

Ecovillage Network of the Americas

## How To Really Support Ecovillages (Not Just Hugs and Theories)

by *Enrique Hidalgo* 1617 words - 3 pages

Our three-year-old El Poncho Eco Center and Quilla Tunari Ecovillage project is located in Marquina, an indigenous village at the foot of the Cochabamba Valley in central Bolivia. No loans of any kind are funding this special economic, socio-cultural, spiritual, and ecological venture.

To jump into the abyss and start a lifelong ecovillage project like this without any financial security can be a dangerous affair, and I personally wouldn't advise it for anyone with family responsibilities. You could endanger your health, your job opportunities, your future, and your personal relationships. On the other hand, all this could be endangered even working and living in mainstream culture, especially for those who don't know how to survive if the system failed. Any urban dweller with a mortgage and other debts may be living in a fragile and unsustainable manner anyway.

But if you're brave enough to start a community or ecovillage because you want to change the world, be aware that all the wheels have to turn in order for the coach to run. Building community is a serious and expensive affair.

My partner Oyunn and I have two children. To feed our family of four we need better soil than we have here, so we cannot produce much food as yet. The children need schooling as well, and many other financial needs must be met.

So our financial strategy for El Poncho Eco Center offers four programs and draws on our work experience—I've been a permaculture teacher for some years and Oyunn is a teacher of Spanish. In our Volunteer Program, volunteers pay for their food and lodging here. They are not coming only to help, but to learn and interact with the community in a unique experience. Our Student Program offers courses in permaculture, ecovillage design, and the Spanish language, with lots of practical work. Our Responsible Tourism program invites

students, volunteers, and tourists to make traveling a learning experience as well. We also started working with some people in Marquina to produce handicrafts we could export to countries where they are sold at a good price.

All of these programs have made it possible for our project to become a relative success. So far, we have offered five permaculture courses in the three years we have been building the center and many Spanish courses to the 180 volunteers who have visited the center for longer or shorter stays. We have created seven workplaces for seven Marquinan villagers with families, and they have been getting training in ecological building while earning their livelihoods. It has been a wonderful experience so far and we expect to create a lot more jobs in the future. Our next venture is to start a bio-construction firm in order to guarantee jobs to villagers who have dedicated their lives to the service of ecological building techniques.

The center is the place where we all meet to work, but it is not the ecovillage itself. The working families form the ecovillage. We all have our own homes and land, but a special “community glue” binds us together—the feeling that we are all creating beautiful architecture and a better world for our families and coming generations. In fact, one can already see the changes in the landscape—all the alternative energy, the newly planted trees, and the food already growing.

The Volunteer Program has been the most successful program of all to start with. Now, more and more volunteers want to come because the center is more built up than it was before. These are usually kind people from developed countries who want to give back a little of what their countries take from countries like Bolivia. Their room and board payments help us to ensure the jobs of the villagers. Usually they stay longer than agreed because they enjoy the lovely energy of the landscape. However, we’ve run into a problem with some of the volunteers who stay extra days, then leave in the middle of the night without saying good-bye or paying for the extra days of their stay. I believe this pattern doesn’t only affect our program, but others in the ecological movement of developing countries.

I want to talk about these “midnight leavers,” because their leave-without-paying behavior may be one of the reasons why the planet is in such a devastated state.

While not intrinsically destructive, these are people who constantly deny the wealth in their own lives. They usually believe that being a “conscious”

person means traveling from one alternative project to another in developing nations, assuming everything should be free and the world is all messed up because everyone is just seeking money and money is something they personally don't want to deal with. They believe (as do I) that the world is increasingly owned by corporations, and corporations are destructive because their only aim is to make money to achieve power to make war and own the resources of all countries—even wanting to patent life so they can own it too. I agree that if getting more money is a goal (as it is for many) because money means power, then it is a poor life goal. This has shown to be very destructive for the planet and all life on it.

At the same time, money represents energy which helps these people travel and visit ecological learning projects such as ecovillages. Ecovillages tend to become more economically sustainable over time and depend less upon outside resources and the money economy, but still we need funds to buy the land and develop sustainable infrastructure. We are in this process at El Poncho Eco Center. It saddens me to meet people with wonderful dreams and ideas, who are willing to not support corporations, who want to change the world, but who aren't willing to contribute financially to the building of a new world, and so at midnight sneak out of a small project like ours without paying our (for them) relatively inexpensive fees. This is irresponsible and it hurts the dream for a better world. How can we make a difference when we don't realize that building an alternative strategy might provide an alternative to the corporate economy and thus a real opportunity for a better world? It takes a great deal of economic resources, as well as cultural, social, environmental and spiritual resources to build an ecovillage.

In *Creating a Life Together: Practical Tools to Grow Ecovillages and Intentional Communities*, Diana Christian observes that only about 10 percent of community projects that were started in North America during the 1990s succeeded. It seems true in Latin America as well. This figure indicates that community building is really a failure, because 10 out of 100 new community start-ups may not be enough to counter the well-paid corporate professionals working day and night to ensure that their companies grow even bigger and more powerful.

It's about time people in the alternative/ecological movement realize that dreams and changes can only be achieved by creating solidarity among us. I want people in this movement to realize that simply giving hugs and kisses and saying

“I love you” without taking a real part in the process, only hurts the movement that feeds them ideologically.

Having our heads in high vision doesn't mean we can't have our feet planted in practical realities. If we want our dreams to come true, we have to fund them, and we have to start taking responsibility for the love we profess for Mother Earth; otherwise our own hypocrisy will make us silent partners of the corporations and we will become anything but community.

In my humble experience, community is built upon trust, upon letting go of ego and attempting to work for goals further in the future than simply in one's own lifetime. As I visited the sacred pre-Inca temple of Tiwanaku in Bolivia a few weeks ago, I saw the work of thousands of people with such high goals in mind through generations of stone carving, building temples that would live beyond time. They must have loved their ideals so deeply that they were willing to carve for decades before they saw any results; maybe they didn't see any results in their lifetimes but kept on carving because they knew that their descendants would enjoy the results. However, they were a part of the wonder of this building process just as we are a part of the process of creating the change we hope will benefit future generations.

Building communities and ecovillages today is like carving stone for sacred temples; we aren't seeing more than 10 percent of the results yet, but we know deep inside there must be a better way that does not harm the environment like we do today. I believe that more and more people are going to become real builders of a new future and take real part in the game—not as leeches or hangers-on, but as people capable of creating strategies that will create all the funds needed to go everywhere, learn a lot, and help new sustainable settlements be built. Money need not be an end in itself, or a means to achieve power over others; it can be a means for really achieving our community goals. The more wealth the alternative movement acquires, the better our builders will be paid, and the better chance ecovillages will succeed and not disintegrate from financial stress, and the faster we'll see the change in the world.

*Enrique Hidalgo, cofounder of El Poncho Eco Center and Quilla Tunari Ecovillage in Marquina, Bolivia, is the ENA representative for the Northern South America region. He can be reached through the Latin American Permaculture Institute (ILP): [ecovillas@hotmail.com](mailto:ecovillas@hotmail.com).*

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