

**How Sociocracy is applied in the Dutch Ecovillage: Insights from Dutch ecovillage inhabitants
and Sociocracy experts**

Master Thesis Research Paper

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20 July 2024

**UNIVERSITY
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1. Introduction

An ecovillage can be defined as "a gathering of individuals into a cohesive unit large enough to be self-contained - that's why it's called a village - and dedicated to living by ecologically sound precepts". Ecovillages combine several 'strands' of sustainability into an integrated whole, for a sustainable, everyday life. (Litfin, 2014). An ecovillage is a (small) community that is designed to be environmentally sustainable with a focus on community. People in ecovillages live together in a way that minimizes their impact on the environment through several approaches like using renewable energy, growing their own food, and sharing resources. They focus on cooperation, eco-friendly practices, and creating a supportive and inclusive community. (Litfin, 2014).

Ecovillages have just a fraction of the number of inhabitants that a normal 'village' would have (mostly between 50 to 250, with plenty smaller but only few bigger). As such, even with the 508 or so ecovillages in existence, the ecovillage movement does not have a huge global impact on greenhouse gas emissions or the ecological footprint- although individually they have been proven to be significantly more ecologically sustainable than 'normal' communities. (Daly, 2017; Litfin, 2014). Rather than quantitative progress, ecovillages mostly add qualitatively to the sustainability transitions as "living laboratories" (Kunze, 2009). Ecovillages are constantly experimenting with social innovation, political systems, and sustainable technologies (Litfin, 2014). Ecovillages can teach us how to "translate a vision into action". (Kunze, 2012; Marselis, 2017).

Of particular interest to the researcher is ecovillage governance and decision-making. It is frequently mentioned in respective literature that ecovillages tend to have unique governance and decision-making methods; particularly fitting within the inclusive decision-making or participatory decision-making categories (Kunze, 2012). Learning about the participatory decision-making models applied in these niche ecovillage communities can offer lessons about the potential for transformative societal change in the sustainability transitions (Marselis, 2017).

Particularly popular among the ecovillage decision-making models is Sociocracy. The method has been adapted by many ecovillages and intentional communities across the world, and is part of the "curriculum" of the teachings of the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN Europe, 2020; Litfin 2014; Buck & Villines, 2017). Sociocracy is a governance and decision-making methodology that emphasizes inclusive, consent-based decision-making and aims to distribute power equitably within an organization or community (Sociocratisch Centrum Nederland, 2020).

Sociocracy (in its modern form) was created in the Netherlands by engineer and inventor Gerard Endenburg. Today, the majority of Dutch ecovillages state that they use Sociocracy, or a method directly derived from it. (Global Ecovillage Network Nederland, n.d.). A great opportunity for research presents itself in the fact that there is virtually no academic research on Dutch ecovillages (with exception of the excellent master thesis by Ilonka Marselis, 2017). And academic research on Sociocracy is also limited, especially within the context of ecovillages. Academic papers describing *how* sociocracy is being applied in (specific cases of) ecovillages, do not exist at all. This then offers the opportunity to fill a research gap in this very specific area. The proposed research question is as follows:

"How do Dutch Ecovillages apply Sociocracy & which challenges do they face in applying the method?"

The particular focus on Dutch ecovillages can be justified because Sociocracy was invented in the Netherlands, with its classic approach. Although multiple variations of the original Sociocratic Circle Method, or SKM in Dutch, have branched out from this original, it is in the Dutch language, in the Netherlands, (in the Sociocratic Centre Netherlands) that the method was first conceived, experimented with, and later taught. Additionally, the researcher is of Dutch origin, and as such is able to coherently understand small nuances and details in his native language in the data collection process.

The methodology used to answer this research question is as follows. The research is qualitative in nature. A holistic multiple case study design of 3 Dutch ecovillages, that all self-report as using Sociocracy, is applied. The data collection will stem from the following:

- a. Semi-structured interviews with 2-3 inhabitants per ecovillage. These individual interviews are used to answer the research question on the level of the individual ecovillages. There are thus 3 separate units of analysis; ecovillage 1, 2 and 3, represented in individual case studies.
- b. One semi-structured interview with a trainer from the Sociocratisch Centrum Nederland.
- c. Two validation interviews with Sociocracy trainers well-experienced with ecovillages.

The report will be structured as follows.

- In the next chapter, a deepening context will be provided as to
 1. What ecovillages are, how they are defined, and what their history is in relation to the Global Ecovillage Network.
 2. What the history of Sociocracy is and how the modern Sociocratic Circle Method was invented, what its 4 foundational principles are, and a clarification for the reader of what it might look like to apply Sociocracy in an ecovillage setting.
- Then some insights will be provided on the advantages and disadvantages of corporate decision-making and consensus decision-making, explaining how Sociocracy can be seen as a mix between both. A few other decision-making methods will be named, in both commercial or political context. This will aid the interpretation of the case study results, particularly with respect to the 'challenges'
- Then the Theoretical Framework will be introduced
- The methodology section will carefully explain the choice of the selection of the case studies, the research design, the data analysis, the selection of experts and the approach to the validation interviews
- The result section will first present context to the field of Dutch ecovillages and Sociocracy by presenting the findings from the expert interview with a trainer from the Sociocratisch Centrum Nederland, then provide a structured break-down of the important case study findings, following the structure of the 4 foundational principles of Sociocracy, going from the individual case level, to the cross-case level. In the cross-case level, 4 Main Findings will be presented, together with the interpretations of the validation experts of these findings.
- Finally, the discussion and interpretation of the results together with the conclusion are given.

2. Context: Ecovillages

The history of the "Ecovillage"

The so-called "ecovillage" was born in the year 1990. That is to say, the newly found word and definition of the ecovillage. In essence, the ecovillage flows from the globally, yet hyper-locally existing Intentional Community movement that has been around, at least in academic literature, since the 1950's and 60's. (Wagner, 2012).

The definition of Ecovillage, the movement itself, and the current overarching organization, all stem started in the beginning of the 1990's. Ross and Hildur Jackson, a Danish couple that had already been running the Gaia Trust (a charity with ecological emphasis) sensed the pressing need for real-life examples of sustainable living in harmony with nature, especially in a world rapidly advancing in technology. They decided to call these examples "eco-villages" (Garden, 2006; Pais, 2019). To pinpoint the best examples of such eco-villages, they enlisted Robert and Diane Gilman, editors of In Context magazine from Seattle, to conduct a large scale survey on these "human-scale, full-featured settlements in which human activities are harmlessly integrated into the natural world in a way that supports healthy human development and can be successfully continued into the indefinite future" (Gilman & Gilman, 1991; Jackson, 2000; Liftin, 2014). The results, published in 1991, revealed that various communities existed worldwide, yet none fully embodying the "full-scale ideal eco-village" (Gilman & Gilman, 1991). Then, in 1995 the Jacksons and Gilmans hosted the first international ecovillage conference, which was held at Findhorn - now one of the most exemplary ecovillages in the world - in the United Kingdom. At this 1995 conference, the first of its kind, with over 400 visitors from many different communities that had previously only been in contact through exchanging letters with each other, the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) was formed. One could say that this is truly the start of the (global / cooperative) ecovillage phenomenon. (Global Ecovillage Network, 2024). Since 1995, the Global Ecovillage Network's shared purpose has been to "link and support ecovillages, educate the world about them, and grow the regenerative movement – to inspire, scale and facilitate communities and people from all walks of life to become active participants in the transition to a resilient and regenerative human presence on Earth." (Global Ecovillage Network, 2024). As of 2024, 508 ecovillages are part of the network, in every continent.

Definition of the "Ecovillage"

According to the Global Ecovillage Network, an ecovillage is "an intentional, traditional or urban community that is consciously designed through locally owned, participatory processes in all four dimensions of sustainability (social, culture, ecology and economy) to regenerate their social and natural environments." (Global Ecovillage Network, 2024)

3. Context: Sociocracy

In the following section, a detailed history follows of how the term "sociocracy" was first used, up until how Gerard Endenburg first turned it into the governance and decision-making method that is used today; The Sociocratic Circle-Organization Method, or SKM. This history section is meant to inform the reader of sociocracy's history, but is not essential to understanding the research at hand.

3.1 The history of Sociocracy

The literal meaning of the word "Sociocracy" can be divided into "socio" and "-cracy". "Socio" means "companion" or friend - people who have a social relationship with each other - , and "-cracy" means "rule" or "power" in Ancient Greek. Together, this then means "rule of the companions", or "rule among friends". (Bockelbrink et al., 2017; Buck & Villines, 2019). The history of the word can be traced back to the French philosopher and father of the school of sociology, Auguste Comte. In 1851 he coined the term to describe a (hypothetical, idealized) government based on the science of sociology; a state that develops policies that benefit the whole population, based on the scientific approach and rationality. (Buck & Villines, 2019). Comte advocated for the pursuit of "positive knowledge"; events that can be observed and verified (Buck & Villines, 2019).

Lester Frank Ward (1841-1913), an American pioneer of sociology, followed in the footsteps of Auguste Comte in terms of thinking and philosophizing about the term "sociocracy". Where Comte saw the ultimate power of the state still being in the hands of a centralized group of social scientists, Ward suggested this group give guidance, but not be in control. Where Comte believed one's environment and social structure of society is the determining factor of the individuals' success, Ward argued that it is the individuals' success - with support of the environment - that determines the success of society and human progress overall. (Bockelbrink et al., 2017; Buck & Villines, 2019). It must be said, however, that Ward did not concretely illustrate what a society based on his conception of sociocracy would look like (Tzouvelekas & Theodorakis, 2020).

While sociocracy and its meaning and ideals kept being discussed throughout the end of the 1800's and early 1900's, the first true realization of a sociocracy did not come into existence until 1926, in the Netherlands. Kees Boeke and his wife Betty Cadbury Boeke set up a primary school with a sociocratic system: "Werkplaats Kindergemeenschap". Boeke created an essential link in the history of sociocracy here: he applied principles from the decision-making of the Quaker movement to the concept of sociocracy. Quaker movements, based on a historically Protestant Christian religion, operate with a meeting and decision-making style that "historically has been the model for consensus decision-making", inspiring "a sense of unity and peace" (Buck & Villines, 2019, p. 32-33). This Quaker system is built on the values of collective intelligence and inclusiveness. However, the full (100%) consensus decision-method of the Quakers, as opposed to other groups and communities that aim to use the method, requires "the common faith and other factors that the latter simply do not have" (Buck & Villines, 2019, p. 33). Thus, in the "Werkplaats Kindergemeenschap", Kees Boeke adapted principles from the Quaker method and applied them in a secular context. In this school, which slowly expanded after 1926, the students were treated as equal members of the organization, just like teachers and staff. Using the guiding principles of "self-direction and working with head, heart and hands", the students in this school were given the "job" to help educate themselves by helping define the curriculum and creating a "harmonious environment", as well as help maintain the school, cooking meals, gardening, and so forth (Buck & Villines, 2019, p. 43). Importantly, Boeke laid the foundation for the principles of the sociocratic method as it is known today here:

"There are three fundamental rules underlying the system. The first is that the interests of all members must be considered, the individual bowing to the interests of the whole. Secondly, solutions must be sought which everyone can accept: otherwise, no action can be taken. Thirdly, all members must be ready to act according to these decisions when unanimously made." (Boeke, 1945).

This excerpt comes from the 1945 (re-edited) text of Kees Boeke: "Sociocracy: Democracy as It Might Be". As the title embodies, Boeke saw the potential of Sociocracy as much more than a decision-making and governance tool for individual units like businesses or in his own example, schools. In this text he sketches an outline for how a sociocratic system might naturally evolve "from the bottom upwards" to eventually create a form of democracy (of state) that is closer to the true democratic values than the "current" party system. About the latter, he writes: "The fact is that we have taken the present system for granted for so long that many people do not realize that the party system and majority rule are not an essential part of democracy. If we really wish to see the whole population united, like a big family, in which the members care for each other's welfare as much as for their own, we must set aside the quantitative principle of the right of the greatest number and find another way of organizing ourselves." (Boeke, 1945). As an alternative vision, which he refers to with the word "sociocracy", he continues with "This solution must be really democratic in the sense that it must enable each one of us to share in organizing the community. But this kind of democracy will not depend on power, not even the power of the majority. It will have to be a real community-democracy, an organization of the community by the community itself." (Boeke, 1945). Hence, this is the bigger vision of Sociocracy according to Boeke. An important note about Boeke's conception of sociocracy is that it did not develop in a vacuum, separate from the world. It is a result of the context within the "oppositional politics" that had produced two world wars in the span of 30 years (Buck & Villines, 2019, p. 45).

