National Green Award for Ireland's greenest community three years in a row from 2012 to 2014 and the ecovillage won a gold medal award at the 2013 International Awards for Liveable Communities (LivCom), also known as the Green Oscars; this was hosted by Xiamen in the People's Republic of China and supported by the UN Environment Programme (UNEP). The Milesecure consortium of 14 European research centres identified Cloughjordan Ecovillage as 1 of the 23 most successful models of transition to a low-carbon society out of the 1400 examined in Europe. It was recognised as one of Europe's most innovative social projects in a survey conducted by the Young Foundation in London for the European Commission. Cloughjordan has been ranked by readers of *The Irish Times* in a national survey as one of the ten best places to live in Ireland. It features regularly in radio and TV programmes and numerous articles have been published in the national media on the project.

LITERATURE REVIEW ON CLOUGHJORDAN ECOVILLAGE

A significant academic literature has developed on Cloughjordan Ecovillage since building began in 2009. This examines various aspects of the ecovillage project including governance structures and decision-making, the project's food system, sustainable housing, the ecovillagers' ecological footprint, and the collaborative economy of the ecovillage. Papadimitropoulos (2018) examines Cloughjordan Ecovillage as an example of a collaborative economy addressing the devastating consequences for nature and society of a predatory capitalism by introducing new and radical forms of ownership, governance, entrepreneurship, and financialisation to promote sustainability, decentralisation, democratic self-governance, and equitable distribution of value. Following three months of fieldwork, he found that Cloughjordan Ecovillage 'is a notable case of a strong sustainability approach, which, contrary to the dominant neoclassical paradigm, combines individual and collective interest with the aim to tackle climate change on the basis of community living' (58).

In researching how the liveable space of the ecovillage was created, Ranz Mc Donald (2019) examined agency in the project, who and why certain people have influence or agency in the development of space. She found that conflicts in the ecovillage community and an inability to make and enforce decisions within the internal voluntary governance structure (the Viable Systems Model) have caused a partial breakdown of the governance structure and community cohesion. This is manifest in its space and the author concludes that the 'objective liveability' of Cloughjordan Ecovillage is certainly below average, as 'major investments in both time and capital are required to bring this estate's physical space above board'. However, the 'subjective liveability' is high and the environmental impact is far lower than the national average.

Ranz Mc Donald's research updates earlier research on governance systems and practices in the ecovillage. Espinosa and Walker (2013) describe an action research project in which the authors facilitated a process of self-organisation in the ecovillage through the introduction of the Viable System Model (VSM), helping the community identify their primary tasks and develop meta-systematic management tools to deal with complexity. Observing the dynamics of the self-organising process over three years, the authors conclude that roles and tasks were designed more effectively,

strengthening viability and sustainability. Examining the consensus decision-making model of the ecovillage, Cunningham (2014) concluded that ‘despite the impressive nature of the built infrastructure at this site, the community continues to struggle with governance, decision-making, consensus and communication issues’. Salter’s (2017) research on socio-psychological sustainability in Cloughjordan Ecovillage found that personal variations in perceptions of Sense of Community (SoC) among ecovillagers were often attributed to ideological dissonance and the incomplete nature of the governance process. She concluded that community should therefore be regarded as a continual process and that component SoC factors must be continually worked upon, through a range of projects and initiatives, to ensure and enhance socio-psychological sustainability in the ecovillage.

Examining Cloughjordan Ecovillage as a case study in sustainable housing, Winston (2012) concludes that it fulfils many of the criteria for sustainability, noting its access to public transport; on-site or local employment; the use of sustainable housing designs and materials; on-site renewable energy; energy-efficient buildings; access to green spaces for food, energy, and leisure; and access to a wide range of social resources. However, she noted that little explicit sustainability assessment had been conducted for the entire enterprise. To assess the ecovillage’s claim to be modelling the transition to a low-carbon society, a process of measuring the average Ecological Footprint (EF) of ecovillagers was undertaken in 2014–2015. Carragher and Peters (2018) describe the process and outline how a bottom-up compound EF method was developed for the purpose. The authors emphasise the purpose of providing meaningful feedback and reflective learning on human carbon intensity to ecovillage residents.