The foundation for Sociocracy as we know it today, lies with an ex-student of Boeke's Werkplaats Kindergemeenschap. This ex-student, Gerard Endenburg, having been a direct participant in the sociocratic school where he, as a kid, was directly part of running the school and deciding on the curriculum, stayed in contact with Kees Boeke after he left (Bockelbrink et. al, 2017). The original connection to the school was formed because of Gerard's parents, who were friends of the Boeke's and shared numerous political (activist) ideals with the latter. Anna and Gerardus Endenburg owned an electrical company called Endenburg Elektrotechniek in which they had already tried to implement and experiment with socialist ideas. On the journey to join the family company, Gerard Endenburg proceeded to study at an engineering college after WWII. Here, he was confronted with the "autocratic instructors" and students who according to him were "silent, sullen, and bullying" (Buck & Villines, 2019, p.45). Thus, a total switch from what he had been taught at Boeke's school. It is this sharp distinction that perhaps motivated Gerard to say yes to two huge challenges. The first challenge came from his parents; they bought a failing electronics company and challenged Gerard to change his career from working at Phillips, to getting this company back on a financially healthy path as the main manager. Having achieved this within a year, the company was merged with his parents' main company Endenburg Elektrotechniek. Gerard took over the reins from his parents and became the general manager in 1968. (Tzouvelekas & Theodorakis, 2020). The next challenge came from Kees Boeke. He asked Endenburg to make the organization sociocratic. Endenburg took on the challenge, but reflected in his initial struggle was the shared mindset of his parents, who believed that it should be possible to manifest socialistic principles and ideals while still building successful economies and organizations.

Where Boeke laid the foundations for the modern sociocracy in the collaborative Werkplaats Kindergemeenschap, Endenburg now was faced with the challenge of applying it to a large, profit-oriented organization in a "competitive fast-paced manufacturing business" (Buck &

Villines, 2019, p.46). While diving into management theory to learn about how he could make this a reality, Endenburg was confronted with the opposing nature of the crystal clear language and definitions in engineering and the hard sciences in general, versus the unspecified definitions in social (business) sciences such as "power", "stress" and the unclear relationship between cause and effect. Much preferring the language of the physical sciences, Endenburg spent two years to mix the languages of physical sciences and social sciences into a system he could work with and understand. Or more precisely, he translated the principles of the former into the latter. (Buck & Villines, 2019, p.46). In the words of Endenburg, his version of sociocracy is derived from the study of cybernetics, including systems theory, fractal concepts and the phenomenon of self-organization (Buck & Endenburg, 2012). In practice, he reduced the number of employees to 100 as a basis for experimenting, and after a few years he released his finished product in the company as well as in literature. Endenburg called his system the "Sociocratic Circle-Organization Method" ("Sociocratische Kring-Organisatie Methode"), or SKM for short. (Endenburg, 1981)

3.2 Sociocracy today

It is important to distinguish between Sociocracy as the ideal of a state governed by science and reason from Comte's perspective, or Sociocracy as such a democratic state governed by the people from Ward's perspective, to the current (inclusive) decision-making and governance method practiced in organizations and communities today. One could say that Boeke created the first 'pilot project' (version 1.0) of an organization functioning by Sociocratic principles, by applying the meeting style and consensus decisions of the (religious) Quakers to a secular context, in a school. But Endenburg was the first to create a system of structures, principles and processes based on sociocratic values that could be applied to any existing organization. He first applied it to his electrical company of 100 people. Endenburg used his company as a "practical laboratory for innovative ideas of leadership and decision-power" (Sociocratisch Centrum Nederland, 2017). After testing it and adjusting it until it was a method that is replicable by other organizations, he released it as the SKM method (short for Sociocratic Circle-Organization method), in 1978. This is sometimes referred to as version 2.0 of Sociocracy. (Endenburg, 1981). This is also the year that Endenburg founded the "Sociocratisch Centrum" (Sociocratic Centre) in Utrecht (now in Rotterdam).

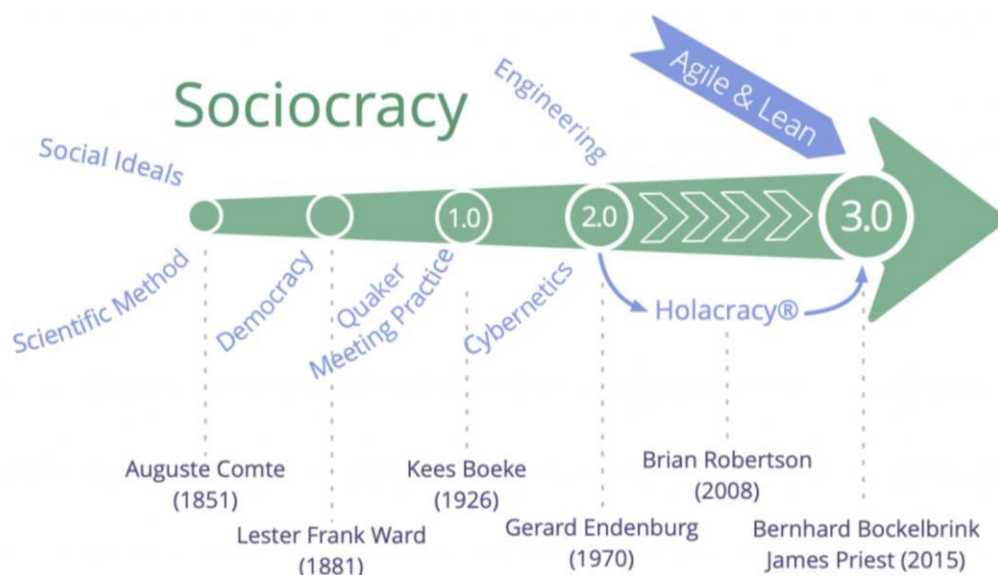


Figure 1. Sociocracy versions over time (Bockelbrink et. al, 2017).

3.3 Sociocratisch Centrum and the SKM method

Since 1978 the purpose of the Sociocratic Centre Netherlands has been "guiding organizations in implementing the Sociocratic Circle-Organization Method (SKM) and training leaders, trainers, and consultants to work with this method" (in the Dutch language). (Sociocratisch Centrum Nederland, 2017). It is the first organization to offer training and certifications of the SKM method. However, Sociocratisch Centrum Nederland only expanded internationally in different languages since 2014, under a franchising model, under the Sociocracy Group name. This means that for a long time, at least through the 'official' source of Endenburg and his Sociocratisch Centrum, you could only learn about Sociocracy in the Dutch language, following the SKM method. Thus, particularly in The Netherlands, the adoption of the SKM method is especially widespread, and the use of the word "Sociocracy" tends to go hand in hand with implying traditional "SKM" (Endenburg, 1981). However, in the meantime other interested parties have come up with their own interpretations and versions of Sociocracy. Not just because they wanted to teach Sociocracy in other languages, but also for a number of reasons that have to do with the method itself. One such "spin-off" of the SKM method is Holacracy, for example, developed by Brian Robertson in 2008. The next big variation was developed by Bernhard Bockelbrink and James Priest in 2015, which they literally referred to as Sociocracy (version) 3.0 (Bockelbrink et. al, 2017).

In this thesis research, the selection of the 3 Dutch Ecovillages will not be conditional on any specific type of Sociocracy used. As long as the ecovillage self-identifies (publicly) as "applying Sociocracy", this is accepted. But it is noteworthy, considering the history of the Sociocratisch Centrum and the cultural implications, that the majority of Sociocracy practiced in the Netherlands is the SKM version (2.0).

3.4 Sociocracy in commercial organizations versus Ecovillages

Gerard Endenburg developed SKM in a for-profit organization of 100 people in a fast-paced, competitive industry. This was the 'testing ground'. SKM was designed so that the Sociocratic structure could be applied directly to an existing organization with a (traditional) line structure. ***"The SKM allows you to add a cyclical decision-making structure for policy-making to an (existing) line structure for implementing that policy. The policy-making structure is based on equality in decision-making and a shared responsibility of all organizational participants for determining and achieving organizational goals."*** (Sociocratisch Centrum Nederland, 2020).

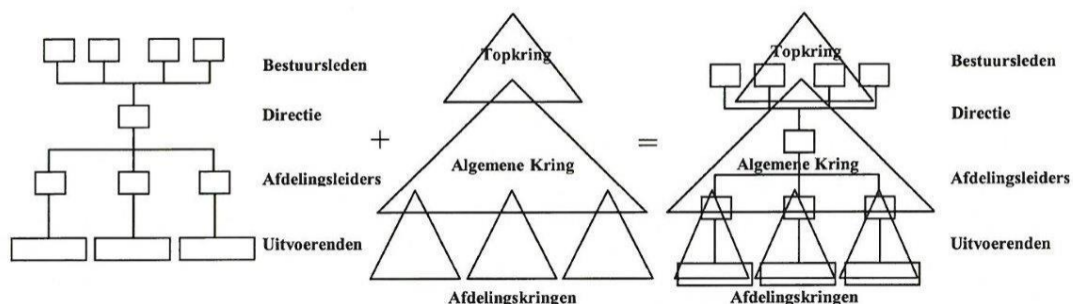


Figure 2. Sociocracy on top of a line structure (Sociocratisch Centrum Nederland, 2020)

To illustrate how the Sociocratisch Centrum Nederland explains what SKM is, the following section is taken directly from their website:

"The sociocratic decision-making structure consists of circles that overlap with functional units in the line structure. Teams form a circle and set policy for their team. Multiple teams forming a department have a departmental circle that determines departmental policy. And the same goes for the cross-departmental level, which has a corporate or general circle for policy setting.

Participants in the circle are the supervisor of the relevant functional unit, the executive staff at that level, and delegates from the adjacent lower organizational level. Thus, in the departmental circle you will find the department manager and team leaders and elected representatives from the underlying teams.

Each circle has its own decision domain for which it determines policy. Decisions on the implementation of policy it delegates to one or more of its members. The term circle comes from 'stuurkunde', cybernetics, and refers to the circle process of lead, execute, measure. The circle is responsible for organizing the circle processes for its own domain.

Top-down and Bottom-up

The circle process is central to the SKM. That is also the reason for the introduction of the elected representative and the consent principle. These ensure feedback from the implementation (back) to the leadership. In this way, there is equal top down and bottom up control at every level in the organization. This improves communication and collaboration in the organization. The agility and manageability of the organization increase." (Sociocratisch Centrum Nederland, 2020).

A detailed explanation of the 4 foundational principles of SKM, which the method is built on, will follow later in the chapter. But for now, it is important to notice that there is quite a difference between applying SKM to an existing organization with a line structure - how Endenburg intended it - and applying it to an ecovillage.

That is because in ecovillages, almost without exception, traditional hierarchies (or line structures) are rejected ideologically by all its inhabitants. (Kunze, 2009). This rejection of company culture, hierarchy and power-over dynamics are often part of the very reason that ecovillages are founded; trying to find a different way to live (and decide) together, in harmony with nature, with heightened awareness. Such go many ecovillages' mission statements. This has two important implications. First of all, what this means is that instead of having an existing line structure to build on, ecovillages often adopt Sociocracy from the start, before they even have an existing organizational structure. This means that ecovillages often have to build up their entire organization with - and *through* Sociocracy. Importantly, including not only the decision-making but also the *governance* in a Sociocratic structure built from scratch - as opposed to applying it to an existing, running organization with day-to-day operations - proves very difficult at times for ecovillages. (Christian, 2023). While Sociocracy is often referred to as both a decision making *and* governance method, it is still the ecovillage inhabitants themselves (in this example) that have to create their own rules and procedures when it comes to governance; Sociocracy is not a template for how to govern your organization. Or at least; SKM is not - it is an "empty" method when it comes to operations". Sociocracy 3.0, however, has an integrated set of tools, like agile and scrum, that organizations can use *after*, or *next* to the decision-making (Priest & Bockelbrink, 2024).

The second important implication is that when Sociocracy is applied to an existing company, as Endenburg intended, there is generally a very clear goal in mind. It might be something like "profit-maximization" or "efficiency", and the context in which to reach that goal is also relatively straightforward - the market or industry that the company is operating in. With ecovillages, however, the goal (often in the form of a Mission, Vision, Aim statement, or MVA in short) is often much less clear and much more open to interpretation; a typical example would be "Living sustainably in harmony with nature with awareness for the spiritual". And the context in which they operate is much wider too. Different to a company, an ecovillage has many different purposes - a parking space, housing, an organization, a children's playground, a pet center, a permaculture garden, a recreational center, an educational center, and on and on (Christian, 2023). Having an MVA that is so widely interpretable and with so many areas of activities or responsibilities, adds significant levels of complexity to making decisions in, and the governing of, ecovillages. This consequently can make it much more complex to apply Sociocracy throughout the organization (Christian, 2023).

3.5 Sociocracy compared to other decision-making methods

When we take a quick look to compare Sociocracy to traditional hierarchical decision-making in organizations, there are a few clear implications. In traditional corporate decision-making, there is a top-down approach, where decisions are made by executives first, and then passed down through the hierarchy of the organizational hierarchy (line structure). This gives the advantages of efficiency and clear accountability, but the disadvantages of issues with power dynamics, abuse of authority and a lack of engagement and motivation of employees. (Hamilton & Gioia, 2010).

In the context of ecovillages or intentional communities, it makes more sense to compare Sociocracy to (traditional) consensus, because as previously mentioned it is very common for ecovillages to reject any form of hierarchies, and they often work with consensus (Christian, 2013). Consensus ensures inclusivity, and creates only mutually accepted decisions, which can foster a sense of community and communal responsibility. The disadvantages are that consensus can be very time consuming, and that there is a risk of a decision-making "standstill" in case of an unresolved objection. (March & Simon, 1993).

Sociocracy can be described as a method that aims to combine the efficiency of traditional corporate decision-making (especially when it is placed 'on top' of an existing line structure) with the inclusivity of consensus. Sociocratic decision-making is based on Quaker consensus, but instead works with 'consent', and not 'consensus', the difference being described as a tolerance, instead of having to agree 100%. The advantages of Sociocracy compared to traditional consensus is that the spirit of "good enough for now" and "safe enough to try" are emphasized because of the built-in feedback systems that make proposals much easier to adjust in the future, putting less pressure on creating a 'perfect' proposal (Christian, 2012). Christian also describes the basis for a *reasoned and paramount* objection in Sociocracy to prevent the kind of "veto" power, the "power-over" dynamic that an objection to a proposal in a consensus setting can create, but states that Sociocracy works best for communities with a clear purpose or aim (Christian, 2012). Endenburg himself states that the advantages of Sociocracy include that it can balance the need for efficiency of decision-making with the desire for inclusive participation, while ensuring transparency. (Endenburg, 1981). But he also states that some disadvantages can be that it "requires careful implementation planning, necessitates training in new concepts, may arouse varying intense emotions during implementation [...] and may at first be uncomfortable for those not accustomed to sharing the responsibility of difficult decisions."(Buck & Endenburg, 2012, p. 21).

It makes sense to have a look at a wider array of decision-making (to be able to place and compare Sociocracy to), both on the side of commercial organizations, and on the side of politics. On the side of organizations, commercial cooperatives are relevant to compare to Sociocracy because of their shared elements of self-organization, equality in decision-making and direct representation. Some advantages of (the decision-making in) cooperatives are that there is a high degree of equality in decision-making, usually ensured through the principle of 'one member, one vote', no matter how many shares the respective member has. This can effectively avoid power-over dynamics. Cooperatives often use a combination of consensus and majority voting, striving to include all members but reserving the efficiency of majority voting where this is otherwise too challenging. An advantage of cooperatives is that they often align the (selfish) economic interests (of shareholders) with the interest in collaboration, ensuring mutually beneficial outcomes and avoiding disruptive competitive practices. Disadvantages of cooperatives include lengthy processes, and the potential for unresolved conflicts. (Reynolds, 1997). Looking on the political side, we can compare Sociocracy with representative democracy. Advantages of representative democracy include the manageability at scale, because of the implementation of elected officials that act in the interests of their constituents. Disadvantages of representative democracies include the disconnect between decision-makers and constituents, the potential for inefficiencies, and special interest influence on decision-making that does not benefit constituents. (Dahl, 2008).

3.6 Sociocracy explained through its 4 foundational principles - the building blocks

The Sociocratic Circle-Organization Method, or SKM in short, is a decision-making and governance system that aims to promote the values of equivalence-of-voice, transparency, and effective decision-making in organizations. It utilizes a structure of circles that are interlinked with each other. Each circle has their own domain - the specified area of activities and decision-making power of that particular circle. This is comparable to a (sub)department.

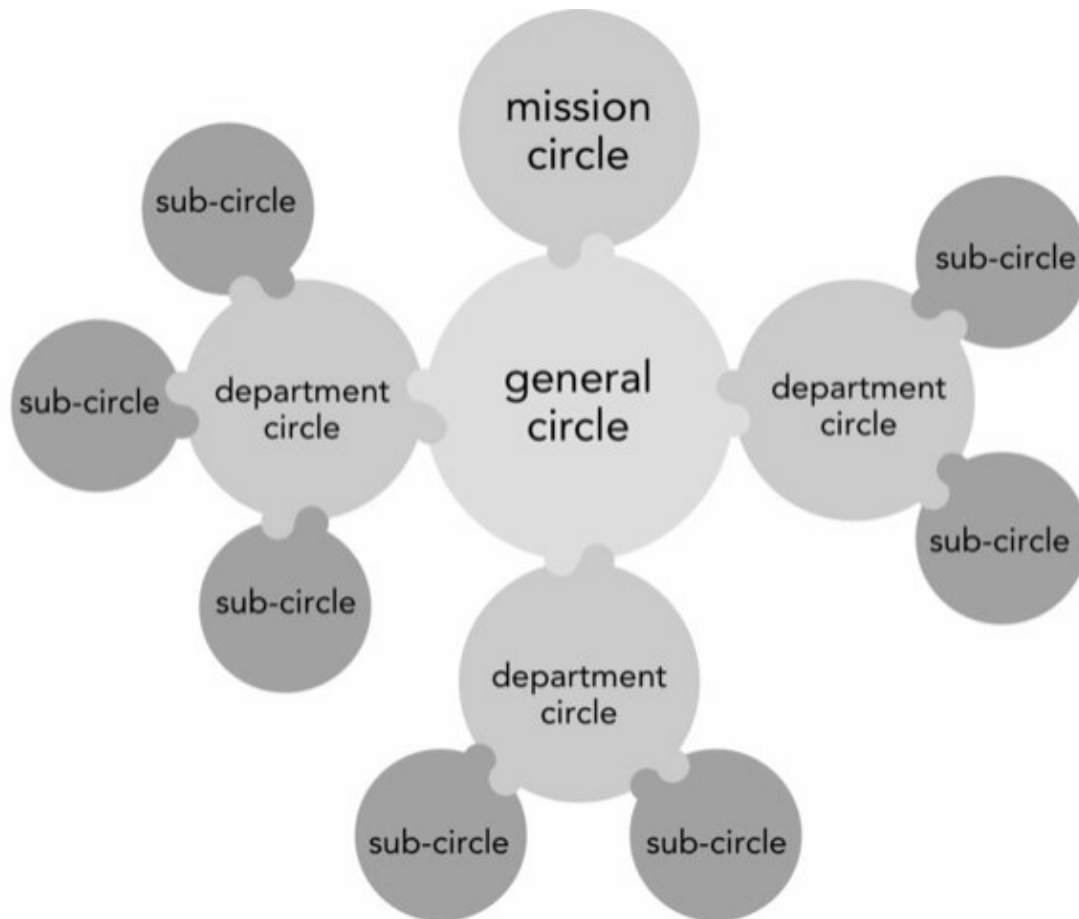


Figure 3. Sociocratic Circle Structure (Rau, 2024)

The core of the SKM method is that it empowers the people (workers) of each circle, who are the ones doing the work, and the ones that are affected by decisions, to decide together on anything that concerns their domain.

'No decisions that are in the domain of the workers in a circle can be made by anyone outside the circle. There is no one ruling top-down.'

Because there is no 'top-down' ruling, this means that everything that gets decided upon within the circles, must come from within the circle. Thus, sociocratic organization strongly relies on the initiative and the energy coming from its members, rather than external commands.

The Sociocratic Circle-Organization Method, as stated by its inventor, Gerard Endenburg, uses 4 foundational principles that are the central building blocks for the entire method. The 4 principles - in order of importance - as taken from the Sociocratisch Centrum Nederland, are as follows.

In the following chapter, the SKM method will be described through its 4 foundational principles. For each of the 4 principles, first the (often brief) English translation from the explanation by the Sociocratisch Centrum Nederland (website) will be given. Then, more detailed information will be given as provided by the book by John Buck and Sharon Villines; 'We the people. Consenting to a Deeper Democracy.' (2017). (This is the second version of the English handbook for Sociocracy, written in close collaboration with the Sociocratisch Centrum Nederland, the Sociocracy Group, and

the inventor of the SKM method, Gerard Endenburg himself.) And finally, where necessary, certain additional information, examples or images will be added from the Sociocracy For All organization (A large international organization focused on spreading education and training in Sociocracy, widely recognized and respected within the community of practitioners and organizations that implement Sociocracy).

1. Consent-decision making ("Regerend Consent")

Consent rules the decision-making. Consent means not having a *reasoned and paramount objection* ("overwegend beargumenteerd bezwaar"). When you give consent you are willing and capable of executing a decision. All other forms of decision-making remain possible as long as you agree on those through consent first. Consent essentially forms the lowest boundary ("ondergrens") for the decision-making.

That does not mean that all decisions are taken with consent. With consent, groups or people can be given the authority to make decisions independently.

Consent is not consensus. You can have objections, as long as they are not so strong that they would hinder your cooperation to the execution of the decision. (This is often referred to as "Good enough for now", or "Safe enough to try" (Christian, 2013)).

Consent is not a veto: if you have considerable ("overwegende") objections, you will have to justify and argue for them so that a solution might be sought. That also does not automatically mean that the respective proposal gets adjusted. By talking together about the considerable ("overwegende") objections, they could disappear as well. For instance because the proposal gets better understood, or because you learn from others how they deal with these objections.

Next to the rule of consent-decision making ("Regerend Consent"), there are also a number of other rules that make working with consent practical in any kind of organization.

(Sociocratisch Centrum Nederland, 2020).

The way that a consent decision is generally made within a circle, is as such: First, one or more individuals from within the respective circle form a proposal for a decision to be made. (In this way, the governance of the organization relies on initiative and energy from its individual members / workers, instead of from the 'top management'). It is important that this proposal is based on a problem or opportunity that is thoroughly identified, questioned and explored first. The written down proposal is handed in to the facilitator of the meeting ahead of time. There are generally 3 steps in the process of consenting to a proposal; Beeld, Mening, Besluit (Claring Questions, Quick-reactions, Consent). (Buck & Villines, 2017, p. 299). In each of these rounds, the facilitator will ask every person to speak, one by one. Once every person has been heard separately, it could be decided to do the same round again, so that the people who spoke first might have a chance to come up with new responses based on what they heard the others say. The "Beeldvorming" (Clarifying Questions) round is about questions that come up regarding (unclearities in the) proposal. These have to be "clean" questions that do not reveal a personal preference or opinion. The "Meningsvorming" (Quick-reaction) round is about sharing one's opinions on the proposal, one by one. This round is meant for circle members to "make brief comments to determine whether the proposal needs more work, or it is ready for consideration and if the circle is ready to consider it" (Buck & Villines, 2017, p. 299). Again, this round can be performed multiple times when appropriate. And then in the "Besluitvorming"(Consent) round, "Each person in turn consents or states concerns or objections. Rounds may be repeated and other discussion methods used to resolve objections. [...] If consent is not reached, the facilitator may propose a fate for the proposal. It can be returned for redrafting, re-delegated, set aside, etc. A round may be done to determine this" (Buck & Villines, 2017, p. 299). When all have given consent, the

proposal is accepted. Importantly, "An objection is not a veto. It is the beginning of a creative process. Objections have to be explained so they can be understood and resolved. Once an objection is clarified, everyone "owns" it. Both the raising and resolving of objections is necessary to improve a proposal and ensure the ability of all circle members to function optimally when the policy is implemented" (Buck & Villines, 2017, p. 299).

There is a strong emphasis on Feedback Loops, according to the "Plan-Implement-Evaluate" cycle; According to Endenburg, a proposal should include the date on which the implemented proposal will be evaluated on its effectiveness respective to its original goal, specifying the unit of measurement. If the proposal is not deemed effective enough after this time, it may be changed by the group. (Buck & Endenburg, 2012).

2. Circle Structure ("Kringorganisatie")

The organization has a decision-making structure built up out of circles that are connected through a double-link, in which the Consent principle ("consentbeginsel") rules. The circles are functional units with their own goals and decision-making domains. The consent principle and the double-linking make sure that they are attuned to each other. The decision-making structure includes all members of the organization. (Sociocratisch Centrum Nederland, 2020).

"All members of an operations unit - teams, departments, committees, working groups, etc. - meet as necessary to decide the policies that will govern the day-to-day operations in their domain. They make decisions by consent as equals and elect officers to do the governance work of the circle". (Buck & Villines, 2017, p. 289).

Every circle needs the following elected officers, with their respective roles and responsibilities:

1. Operations Leader

"The operations leader supervises the circle's daily work, is elected by the next higher circle with the circle representative's participation, and is responsible for the circle's development.

The operations leader may be elected to fill any circle role except that of the circle representative.

The operations leader is responsible for communicating information from the larger organization to the circle, functioning as the "down" link in the feedback loop formed by the double link."

2. Facilitator

"The facilitator leads circle meetings, works with the secretary to prepare agendas and materials for meetings, and may or may not be the operations leader of the circle."

3. Secretary

"Serving as the circle administrator, the secretary:

1. records and publishes meeting minutes;
2. works as a partner with the facilitator to formulate proposals and plan facilitation and meeting process;
3. announces and makes arrangements for meetings;
4. either prepares the meeting agenda in consultation with the facilitator, operations leader, and other circle members as appropriate, or organizes proposed items for spontaneously generated agendas records according to circle policies; and
5. prepares handout materials."

4. Logbook Keeper

"Maintains records of minutes, policy decisions, detailed descriptions of work processes and instructions, financial records, etc. This role is often combined with the secretary, particularly in small circles or circles with less-complex responsibilities."

5. Elected Representatives or Representatives

"This (these) individual(s) represents the circle in the next-higher circle; participates in both circles as a full member whose consent in decision-making is required; and is not a "vote carrier", but a full participant representing the circle's best interests. The representative(s) communicate information from the circle to the higher circle, functioning as the "up" link in the feedback loop formed by the double link."

6. Other Circle Officers

"Other circle officers may be elected for defined roles, particularly in large circles with complex tasks."