Early in the building of the ecovillage, Campos (2013) examined the challenge of implementing the project’s vision of becoming a self-reliant, socially supportive, and ecologically sustainable community, identifying some challenges of translating this vision into reality. He found that ‘the project hasn’t been able to get around the predatory price system of the formal economy’ and that this constitutes ‘a serious limitation to the development of the enterprise – it potentially excludes members with skills, knowledge and experience that otherwise would be able to give input and boost CEV’s aspirations’ (Campos 2013: 40). He concludes: ‘The paradox then becomes apparent—CEV’s enterprise conveys a vision of an alternative way of living although it runs on, somewhat, mainstream tracks; that is, it is supported by mainstream institutions such as debt

money or private ownership' (ibid.: 41). A similar point was identified by Nelson (2018) in her case study of the ecovillage. She concluded that Cloughjordan 'replicates many features found in other ecovillages' such as non-hierarchical work planning and monitoring teams, a modified form of consensual decision-making, and discussion through deep listening and engagement (148). However, of the four ecovillages she studied, she concluded that Cloughjordan 'is the most market-oriented ... and the least affordable' (ibid.: 157).

Kirby (2016) gives an overview of how Cloughjordan Ecovillage attempts to model the transition towards a low-carbon society and to disseminate the lessons learnt. He analyses the elements that support modelling the transition, including energy, food (community farm), transport, water, the building of homes, livelihood styles, and community life. The author outlines the ecovillage governance model and how it evolved since inception and describes the ecovillage's educational activities through which the lessons learnt are disseminated.

Milesecure, an EU-funded research project designed to identify the obstacles to, and drivers of, the transition to a low-energy society, undertook an analysis of 1400 projects relating to energy transition at the local level throughout Europe 'so as to identify actual conditions that facilitate (or, conversely, hinder) a transition towards a post-carbon (or low-carbon) society' (Milesecure 2014: 7). Of the 90 anticipatory experiences initially identified, 23 were selected for a more detailed examination on the basis of a number of criteria including the success of the project 'in terms of social recognition and excellent results (indicatively defined "post carbon") from an energy and environmental point of view' (15). Among those selected was Cloughjordan Ecovillage. The project's final manifesto highlighted Cloughjordan Ecovillage 'as an example of how a local community can take control over the implementation of low-carbon footprint living areas ... a great counterbalance for top-down styles of government' (Walkenburg et al. 2015: 12).

The Atlas of Social Innovation (2018), a global map of social innovation projects produced as part of the EU/FP7 SI-Drive project, a consortium of 23 global partners, identifies Cloughjordan Ecovillage as one of the more than 1000 social innovations featured. Categorized as an 'energy innovation', the Atlas identifies the most important factors accounting for its success as being the leadership of key individuals, EU funding for its district heating system, and what it calls 'the sustainability movement' as it energised people to get involved. While identifying a lack of capacity due

to the need to get more young people involved, the Atlas also states that ‘there are distinct competencies that could be shared in order to diffuse at least the principles of the innovation more broadly’, mentioning consensus decision-making and the viable systems model.

Atlas of Utopias (2019) features Cloughjordan Ecovillage in its energy and food sections. Following a description of the project, it offers the following evaluation: ‘The project is conceptually well conceived and implemented in a practical down to earth manner. The presentation is modest and self-critical. It is being implemented with stamina and dedication by the collective members. It is a useful well-documented real-life experiment meriting further study’.

Sempere (2018) examines Cloughjordan Ecovillage as a transition town, looking in particular at its community cohesion and territorial relocalisation. He concludes that practical projects like Cloughjordan ‘help to imagine a future of scarcity and prepare better for it. ... Its existence is pedagogical: it stands as a sort of “instructions manual” available for problematic situations of scarcity’ (120).²

Casey et al. (2016) examine sustainable consumption practices in Cloughjordan Ecovillage as a contribution to the shift in sustainable consumption research from a focus on individual behaviours to wider social networks and material infrastructures. They conclude that ecovillage members employ tactics that encourage reflexivity in everyday practices so as to confront routine consumption and create alternative infrastructures that support sustainability and foster critical engagement. Moore et al. (2014) examine a very different form of reflexive practice in Cloughjordan Ecovillage, tracing the development of Cloughjordan Community Farm. They describe how this member-owned and -operated CSA critically self-assessed and restructured in the face of challenges, thereby developing an adaptive awareness which they describe as a ‘reflexive resilience’.

WHAT MAKES CLOUGHJORDAN AN ECOVILLAGE?

Three key features of the Cloughjordan project support its status as an ecovillage: its ecological building standards, its carbon-neutral District Heating System (DHS), and its food system centred on Cloughjordan Community Farm (CCF).