(Buck & Villines, 2017, p. 289-290).

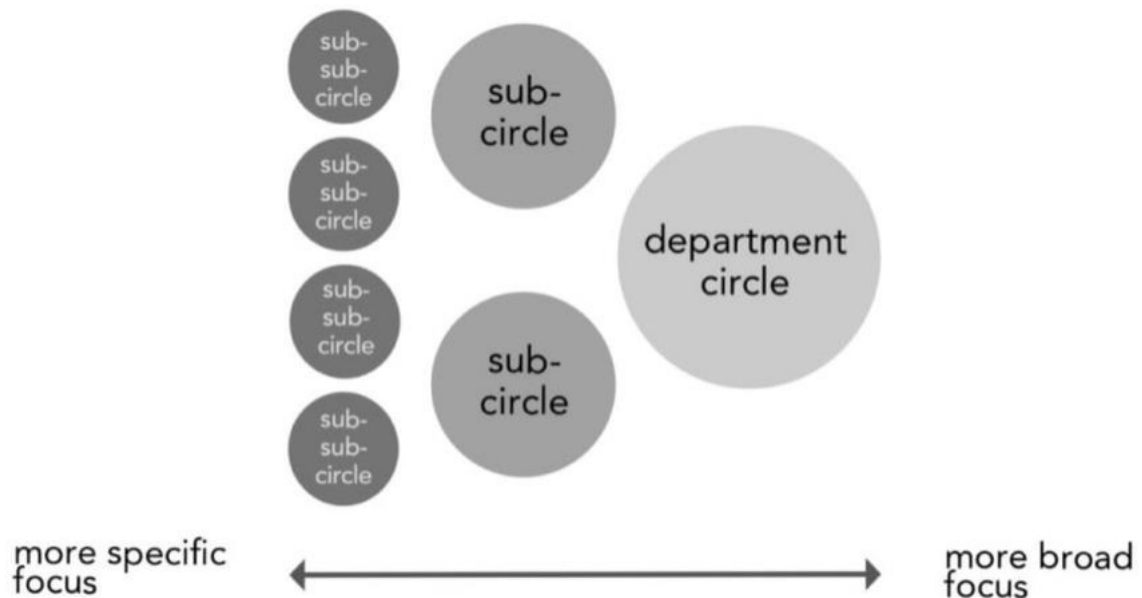


Figure 4. Sociocratic hierarchy of abstraction (Rau, 2024).

Sociocracy is organized such that "as many decisions as possible are made at the most specific level of the organization [so that] any specific circle in sociocracy will be dealing with the specific decisions for their level." (Rau, 2024). The *domain* of every circle specifies its area of activities and decision-making authority. Decisions made within such a domain, though specific to a particular circle, can have organization-wide consequences. Thus, a "lower" ("naastlagere") circle refers to a hierarchy of specificity (abstraction) of the circle's domain, not of "power-over" dynamics. Domain specific decision-making can transcend to the General Circle if it reaches some threshold agreed upon, for instance a budget limit. However, in general the decision-power lies with the respective sub-circle, and must be respected by the rest of the organization, since its members and domain have been consented upon by every member. (Buck & Villines, 2017; Rau, 2024).

3. Double Linking ("Dubbele koppeling")

The connection of a circle with the next-higher ("naasthogere") circle consists of a double-link. This means that at least two people, specifically the coordinator and at least one representative of the circle, belong to the next-higher circle. (Sociocratisch Centrum Nederland, 2020).

This creates equivalence of voice through the organization, and helps to make sure no power-abuses can occur since every member of the organization is represented in multiple circles, and gets reported the goings-on of multiple circles. (Rau, 2024).

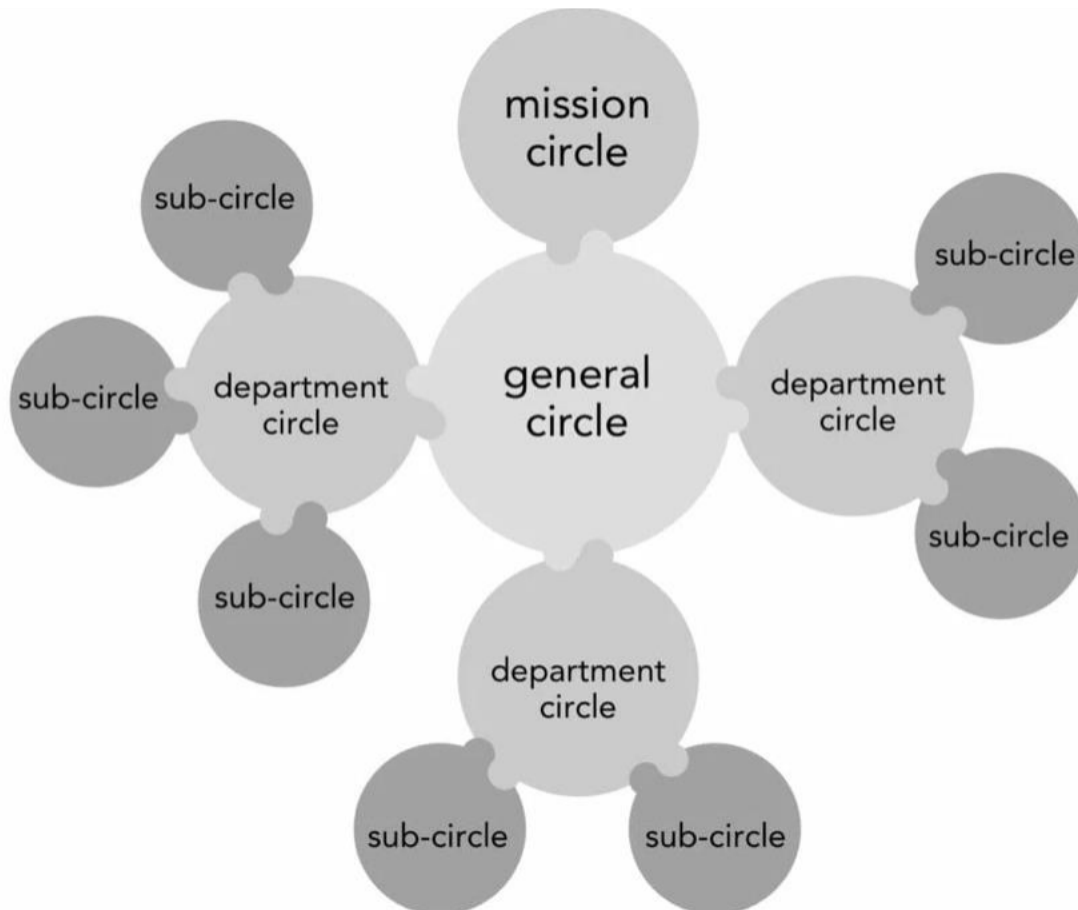


Figure 5. Sociocratic Circle Structure (Rau, 2024)

This double-linking can ensure the flow of communication throughout the entire organization, no matter how small or large it is or later becomes. The General Circle is "the center of the flow of information for the operational level" (Rau, 2024). The General Circle (GC) consists of the coordinators/leaders and the representatives/delegates of all the department circles. Generally speaking, although "roles can blend into each other in reality", a department circles' delegate reports from the department circle to the general circle, while that circles' leader takes information from the GC into their circle. (Rau, 2024).

"The actions and responsibilities of the General (Managing) Circle include:

1. elect or affirm leaders of operations circles;
2. adopt, adjust, or affirm budgets for operations circles;

3. review and adjust aims for the operations circles;
4. review or establish long-term plans; and
5. establish an agenda for addressing policies related to decisions that affect more than one operations circle. "

(Buck & Villines, 2017, p. 288)

The main role of the GC is to hold each circle accountable, support each circle where needed, and provide the information flow between circles; e.g. what is each circle working on, which circle needs information from which other circle, how can the GC help with that (Rau, 2024). In Sociocracy, the General Circle is often considered the highest level of organizational structure. Where this is the case, the strategic planning and direction and other "big picture thinking" will take place in the General Circle. But depending on the size and complexity of the organization, there can be additional levels above it, in which case the GC takes a more day-to-day operational function and the next-higher circle provides the strategic / long-term planning functions. In the diagram provided above, as taken from Sociocracy For All, a Mission Circle is shown. This circle can be compared to a board of directors, taking care of long-term planning and making sure the organization "stays true to its mission and aim". According to Sociocracy For All, the Mission Circle (MC) includes outside experts, and is the "organizations opportunity for mutual influence between the outside world and the inside of the organization" (Rau, 2024).

4. Sociocratic Elections ("Sociocratische verkiezing")

Choosing persons for functions and roles/tasks happens through the consent principle after open argumentation. (Sociocratisch Centrum Nederland, 2020).

"Circles elect their members to roles and responsibilities by consent following an open nominations process that includes arguments to support the nominations. The circle facilitator may conduct elections or another person may be elected to facilitate elections." (Buck & Villines, 2017, p. 291).

The steps are:

"

1. Read Description of the Role or Responsibility

This may require defining and consenting, or reaffirming the description. The description should include the lengths of service and the means of measuring performance.

2. Nominations

Each member of the circle, including the facilitator, submits a written nomination to the facilitator containing the name of the nominator and the name of the person nominated. Members of the circle may nominate other members or themselves, or indicate "no nomination" or "outside hire."

[The Nominations Form takes the form of "{Your Name} nominates {Nominee's Name}"]

3. Presentations

The facilitator reads each of the nomination forms and asks each nominator for the reasons (arguments) for their nomination. Reasons should address the roles and responsibilities in the description.

4. Changes after Nominations are Explained

Based on the other presentations, the facilitator asks the nominators if they want to change their nominations and if there are new nominations. If none are given, the facilitator requests reasons for any changes or new nominations. This can be done in a round or in a simple invitation to change.

5. **Consent Round(s)**

1. Based on the reasons given and the role description, the facilitator chooses a person from those nominated, gives reasons for the choice, and asks each circle member, in turn, if they consent.

Important: The proposed person is asked last and gives their own reasons for electing themselves or other persons.

2. If there is an objection, the circle may try to resolve the objection.
3. If there is an unresolved objection or the person him-herself objects, the process repeats from Step 4, "Changes", until there is a choice with no objections.
4. If there are objections to all the nominees, including from the nominees themselves, the vacancy continues until a resolution is found.
5. Completing the process may require redefining the role description to address objections or hiring a new circle member with the required knowledge and skills.
6. If someone is hired from outside, the operational leader is normally responsible for initiating and conducting the process, subject to the consent of the circle. "

(Buck & Villines, 2017, p. 291-292).

Additionally, elected roles may have term limits, after which new elections are held. Periodic reviews of role performance may also be conducted to ensure individuals continue to meet the needs of the circle.

Sociocratic elections create trust by ensuring roles are filled by individuals who have been elected by their peers through a very conscious process. This promotes a sense of ownership and accountability among team members. (Sociocratisch Centrum Nederland, 2020; Buck & Villines, 2017).

4. Theoretical Framework

In order to answer the research question, "How do Dutch Ecovillages apply Sociocracy & which challenges do they face in applying the method?", this thesis will utilize the four core principles of the Sociocratic Circle Method as described by its inventor, Gerard Endenburg, as its theoretical framework. These principles provide a structured lens through which to examine the application of Sociocracy in Dutch ecovillages and to identify the adaptations and challenges encountered. Using these foundational principles as the analytical lens allows us to deconstruct the application of Sociocracy in each ecovillage and its associated challenges, in a structured and comprehensive way, facilitating a detailed comparison across the cases. This framework makes it easy to find the similarities and differences in the application of the method across the Ecovillages, and categorize the findings in a structured manner.

The four foundational principles of Sociocracy are:

1. Consent-decision making ("Regerend Consent")
 - This principle emphasizes decisions made based on the consent of those affected. Within the scope of this principle and the Ecovillages under research, we will look at how consent decision-making is practiced, and the processes used to achieve consent. Particularly, we will also study how proposals are formed and how objections are handled, and any challenges encountered by the Ecovillages in their consent decision-making.
2. Circle Structure ("Kringorganisatie")
 - Sociocracy organizes groups into semi-autonomous circles. Each circle has a specific domain and its own area of responsibilities. Within the scope of this principle, we will investigate how the Ecovillages under research structure their organization, which circles they have, and which decisions are made where. Importantly, we will look at the function of the General Circle in relation to all the domain-specific (sub-)circles.
3. Double Linking ("Dubbele koppeling")
 - Double linking involves having individuals serve as links between circles. Circle coordinators / leaders create the "down" link to the next-lower circle and a circle's elected representative creates the "up" link to the next-higher circle. This ensures bi-directional flow of information and influence. We will analyze how double linking is implemented in the ecovillages, its role in maintaining coherence between different circles, and any difficulties faced in maintaining effective links.
4. Sociocratic Elections ("Sociocratische verkiezing")
 - Elections in sociocracy are conducted by consent, aiming to select the best person for a role based on the group's consent. This principle will guide our examination of how roles are assigned in ecovillages, and any challenges related to elections or role specifications

The theoretical framework as stated above is used in the creation of the interview guides, as well as in the structuring and interpretation of the results.

5. Methodology

5.1 Research Design

This study employs a holistic multiple case study design to investigate how Dutch ecovillages apply Sociocracy, and which challenges they encounter in applying the method. The primary units of analysis are three distinct Dutch ecovillages (The pseudonyms are Ecovillage Terra, Ecovillage Nova and Ecovillage Luna), each treated as a single entity (unit of analysis).

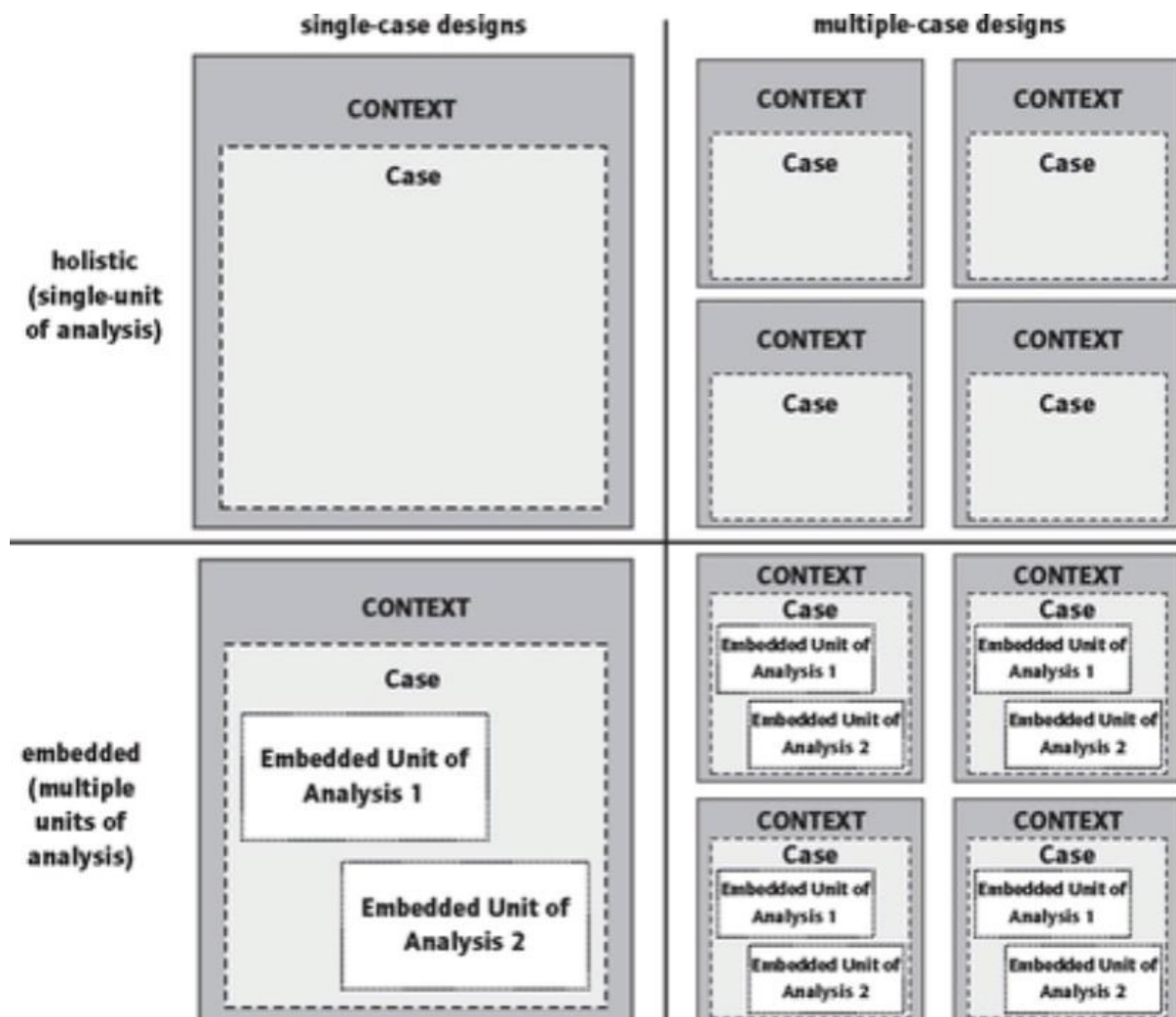


Figure 6. Case study designs (Yin, 2009)

5.2 Data Collection

The data collection includes multiple sources to increase the validity of the results:

1. Interviews with inhabitants:

- Conducted 2-3 (semi-structured) interviews with inhabitants per ecovillage, to gather in-depth insights into their experiences with the application of Sociocracy in their ecovillage.

2. Interview with a Sociocracy trainer:

- Conducted an interview with a Sociocracy trainer from the Sociocratisch Centrum Nederland to gain a broader perspective on the unique challenges with Sociocracy faced by Dutch ecovillages in general.

3. Validation Interviews with Experts:

- Conducted two validation interviews with Sociocracy experts particularly active within the field of ecovillages. These interviews helped to validate the key findings within the broader Dutch ecovillage context, and offered expert interpretations of the main results.

5.3 Data Analysis

The data from these various sources were synthesized to construct both a comprehensive understanding of each ecovillage’s application of Sociocracy, and to put it in the broader context of Dutch ecovillages overall. The synthesis of the different data collected enabled a comparative analysis across the cases, focusing on the findings that were consistent across the cases and generalizable for Dutch Ecovillages in general.

5.3.1 Anonymization of data

To protect the privacy and confidentiality of the respondents and ecovillages, the names of the ecovillages under study have been replaced with pseudonyms (Terra, Luna, Nova), the interviewed respondents within them, have been anonymized (Respondent A, B, or C).

5.4 Justification of methodological choices

5.4.1 Overall methodology

Table 1. Relevant situations for different research strategies

Strategy	Research question type	Does it require control over the events?	Does it target contemporary events?
Case study	How, why?	No	Yes
Experiment	How, why?	Yes	Yes
Survey	Who, what/which, where, how much?	No	Yes
Archive analysis	Who, what/which, where, how much?	No	Yes/No
Historical analysis	How, why?	No	No

Figure 7. Relevant situations for different research strategies (Yin, 2009. As adapted from Hedrick et. al, 1993)

The choice of a holistic multiple case study design is justified for several reasons:

1. Exploratory nature of the research question:

- The research question, "How do Dutch ecovillages apply Sociocracy & which challenges do they face in applying the method?", is exploratory in nature. A multiple case study design supports research where complex, uncontrolled phenomena within their contemporary, real-life contexts are explored. This is certainly coherent with the research attempting to understand the nuanced application of Sociocracy in different Dutch ecovillages (Yin, 2009). As visualized in the Table provided by Yin (2009), a case study is warranted when the type of research question is "How, why?", control over the events is not required, and contemporary events are targeted. All of these conditions are met in the research at hand. (Yin, 2009).

2. Depth and contextual understanding:

- Case studies allow for an in-depth exploration of each ecovillage, providing rich, contextual insights. This approach facilitates the researcher in capturing the unique characteristics and specific challenges faced by each ecovillage, which might be overlooked by more quantitative, or less in-depth methods. (Yin, 2009).

3. Comparative analysis:

- By examining multiple ecovillages, the study can compare and contrast the application of Sociocracy across different ecovillage contexts. This comparative analysis helps to identify commonalities in the ecovillages' challenges and applications, as well as unique adaptations, ultimately helping to answer the research question on a level of generalizability of Dutch ecovillages.

4. Holistic perspective:

- A holistic approach allows for the treatment of each ecovillage as a single unit of analysis, considering the entire system rather than focusing on individual sub-units. This perspective is crucial for understanding the overall application of Sociocracy and how it is integrated into the respective ecovillages as a whole. (Yin, 2009).

5.4.2 Choice of Ecovillages

The three ecovillages that were selected are:

- all part of the Global Ecovillage Network (Netherlands) (or: GEN-NL),
- all self-identifying as "using Sociocracy" through their external communications (websites)
- all relatively established ecovillages, having existed for at least 5 years each.

The ecovillages included in this study were selected using a purposive sampling method, although the selection process had elements of convenience and accessibility. The ecovillages were selected and contacted in the following ways:

1. Ecovillage Luna:

- The first contact was made at an informal BENELUX meeting during the European Ecovillage Gathering, a yearly event organized by GEN Europe, in 2023. Upon discussing the initial research topic of Sociocracy in ecovillages, the researcher was approached by a member of Ecovillage Luna, who offered their community for interviews, mentioning their active use of Sociocracy.

2. Ecovillage Terra:

- The researcher became aware of Ecovillage Terra through a Sociocracy workshop given by one of its members at an ecovillage gathering. Further contact was established through a referral from a fellow student and researcher who had previously interviewed a knowledgeable member of Ecovillage Terra. Additionally, Ecovillage Terra's application of Sociocracy was documented in a key academic source describing decision-making tools used by Dutch ecovillages.

3. Ecovillage Nova:

- This ecovillage was recommended by members of the previously selected ecovillages, Ecovillage Luna and Ecovillage Terra, as another community that uses Sociocracy. It was praised for its considerable size and serious approach with regards to their organization, making it a relevant case for the study.

These selections, while somewhat opportunistic in nature, were guided by the criteria of active Sociocracy application and the ability to provide rich, relevant data for the research question.

A short description of the background of each of the ecovillages follows:

Ecovillage Luna

Ecovillage Luna was founded 22 years ago. It is situated in the west of Germany, but was founded by 4 Dutch founders. They already had the ambition of doing something good for the world, and to be able to live "from peace and awareness". One of the 4 founders was involved for a long time, but the other 3 went into their own directions. Ecovillage Luna used to be a small farm where one family lived. It covers 3 hectares, and currently includes a vegetable garden, 2 private houses, and one group accommodation. 12 people live there now, including one baby. The current group of residents formed 3,5 years ago. Before that, many other groups came and went. "The place belongs to nobody.

Ecovillage Luna is an association, and the space belongs to the association. So we say that we are the 'caretakers' of the place. [...] So that people that come to Ecovillage Luna now, or in the future, can enjoy the place. Also being able to live from a bit of peace and awareness. Being able to rediscover oneself in connection with nature". Apart from being a living community, Ecovillage Luna also runs a company; a holistic health center.

Ecovillage Terra

Ecovillage Terra was founded in 2013, in the north-west of the Netherlands. It was founded on a former military facility that was finalized just before World War II, and used by the Germans for 4 years in camouflaged state, until it was bombed by the allied forces. After that it was reinstated as a mobilization center during the Cold War, and finally disbanded by the Dutch government a bit over a decade ago. The site of 15 hectares was bought in 2013. The inhabitants take pride in transforming the site from "war to peace", and they aim to live "in togetherness, in harmony with our surroundings and with nature". A lot of work has gone into sanitizing the ground from concrete and toxic materials. Ecovillage Terra started at the time with 5 initiators, but has since grown to around 24 adult inhabitants, and a few children. With the building permits and plans that have been finalized since this year, 2024, there is a total capacity of 60 inhabitants. Currently, most of the residents still live in temporary (mobile) housing.

Ecovillage Nova

Ecovillage Nova is an ecovillage founded in the north of the Netherlands, in 2018. It currently houses about 50 inhabitants, about 33 adults and 17 children. Currently, they all still live in yurts, buses or trailers ('pipo wagens'). In close cooperation with the local municipality, the founding group got permission to start an ecovillage on the terrain of an old factory, which had degraded into a worn down area with a lot of vandalism and even arson. After a feasibility study that was paid for by both the province and the municipality, as well as a financial analysis by the initiating community group, it was found that the project would be feasible with an amount of 60 (initial) to 100 (eventual) adult inhabitants paying an entry fee for the property. After extensive research into the ground and soil, and the overall property, plans were created for a living community with a vegetable garden and food forest. The first step of the planning includes plans for 30 small houses, among which 10 (mobile) tiny houses. The building process will go in phases, but there is permission for 50 to 60 houses eventually. The municipality is closely cooperating with the desires of the community, being flexible with the type of (eco) housing permits and renovations to the old factory as living space. This is made possible by the special 'experimental status' that is allotted to the ecovillage by the municipality. The ecovillage has an official destination plan with the 'ecovillage' status in the municipality that is legally binding for the indefinite future.

5.4.3 Sampling of Inhabitants

The inhabitants of the ecovillages that were interviewed were all full members of the respective communities, and were selected using convenience sampling. The inhabitants interviewed were those who expressed willingness to participate after the invitation was extended to the group by a contact person within the ecovillage. This resulted in 3 respondents for Ecovillage Terra, and 2 respondents respectively for both Ecovillage Nova and Ecovillage Luna.

5.4.4 Choice of Experts

Context Interview with a Sociocracy Trainer:

1. **Expert 1:** Jette Schneiders.

- The context interview was conducted with Jette Schneiders (also referred to as 'expert 1'), a fully licensed Sociocracy trainer from the Sociocratisch Centrum Nederland. Contact with Schneiders was established at a lecture organized by the Sociocratisch Centrum Nederland. Schneiders has been a licensed trainer for three years and collaborates with Pieter van der Meché, the director of the Sociocratisch Centrum. This interview selection adds insights from a trainer with a direct link to the official authority and training center of SKM, as founded by (modern) Sociocracy's inventor Gerard Endenburg in the Netherlands.