- 1) Ecological building standards: While the ecovillage does not exercise any control over building designs (which require planning permission from Tipperary County Council), it has set out a range

of standards and principles to which all buildings must adhere. These are contained in the Ecological Charter which sets targets for total heat input and exact specifications for insulation as well as covering issues of air-tight construction, ventilation, and maximising natural light and heat through building south-facing. It recommends the use of non-toxic materials, regionally sourced and with low embodied energy. Guided by the Charter, CEV has pioneered the use of different building types such as passive timber-frame, Durisol blocks of chipped waste wood bonded with ecocement, cellulose, hemp-lime, and cob. In 2017, 10 of the 55 houses in the ecovillage installed photovoltaic panels to generate energy.

- 2) District Heating System: All homes in the ecovillage depend on the district system for the supply of hot water and heating. The heating plant contains two 500-kilowatt wood-chip boilers backed up by 500 m² of solar (thermal) panels. This system is the first of its kind in a private housing development in Ireland and is estimated to save some 113.5 tonnes of carbon emissions annually over what would be emitted by an equivalent size development using conventional heating methods. The plant supplies hot water daily to all homes via a well-insulated network of piping and the water is stored in each house in an insulated storage tank supplying hot water and heating.
- 3) Food system: The CEV food system is centred on Cloughjordan Community Farm, an area of around 10 acres of which about half are under cultivation at any one time, the remainder being under green manures or in pasture. It is run on organic principles and produces some 85 varieties of vegetables, salads, herbs, and fruits to feed a membership of around 90 people, to supply the Middle Country Café co-operative, and to feed visiting groups at events and conferences. It includes a dedicated composting area, a composting toilet, and a compost-heated shower. In addition, a timber building has been erected by farm members and volunteers for seed saving and the social use of the farm workers. The farm is run by two full-time farmers but, as its ecologically sensitive methods are quite labour-intensive and there is minimal use of mechanical equipment, its smooth functioning also relies upon the manual labour of eight volunteers from the European Solidarity Corps (ESC), who each come for a year. CCF now exceeds the United Nations terms for the definition of agro-restorative farming. It is committed to seed saving, and currently about 60% of crops are grown from its own seed.

In these ways, CEV is pioneering a range of practices that build resilience and sustainability. The benefits were illustrated during the severe snowstorm that hit Ireland in early March 2018 known as the ‘Beast from the East’, when communities throughout the country were threatened by food shortages, interruption of heating systems, and isolation. CEV residents were able to depend on reliable heating, food deliveries from CCF and RiotRye bakery, and a supportive community.

FACING THE CHALLENGES OF BUILDING COMMUNITY

Building CEV has required pioneering new technologies and ecological building techniques, but it has been learnt that building a resilient community is the greatest challenge. This approximates to the growth phases of any individual’s life as early idealism meets the severe challenges of implementation and of moving through difficult times. In the case of the ecovillage, the acute recession of 2008, centred on the building sector, had a major impact on the project, resulting in some being unable to move forward with their building plans and a halt to site sales. As a result, SPI had to let go all its staff and the project became entirely dependent on voluntary labour. All members pledge at least 100 hours voluntary labour a year so that the project can draw on an extensive range of skills and experience. These skills and experiences include running SMEs; primary-, secondary-, and third-level education as well as the non-formal sector; organic farming and seed saving; land management and forestry; low-energy building and renewable energy systems; urban drainage systems; waste disposal systems; cooking and nutrition; arts and crafts; health-care and well-being; psychotherapy and spirituality; communications and photography; and social media. Members step up to various roles, on various boards, on the office team, in looking after the land, and in varied educational activities.

From the beginning, CEV adopted a consensus form of decision-making. The monthly members’ meeting is the central forum for accountability and for making decisions. This has helped to make members feel they are driving the project. However, its growing complexity required a transformation of governance structures from traditional top-down structures (by 2007, there were 21 working groups) to a flatter and more bottom-up model. Consultants Jon Walker and Angela Espinosa helped design these structures in 2007 using a Viable Systems Model (VSM), originally developed by Stafford Beers in England. Based on Beers’

observations of natural eco-systems' self-organising, he designed a layered governance system which gives priority to an organisation's primary activities and identifies the tasks needed to support these activities and help them flourish.