Validation Interviews:

2. **Expert 2:** Fredjan Twigt

- A Dutch Sociocracy trainer who regularly conducts training and workshops for ecovillages (also referred to as 'expert 2'). He has studied at the Sociocratisch Centrum for four years and resides in an ecovillage. He is also an active member of GEN-NL. This expert was selected for his extensive expertise in Sociocracy and his practical experience with ecovillages. His contact information was provided by a fellow student and researcher, underscoring his recognized expertise in the field.

3. **Expert 3:** Frands Frydendal (expert 3)

- A Danish Sociocracy trainer and expert who has been working with ecovillages since 2010 (also referred to as 'expert 3'). Although he is not currently a resident of an ecovillage, his extensive experience and international perspective adds depth to the validation process. The researcher met this expert at the European Ecovillage Gathering 2023 and a Sociocracy For All conference for intentional communities, highlighting his active engagement in the Sociocracy community. Additionally, this expert personally knows Gerard Endenburg, the founder of the Sociocratic Circle Method (SKM), further enhancing his credibility and the relevance of his insights to the study at hand.

These experts were chosen to provide a well-informed validation of the study's case study findings, drawing on their expertise and experience in the application of Sociocracy within ecovillages.

5.4.5 Data Collection Methods

Semi-Structured Interviews:

Semi-structured interviews were employed for data collection with both the inhabitants and the expert Sociocracy trainer. This method was chosen because it allows for a flexible exploration of key themes. Semi-structured interviews facilitate a balance between guiding the conversation with predetermined questions and allowing new insights to emerge organically, which is essential for

capturing the complexities of Sociocracy applications and the associated challenges faced in ecovillages. (Hyman et al., 1954).

6. Results

The results section is structured in the following way: First, insights from the expert interview with Jette Scheiders (Sociocracy trainer at the Sociocratisch Centrum Nederland) will be shared. Then, the findings from the ecovillage case studies will be shared. In the results section, this will be shown first on an individual case basis. For each of the 3 ecovillage cases, the results will be presented according to the structure of the 4 foundational principles of Sociocracy. Then, the results will be shown on a cross-case level, followed by an analysis of the main themes found across the 3 cases, in an attempt to generalize the most important findings to the level of Dutch ecovillages in general. Finally, the main insights of the 2 expert validation interviews, based on the main case study findings, will be shared.

6.1 Expert Interview

The following insights are synthesized from an extensive semi-structured interview with Jette Schneiders, Sociocracy trainer at the Sociocratisch Centrum Nederland. These are insights from Jette Schneiders' perspective on Dutch ecovillages with Sociocracy, including the application and potential problems with Sociocracy. These insights can give the reader a broader context of the topic of Sociocracy in ecovillages, as seen from the eyes of an expert trainer.

Introduction

In an introductory conversation, Jette shared some initial thoughts on Sociocracy, its value and some of the challenges of using the method, outside of any specific context. She describes the strength of Sociocracy in its ability to put power in the group, and giving space to people, characters and unheard voices that often do not come forward in the world we live in. She highlights the dominance and prejudices that are overly present in the majority voting democracy system, which silences many voices. The first and foremost challenge that Jette points to is that:

“It is one thing to vouch for the values and idealisms of Sociocracy, but it is another to actually do it. Doing it is a whole different thing, because there are behavioral patterns written in our DNA.”

She goes on to explain how the way we have learned to behave within the world around us - which is generally very different to the ideals and values of Sociocracy - is caught within our bodies, and takes a lot of effort to unlearn. Applying Sociocracy (for the first time) can therefore be difficult, Schneiders highlights, because certain members of the respective group might not be used to speaking that much, or speaking out in front of multiple people - something Sociocracy's consent decision-making meetings require. There is a lot of emphasis on group dynamics here:

“But that is really the learning process of the group. To help someone feel more comfortable than in situations where we have to fight for our turn. It is about how the group learns to make someone feel more comfortable. There is a lot of behavior there.”

Jette explains that the quality of the facilitation of sociocratic meetings is very important in this. She names a number of important tasks of the facilitator, that when not practiced or trained correctly, can lead to the conclusion that 'Sociocracy does not work', when the problem is actually in the facilitation. Jette states that facilitators need to be able to take control of the conversations, intervene when individual discussions arise to bring it back to the group as a whole, maintain neutrality even when someone brings up opinions that the facilitator feels strongly about, help people go from an emotional response to being able to explain themselves rationally, and deal with passive aggressiveness and a variety of non-verbal behaviors. Schneiders says that these skills can be learned at the Sociocratisch Centrum Nederland, but that these are actually coaching skills that you have to learn in general.

How Sociocracy fits in ecovillages

Although Jette stated that she does not have very extensive experience with directly training ecovillages in Sociocracy (she guided 2 ecovillages on a short track), unlike her colleague Pieter who has done that more, she explains that her specialization is on working with communities, which allows her to give meaningful insights nonetheless, as ecovillages are ultimately communities too.

When asked if Sociocracy is a good fit in ecovillage settings, Schneiders confirms that indeed, it is. Sociocracy, she says, can help to give people a structure of how they can sustainably shape their project, while holding on to their communities values. She emphasizes how Sociocracy can bridge the gap between the desire of individual members to have a say in the things happening in their community, while also allowing the community to grow to a size where it is simply not possible to directly make every decision together anymore:

"In living communities, you see that there is a strong desire for people to still keep the possibility to comment or participate, alive in some way. Or the ability to give feedback, or to correct the course. With Sociocracy, that is possible. That is what I mean by 'holding on to your community values'."

Speaking from her general experience with communities, Jette states that being a community member is often not the primary time expenditure of the members, and that when communities grow or become more successful, there is a desire to be more effective with time management. Schneiders is pointing here towards the ability of Sociocracy to provide this time effectiveness, through its Circle Structure in which circles have their individual domains of task responsibility, ensuring decentralized decision-making while at the same time ensuring feedback and representation through the Double Link principle. But this takes a level of trust in the fellow community members that some may not be used to:

"In Sociocracy, people can then join smaller working groups when they have an interest in it, or are good at it. But it means that a certain trust needs to be given as to what gets decided in a group you are not part of, where you are not sitting at the meeting. So it is also about giving trust."

Challenges of Sociocracy in ecovillages

Jette talks about a number of challenges that arise when applying Sociocracy to an ecovillage. Firstly, she discusses a lack of clear motivation and commitment to properly learn Sociocracy, and get better at it:

“Communities sometimes do not seem to have the awareness that investing into Sociocracy, learning to better apply it, frees up a lot of time, energy and emotional capacity that is otherwise spent in deciding together about every little thing.”

She states that she sees this reflected in the applications of Dutch ecovillages at the Sociocratisch Centrum Nederland. While ecovillages come to them relatively frequently, they often do not commit to a full Sociocracy implementation project, but instead send one person from the ecovillage to do a single training session or a short training track. Although the communicated reason for this is often financial, Jette stresses that it is also a matter of priorities:

“Ecovillages will invest in soil, stone, solar cells, architects, in everything really. But often not in the 'social construction'. That is a bit of a shame. Living communities can get all kinds of subsidies through the Gerard Endenburg Foundation for social, cultural and societal projects.”

Schneiders explains that properly training Sociocracy is essential for a community that wants to apply it, because there are many things that can go wrong, and challenges that can arise. Multiple times in the interview, Jette reiterates that the biggest challenge with applying Sociocracy (also the biggest reason why proper training is so important) is that it requires a switch in mindstate. She describes how it requires you to learn to negate the pursuit of a personal preference, and learn ‘tolerance’ instead. She explains that communities particularly struggle with this:

“In communities, it is often about 'your self', and it is difficult to learn how to connect to this new perspective of representing others, spending time to collect feedback, and learning how to place your personal individual interests in a balance with the interests of the community as a whole.”

This is much less of a challenge in the context of a conventional company that wants to apply Sociocracy, Schneiders says. In conventional companies, people are already used to not having to personally agree with everything 100% but being okay with something that works and is 'good enough for now', understanding the difference between policies and their implementations (and that you can leave some things to others) and acting in the interest of the company as a whole.

Additionally, Jette highlights a major difference in the general sentiment of the group when Sociocracy is first implemented in a conventional organization, as compared to a (living) community. In conventional organizations, the decision to apply Sociocracy is made autocratically by a manager or director, and it is then also the last purely autocratic decision that gets made in the company, because (after that) Sociocracy operates with consent decision-making. Schneiders explains how this instantly gives employees co-determination and participation, generally making them feel happy and more connected to the organization. In communities this is different, says Jette, because there the members have generally gotten used to deciding on everything together since the start of the community. And with the implementation of the circle-organization structure of Sociocracy, there are often fears that the respective members are losing control:

“But what happens is that people have to learn to deal with the layered responsibility levels, and this creates a fear that something is 'taken from them'. And this is a learning step in a community that is harder than in conventional organizations. In conventional organizations, people feel like they finally matter, while in communities, there is a feeling that something is being taken away. There is a fear that a small group can 'decide things about me'.”

Jette further illustrates her point by stating that it is sometimes hard for communities to deal with the idea of the General Circle (represented in Foundational Principle 2: Circle Structure), in which the entire community is represented in a smaller delegation. Not being able to directly decide on the issues discussed there (domain-transcending, strategic and/or long-term decisions affecting the community as a whole) can be hard for people when they might have been part of every decision at the start of the community, says Jette.

Adaptations of the SKM method in ecovillages

When asked about the biggest adaptations of the SKM method that Jette Schneiders has seen in Dutch ecovillages, she clearly notes that the terminology used in Dutch ecovillages is generally much different than the terminology used by the Sociocratisch Centrum Nederland, both in terms of language and in graphical representations. The focus for ecovillages in this respect, according to Jette, is on avoiding any (negative) ideas of (power and) hierarchy, resulting in ecovillages drawing the organization structure as flat as possible, using circles instead of triangles (that are drawn over existing line structures of conventional organizations in SKM schematics), and using different words that do not suggest any power-over dynamics:

“Instead of 'leader' they might use 'coordinator'. Also in the graphical representations. Instead of the triangular structure as drawn by Endenburg, which is on top of an organization chart, ecovillages draw circles. If you draw (that) hierarchy in ecovillages, it is associated with 'old sorrow'; it is 'contaminated'. So the graphical representation is often in the form of circles, with a structure drawn as 'flat' as possible. The idea of hierarchy is rejected in ecovillages, even though it still exists, even in Sociocracy. A hierarchy of responsibility, with the General Circle, and with double linking. I tend to use the term 'layering' in ecovillages or communities.”

When asked more specifically if (Dutch) ecovillages ever remove or change any of the 4 foundational principles of Sociocracy, Schneiders says that especially (although not exclusively) in ecovillages and communities, the role of the representative (representing the community in a smaller delegation in the General Circle through the Double Linking principle) is often not applied. She gives two reasons for this. Firstly, there is a fear of letting go of the comfortable norm in which people are used to having a leader or manager, but not a representative. And secondly, in ecovillages and communities people are (more) mindful of their time (than in a full-time job in a conventional organization), and associate the role of the representative with a loss of time and additional work:

“A frequent reason behind that is that people get 'scared' of this new phenomenon of having a representative, and the double link. In conventional teams or organizations, people are used to just having a leader or manager. So the idea of having a representative is new. And I think this essential principle is sometimes let go, because it is new, and because in ecovillages and

communities people are mindful of their time, and do not feel like they have the time to also sit in on meetings in the General Circle as a representative.”

6.2 Individual case results

In this section, the 3 individual case study results will be discussed. As such, a summary will be given of the findings of the (semi-structured) interviews conducted with the 2-3 ecovillage inhabitants per case: Ecovillage Terra, Ecovillage Nova, and Ecovillage Luna. The results will be structured based on the theoretical framework; according to the 4 foundational principles of Sociocracy.

6.2.1 Ecovillage Terra

Foundational Principle 1: Consent decision-making

While the respondents of Ecovillage Terra do not report any adaptations or alterations on the steps in the consent decision-making meeting according to the SKM method (in the order of Clarifying Questions, Quick Reactions, Consent), they do report on a number of problems and challenges that occur in the consent meetings, as well as one noteworthy alteration on the consent meetings.

Ecovillage Terra has added an additional role in their consent meetings, to be fulfilled by any member of the respective circle, called the Heartkeeper. The Heartkeeper can be any person in a meeting, and he/she is responsible for ringing a sound bowl (that is provided to that person) whenever he/she feels like there is too much talking about the subject at hand, “while we know that all kinds of things are happening in the body”. This abstractly refers to underlying emotions, tensions, old hurt, and other things that do not have to do directly with the conversation / issue at hand. During the sound that the bowl makes, everybody stops talking and takes a moment of introspection.

There are a number of problems and challenges that the respondents of Ecovillage Terra pointed out that relate most clearly to Foundational Principle 1: Consent decision-making. Firstly, there are numerous accounts of reported problems with the large amount of time that sociocratic meetings take. On the one hand, this is said to be the case when there are a lot of people in a circle meeting. While Ecovillage Terra has a relatively decentralized organization structure with a functional General Circle and the principle of the Double Link applied, there are some decisions that they take with the full-inhabitants circle, such as consenting to new inhabitants. In this case, they have to follow the consent decision-making meetings steps (Clarifying Questions, Quick Reactions, Consent), going by the inputs of all its 25 circle members, one by one. This is an example where the sociocratic meetings take a very long time. On the other hand, the problem of Sociocracy taking a lot of time, according to Ecovillage Terra’s inhabitants, is said to be exacerbated by underlying social tensions among the inhabitants that come up during the consent decision-making process, where they do not belong, and cause delays:

“A disadvantage with Sociocracy is that it works well when there are little tensions. When there are many tensions, it can make everything a bit ‘syrupy’” - Respondent A.

“But what happens in practice is that we go to discuss a topic, and then something else appears to be underneath the surface, and then we need to look at that first before we can

move on. The underlying tensions come up during such circle meetings: 'actually, this is going on'". - Respondent A.

One solution to this problem that Ecovillage Terra has (re)applied, is a (bi-weekly) sharing circle, in which (underlying) emotions and tensions can be discussed in a designated place, outside of the decision-making meetings.

Interestingly, one of the respondents of Ecovillage Terra, who is the facilitator of the General Circle, pointed out that she does not feel capable enough yet to solve (larger) tensions sociocratically. It must be noted here that this respondent had only been the facilitator for 3 months at the time of the interview, and that she reported Ecovillage Terra to be in a harmonious phase at the time.

Furthermore, a problem was pointed out with general (emotional) maturity that is sometimes lacking, causing similar problems:

"I mean, if the maturity is not there, it can become quite a mess. Endless meetings, and making one's voice more important than it is in reality. So look, the fact that your voice is heard, does not mean that that opens the door to give priority to everything you want. Absolutely not. So, there is a certain humility that is needed, and when you don't have that, it can become quite a mess." - Respondent B.

The second main problem that has been pointed out by the respondents of Ecovillage Terra, has to do with the Sociocratic objections; the reasoned paramount objection (or "overwiegend beargumenteerd bezwaar"). There is a reported issue with the lack of clarity of what exactly constitutes a valid objection. On the one side, this issue is said to be caused by a lack of clarity from the Sociocratisch Centrum Nederland about when an objection is valid:

"I think that on the topic of the consent principle and the reasoned, paramount objection, there is very little [effort] from the Sociocratisch Centrum to properly explain it. I find it an important theme. [...] Because you can interpret their brief explanation in too many ways. That could be tighter, I think." - Respondent B.

And on the other side, multiple respondents point to the behavioral side of certain members in a sociocratic meeting who are not using reason to explain their objections, or not able to explain their objections at all - something that is a prerequisite to an objection being accepted according to the SKM method:

"I think that if people in a group say that they can't give consent for something, and when asked what their paramount objection is, they say for example 'it just doesn't feel good for me' or 'I just don't have a good feeling about it', this can drain the whole thing. It needs to be explained rationally, and you need people that say to that: 'Okay, that is very unfortunate that you feel that way. I will come back to you in 10 minutes to see if you can put it into words then, because we can't do much with this'. And that is the role of the facilitator, I think." - Respondent C.

Foundational Principle 2: Circle Structure

Ecovillage Terra follows the sociocratic circle structure relatively 'by the book'; they have a General Circle, in which both the representatives and the coordinators of their 4 main circles are present. (This

has not always been the case, as will be discussed in the later section on Foundational Principle 3: Double Linking).

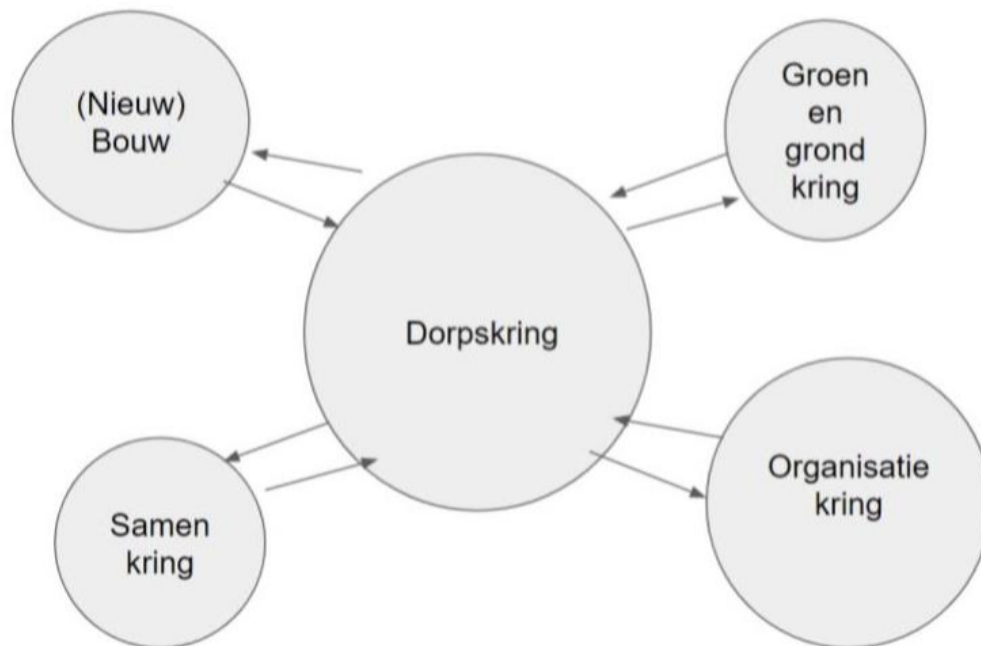


Figure 8: The Circle Organization of Ecovillage Terra (as adopted from their internal document. See Appendix D)

The 4 main circles, namely the Green and Ground circle, the Together circle, the Organization circle and the Building circle, all function sociocratically, following the sociocratic circle meetings and consent decision-making according to Foundational Principle 1. However, it was mentioned multiple times by the respondents that Ecovillage Terra keeps a less strict, and somewhat organic attitude towards deciding when something needs to be consented upon sociocratically:

“We have created the domains, and attributed them to the circles, and the circles function through sociocratic circle meetings and decisions. And, it is not always so strict. So what we have noticed, is that you don’t need to decide about everything sociocratically. Because sociocratic decision-making is when you think ‘hmm, this is an important topic, and here it really is important that this is well supported by the community. [Knowing when we want to decide about something sociocratically] happens automatically. It is rather organic.” - Respondent B.

Ecovillage Terra has implemented a noteworthy alteration on the General Circle; they have added an additional function, or role, in the GC. Not only do they have the elected representatives and the coordinators of the 4 main (domain-specific) circles in the General Circle (adding up to 8 members), but they have added a 9th member to the circle, with the role of General Coordinator. The role of General Coordinator has had different approaches, ranging from a more managerial, ‘push’ approach,

to a more peace-keeping and representative role. One of the respondents, who is currently filling the role of General Coordinator, describes this:

“Look, the way I see my role... We have had various general coordinators in the past. And some really took that role to direct, to really steer, set the blueprint. That is not how I work. I see myself more as a general representative, basically. So I really want to know what is going on everywhere, and I am involved with many things. And I have an opinion, but I’m not into steering. I honestly think it works well this way. I am more about keeping the bunch together, that is more my role.” - Respondent A.

The General Circle of Ecovillage Terra makes decisions on domain transcending (“overkoepelende”) topics, which includes decisions that go above a certain circle’s allocated budget. Recently, Ecovillage Terra has started to look into delegating more to the main (domain-specific) circles, and deciding less in the General Circle; they aim to move towards a less “top-down” decision-making process. This movement is related to an issue that the General Coordinator pointed out as a problem he is acutely aware of: that the General Circle, and especially the coordinators within it, are uniquely qualified to be good at coordinating, organizing, and taking control, while this creates constant tension with the desires to have a more organic, creative and/or free-flowing way of doing things in the ecovillage:

“If I look at the current occupation of the General Circle, [...] it is in some way a one-sided group. I do think they are the right people for the roles, but you see that most coordinators are people that are structured, pragmatic, familiar with the prevailing organization structure. [...] You know, ‘ordnung und gründlichkeit’. But part of the ecovillage inhabitants just don’t work like that. They are more the free birds, the creatives, the spiritual people. This is not their perception of reality. But you want to have them represented in some way in the decision-making process. And at this moment, it is not so much.” - Respondent A.

Foundational Principle 3: Double Linking

Currently, Ecovillage Terra applies the principle of the Double Link: they have their General Circle, which makes decisions on topics that transcend the domain or budget of the subsequent 4 main (domain-specific) circles. And this General Circle is filled with the coordinators (chosen by the General Circle) and elected representatives (chosen by the individual circles) of the 4 main (domain-specific) circles. And as discussed under the previous section, Ecovillage Terra has an additional role of General Coordinator in the General Circle.

For a period of time, however, Ecovillage Terra let go of the Double Link. During this period, they still had the General Circle making domain-transcending decisions, but they did not include the role of the elected representatives in the GC, only the roles of the coordinators. This is directly in violation of the Foundational Principle 3: Double Linking. Concretely, this means that the domain-specific circle's views could not be represented (through a delegation) in the General Circle, potentially allowing for a top-down power dynamic; the General Circle chooses the coordinators of the next-lower circles, and this power should, according to the SKM method, be held in balance by including the elected representatives of the next-lower circles as full decision-making members in the General Circle. The reason that Ecovillage Terra let go of the Double Link principle was reported to be the perception that there were simply not enough inhabitants to fill all the roles - specifically the

role of elected representative, and that the small group at the time was able to represent each other well without the need for the role of the elected representative:

"At some point we had such a small group, everybody was in almost all the circles, and everybody was in the General Circle. And then you also had the Double Link on top of that, so it just didn't make sense anymore. We were basically keeping seats warm without any use. Because everybody was just always in every circle. Then you have 10 people in the ecovillage, and 12 in the General Circle, because we also had externals. I'm exaggerating a bit, but still. It just wasn't practical. And, well, then we let go of the Double Link, because it was like, 'we speak to each other all the time, you know? We don't need to represent each other in 6 different ways'". - Respondent A.

However, the same respondent also explained another - somewhat contradicting - reason for letting go of the Double Link, namely that at the time, due to a lot of social frictions and a reported lack of ability to properly deal with people's objections to proposals, decisions were stagnating, while there was a need to move on:

"But it was also a period where we really needed to move forward. Sociocally there were quite some tensions at that moment. Decisions really had to be made, but stagnated because we could not deal well with people that did not give consent. So what do you do when you can't figure it out together, when one or more people don't give consent?" - Respondent A.

This decision to remove the Double Link has reportedly caused quite some friction in the community, because not everybody agreed to this. Although it has not become totally clear how, it appears that the decision to let go of the Double Link was not made with everybody's consent, and that the elected representatives were not included in the decision to remove their role from the General Circle. When asked if removing the representatives of the domain-specific circles from the General Circle had the desired effect, the same Respondent confirmed that it had (indeed) made it easier to make decisions:

"Yes, in that sense it had the desired effect because it cut the General Circle in half, and made it easier to get consent for decisions." - Respondent A.

Foundational Principle 4: Sociocratic Elections

The sociocratic elections at Ecovillage Terra seem to be running according to the SKM approach. Ecovillage Terra recently had elections, and now has a new General Circle. While there are no direct changes to the foundational principle 4, or major problems reported, one of the respondents did voice some criticism on the extent to which the responsibilities and tasks that belong to the elected roles are specified ahead of the elections. She points out that there is currently no description of the specific skills and time commitment needed for the roles, or evaluations of how a person is fulfilling the role:

"For example what we don't do, is that when you have a role, for example in a PR group, and someone says they are interested, then actually asking 'okay, but what is that role actually? What does it ask of you if you go in the PR group, what is expected of you and how much time will it take approximately?' So describing a role properly, is something we don't do yet. Or when someone shows interest in the role while they do not have the skills needed for it, asking

them how they will learn these skills, and when or how we can evaluate after a week, or two months, how that is going." - Respondent C.

Although the role specifications and evaluations are described in the SKM method and taught by the Sociocratisch Centrum, Ecovillage Terra reportedly does not follow these elements strictly. This specific lack of role specification, as well as multiple other areas in which Ecovillage Terra operates, has reportedly been criticized recently by an external expert that consulted the ecovillage, who said that Ecovillage Terra should actually follow the (sociocratic) rules much more strictly. This expert reportedly suggested another form of representation that can be applied in the selection and integration process of new inhabitants of Ecovillage Terra. Instead of applying consent decision-making with all 24 members when deciding on new members, this expert says meetings with all inhabitants should be reserved for social cohesion and information sharing, and that these decisions could easily be made by an elected delegation of the group:

"[This external expert] says 'no, you shouldn't do it like that. Those communal evenings are much more for the social cohesions and also a bit for sharing information, but also just having a good time with each other. The full group of inhabitants can then give a few people the commitment to concern themselves with the new inhabitants. That is just a delegation of the community'" - Respondent C.

6.2.2 Ecovillage Nova

Foundational Principle 1: Consent decision-making

Ecovillage Nova reportedly follows the official steps in the consent decision-making process (in the order of Clarifying Questions, Quick Reactions, Consent) in line with the Foundational Principle 1: Consent decision-making as described in the SKM method. There are a number of alterations that Ecovillage Nova has added in their sociocratic decision-making approach, as well as several bigger challenges and problems that they experience in the consent decision-making process.