In the case of CEV, three primary activities, or PAs, were identified—education, land use and the development of the built environment. These PAs are organised with multiple internal groups to support the range of tasks and responsibilities held by the PA. Supporting these are a Process group which organises meetings and decision-making processes, the SPI Board which has legal and financial oversight of the project, and numerous other groups looking after such tasks as maintenance and fundraising. The co-ordination function plays a key role as it ensures transparency and accountability to members through a bi-monthly Co-ordination Report to which all groups contribute and which is sent to all members before the members' meeting. Co-ordinators of each group attend the meeting to answer questions and hear the concerns of members. This system has proven very successful in fostering bottom-up creativity throughout the project, but it is found by some to be complex and slow-moving in making decisions. The experience of managing this system has helped to build skills of conflict resolution, facilitation, mediation, and community building, and courses are occasionally provided to train members in these skills. In 2020, the community began to introduce decision-making practices drawn from Sociocracy.

Despite this, there remain some deep divisions in the community. In her research, Ranz Mc Donald (2019) identifies a number of polarising issues. A central one derives from the consequences of establishing a Service Company (SC) in 2007, as required by Tipperary County Council as a condition for granting planning permission. There is disagreement over whether the Multi-Unit Development Act of 2011 applies to the ecovillage and whether ownership of land should be transferred from SPI to the SC so that the latter has legal responsibility for the management of the services on that land, and disagreement over the extent of the land to be transferred. An additional complicating factor is disagreement over who should be members of the project, whether it should be limited to those who have built homes or who rent in the ecovillage, or should also incorporate a wider group of activists and supporters. One resident is quoted as saying that 'there are some very entrenched positions and it is very much tied up with attitudes to land ownership and property ownership' (Ranz Mc Donald 2019: 34). Ranz Mc Donald writes: 'Because of

conflicts, social cohesion is nuanced and as a result the community which exists in CEV is more aptly described as a “community of communities” (ibid.: 45).

EDUCATING FOR SUSTAINABILITY: SHARING THE LESSONS

Village Education, Research and Training (VERT) is the educational arm of CEV. Its remit is to establish the ecovillage as a leading national and international centre for education on sustainability, resilience, community living, and rural regeneration and for rethinking and remodelling the society of the future. It offers a place-based learning experience of building a sustainable community which is unique to Ireland. This it does mainly through guided tours every Saturday and Sunday and visits by schools, community groups, and specialist professional groups from Ireland and abroad. Longer visits, particularly by groups of third-level students as part of their academic study, involve a wider range of inputs and activities, tailor-made for the needs and interests of each group. VERT is also involved with other Cloughjordan-based learning providers in organising a number of festivals and workshops each year around particular issues such as co-housing, community energy, organic farming, and permaculture. VERT currently has partnership agreements with Dublin City University and with Mount Temple Comprehensive School, Dublin. The appointment of a part-time education officer in 2018 has helped to co-ordinate VERT’s educational offering and to respond more professionally to increasing demand.

Other educational providers are also active in CEV. Cultivate, a national environmental non-governmental organisation (NGO) providing education in sustainability, is headquartered in CEV and collaborates actively with VERT. RiotRye runs courses in natural baking which incorporate information about the ecovillage. Individual residents are also active in providing education on issues related to sustainability.

CONCLUSION: LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

As SPI celebrated the 20th anniversary of its foundation in 1999 and the 10th anniversary of the first houses being built in 2009, it was planning a new development phase. This involves building out the ecovillage, bringing in new members and broadening the diversity of the community through including social housing and affordable rental options, and developing it as a leading campus for education in all aspects of sustainability.

As Ireland's first ecovillage, it has established itself as a living model of both environmental and economic sustainability, of rural regeneration, and of resilient community. It offers a unique example of place-based learning about how to address the challenges of climate change and biodiversity loss in ways that could be replicated in both urban and rural areas. It pioneered high ecological standards in its building regulations which national regulations were later to catch up with. Its carbon-neutral district heating system offers another model that could be replicated in estates and apartment blocks throughout the country. Its member-based community farm supports a food system which demonstrates an alternative model of agriculture so badly needed in Ireland. This shows how communities could meet more of their own food needs, regenerate the soil, create livelihoods, and eat in a far more healthy way. In these ways, the ecovillage has been a pioneering project in a country that for long neglected to take seriously the challenges of climate change and biodiversity loss. As national policy begins finally to grapple with the immense challenges of social, economic, and cultural transformation required to achieve low-carbon development, the challenge for projects like Cloughjordan Ecovillage is to remain ahead of the curve, learning and spreading the lessons of how vibrant, resilient, and welcoming communities will be the seedbeds of a low-carbon Ireland.

NOTES

1. Known since 2015 as Sustainable Projects Ireland CLG (SPI).
2. Translation from the Spanish by Peadar Kirby.

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