Firstly, in the forming of the proposals to be voted on in the sociocratic meetings, Ecovillage Nova (when appropriate) uses a very specific project plan format that includes the estimated cost, people involved, total time span and motivation for the project, in its proposal. Ecovillage Nova has adapted this project plan format from the author Damaris Matthijsen, who describes the concept of the 'DeelGenootschap' in her book 'Vrij, Gelijk, Samen'. This is an (influential) book that provides practical tools for transforming society and the economy towards more humane and sustainable practices, with a specific focus on community cooperation. (Matthijsen, 2023). (During the course of this research, multiple inhabitants from different ecovillages have spoken about this book, and case ecovillage Ecovillage Luna also reports on using practices described in this book.) Although the respondents mostly described the sense of inspiration that Matthijsen inspires, they also note a few challenges coming up for them in following this method. One of the described issues is that following the DeelGenootschap approach causes some community members to negate the sociocratic principles, being too much in a 'doing mode' and too focused on their individual passions rather than the communal interest. This has to do with the focus of taking initiative from your own energy and passion in the concept of the DeelGenootschap:

"In the DeelGenootschap it is important to 'live your star'; that is how it is called, which refers to doing things from your own sense of enthusiasm and such. But it can happen that you find your own 'star', but lose sight a bit of what the community needs. That can happen" - Respondent A.

"He has gotten used to take his own decisions so much with building and stuff, that [while his project has not been consented upon yet] in the meantime, he has just already started doing it. That is a bit... A bit tough to confront him with. Yeah. Or people that have ideas, and see their 'star' in it, 'I want this', but then we have to say 'well, too bad, because you can't just start projects on your own'. We have rules that you can only start projects with more than one person. [...] Having to do all those meetings is tough for people that are more in the 'doing' mode. Maybe with Sociocracy you have more meetings than elsewhere." - Respondent A.

Another alteration that Ecovillage Nova has made to their consent decision-making process is that they have added the possibility to supersede a continued block of a decision that is important for the continued survival of the ecovillage, with a supermajority vote. This has never been put into effect, but can protect the community against the possibility of a member purposely trying to disrupt the community:

"We have said that if it is very important at that moment for the continued survival of the ecovillage, that it touches on essential things for that survival, it says in our bylaws that then at some point we can decide with a majority plus a few. [...] If for whatever reason someone is trying to hinder or mess up things on purpose - that hasn't happened yet - but then you should be prepared for that. We learned that from examples of other communities." - Respondent A.

Ecovillage Nova also has come up with an alteration to the need to participate in (every) consent decision. As will be discussed more thoroughly under the sections of Foundational Principle 2 and 3, many decisions at Ecovillage Nova are directed by the General Circle to be made by the 'bewonerskring'; by all inhabitants together. Given that Ecovillage Nova has more than 30 adult (voting) members, it takes a lot of time and effort from its inhabitants to decide on most issues together. This is why Ecovillage Nova is experimenting with the ability for people to opt out of decision-making. How this goes in practice is that a well-prepared agenda of the decisions to be made in the meeting, with the approximate time stamps on which these will be made, is shared with all the voting members, who can then ahead of time decide (in writing) that they wish not to be present at the consent decision meeting:

"We do that now, where we prepare the agenda in such a way that it is clear at what time a certain topic will be discussed, potentially with decision-making. But for now, let's say it is with decision-making added. People can then also choose if they want to be present for that. If people are not interested in the topic, they are free not to come. They just have to confirm that first, because you can't come back on it the day after; 'no, but actually I don't agree to this'. No, you were able to be there but you chose not to be. But people that can't be there because they have other things to do then say this a day in advance. Then, after the minutes of the meeting have been released, they have the chance to give or not give their consent within 5 days after." - Respondent A.

There are a number of problems and challenges that Ecovillage Nova faces in the area of objections in a consent decision-making meeting. Firstly, it has been reported that decisions often get blocked while the block has little to do with the topic or proposal at hand, and more with personal issues or old sorrows. There is a reported underlying issue here with the feeling of not being heard:

"There are frequent interventions from people that do not feel heard. Or, yes, if we would go back to the example of the office units, then there is often old hurt. Then we go to the input round, and everything is clear. But then at the reactions round, things like 'But last time you also did not take me into account. Then you placed that ugly bike rack' are said. Right? So, that kind of old hurt has nothing to do with a new proposal. But regularly it is expressed that 'you never take me into account'." - Respondent B.

Another reported issue at Ecovillage Nova is that often when consent is not given, this is done by individuals who are not very involved with the topic, or not properly prepared for the meeting by for example reading all the papers necessary in advance of the meeting:

"Where it sometimes goes wrong with us, is that someone gives an objection while they are insufficiently involved. So take for example the helophyte filter; if you do not read all the papers, and don't read about all the pros and cons, and everything that has already been clarified in detail, then it can still be that someone gives their paramount objection. And that slows it down. Without a better proposal coming! Because a better proposal is sometimes possible, but most of the time it isn't, right? Because the best options have already been explored by [...] two circles that weighed 3 alternatives and came up with option A being the best." - Respondent B.

Although not stated directly by the respondent, this reported issue brings up the question of why objections can be accepted as 'reasoned and paramount', when the individual is (apparently / clearly) not able to reason their objection according to the prepared materials. The Respondent continues this argument by explaining how part of the problem here has to do with objections and resistance only coming up during consent rounds (with often all the inhabitants), while a lot of these concerns could instead be explored and tackled outside of the official sociocratic consent decision meeting, in an informal setting, through talking with the individuals or project leaders who have already extensively researched the topic, so as to educate themselves or express their concerns:

"But you can also just walk up to the project leader or the person making the proposal. And if you have a gut feeling, or you don't see this as a good idea, or want to know how this will go; Well, then you can go and have a coffee with that person. And then you can, one on one, share your concern or ask for explanations. What sometimes happens now is that this probing and preparing well, and asking your questions in advance, doesn't happen. And then, in a meeting with 20, 30 people, it can lead to a stalemate, which delays things enormously." - Respondent B.

Foundational Principle 2: Circle Structure

Ecovillage Nova works both with the Sociocratic circle structure and with 'projects' as adapted from the 'Deelgenootschap' method developed by Damaris Matthijssen. The last 5 years, Ecovillage Nova has alternated the way they structured their organization, and the circles they have, according to either one of these methods, but they reportedly are now focused on the Sociocratic circle structure since 2 years. Ecovillage Nova currently has 4 main circles; the LVP (land, food and permaculture) circle, the Building circle, the GV (community forming circle) and the Facilities circle. The BSK ('basiskring') is their name for the General Circle.

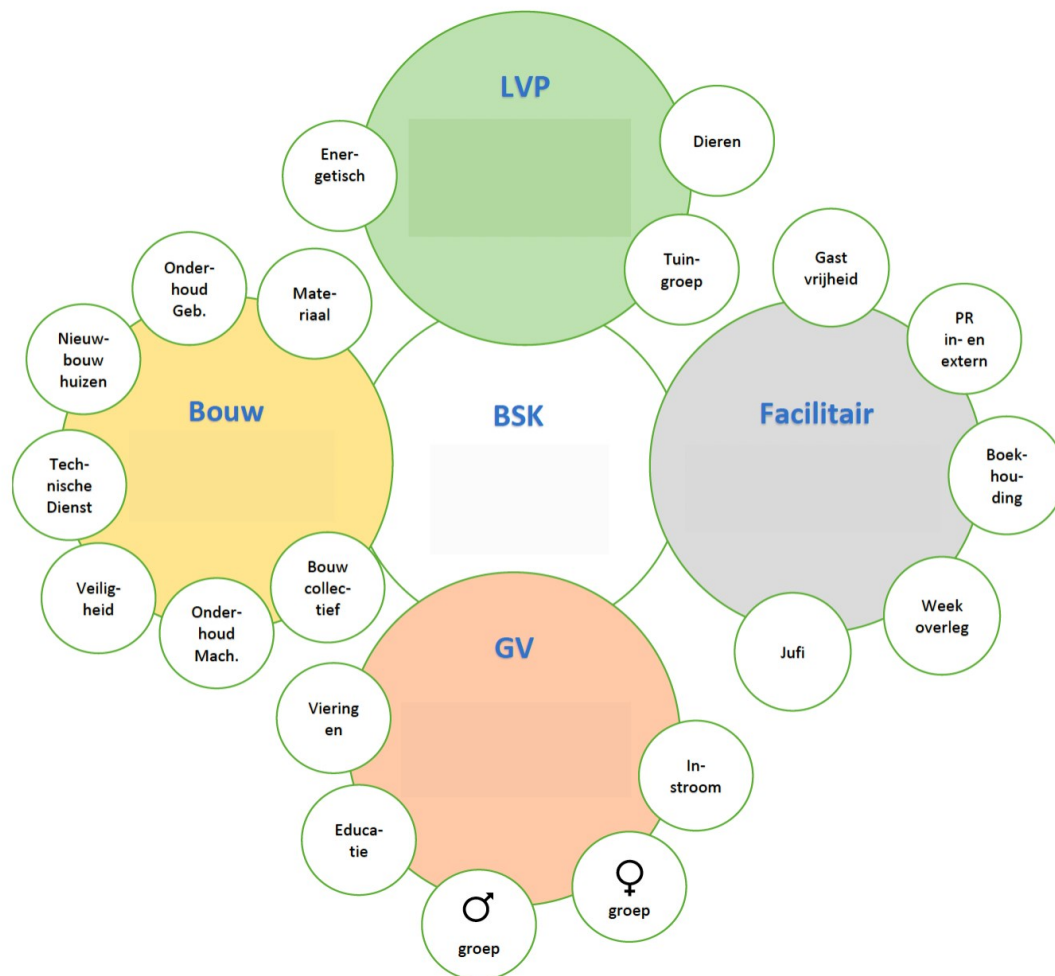


Figure 9: The Circle Organization of Ecovillage Nova (as adopted from their internal document. The full document will not be shared due to privacy reasons)

Ecovillage Nova has a very significant deviation from the SKM approach in their General Circle approach. The General Circle of Ecovillage Nova is responsible for deciding the route of how a proposal, that needs to be voted on, is entered into the community. The GC decides if a proposal is 'ripe enough' (detailed enough and thought through), and if it is domain-transcending - falling outside of the domain of any single circle. In this case, the GC directs the proposal to be voted upon by all the inhabitants together (in a circle that they call the BK). The latter BK comes together once a month, and includes full inhabitants, aspiring inhabitants, and introductory members ('kennismakers'):

"The General Circle does not decide. The General Circle looks where a decision has to be made. [...] So the General Circle always decides the route to be taken, and makes sure that all the circles make their budgets." - Respondent B.

It is noteworthy here that the General Circle of Ecovillage Nova does not have decision power on proposals, and that every circle-transcending ('overkoepelende') decision outside of an individual circle's domain, is voted on by every inhabitant (in the BK) through consent rounds, instead of by the General Circle. This is directly opposed to the SKM principles (2 and 3), which state that the General Circle should carry the responsibility of deciding on circle-transcending issues.

Closely related to this lack of a decentralization of decision-making is the finding that for a long time, Ecovillage Nova has not had clearly demarcated domains or tasks for its main circles, making it difficult to know when a certain proposal needs to be consented upon within a circle, or by everyone (in the 'bewonerskring', the circle with all the members):

"There is a clear description of what their task is, what their domain is, and they also have a certain budget. We are giving more shape to that now. At first we did not do this, but this year, we have two people that are really good at that. We set up a multiple year plan, and now all the groups and circles have a certain budget for the year, and they are free to spend within that budget." - Respondent A.

"The budget is important here. If it concerns a project or action that will cost more than that certain amount of money, a circle can't decide for itself. [The budget] is not the most important [factor in determining who decides on a topic], but it plays a role. And yeah, it is a bit... Look, sometimes it is not very clear, then the circle doesn't know it well at all either. - Respondent A.

The overarching issue that was reported to be experienced at Ecovillage Nova is that there is a general uncertainty about what gets decided where. The General Circle at Ecovillage Nova decides if a proposal is ready to be voted on, or needs more preparation first. Then, it decides if it fits within the domain (and/or budget) of a specific circle, in which case the consent decision making is directed to be in that circle itself, or if the proposal is domain-transcending, in which case it is directed to be voted on in the BK, the circle with all the inhabitants. However, the General Circle is reported to often leave ambiguity in who decides what, and not take a decisive stand, but instead suggest to those who bring a proposal to the GC that is not clearly within a specific domain or budget, to instead organize an 'information night', the purpose for which is not entirely clear:

"And then there is a proposal [from the General Circle] to 'then organize an information night', right? Then everybody can have their say. But then it is an interesting question; why do we do that? Because everybody can say something about [the proposal for temporary new sleeping units, the options for which have already been extensively researched by the respective responsible person] [...] but then it is not entirely clear what the value of that input is." - Respondent B.

Foundational Principle 3: Double Linking

Ecovillage Nova has only applied the Double Link in their General Circle (BSK) since a relatively short period. Before that, only the Coordinators of each circle were in the General Circle, but there were no Representatives. Thus, the Double Link has not been applied for the majority of the community's existence. One reported reason for this is because members doubted if there were enough people to fill all the roles. Ecovillage Nova finally applied the Double Link because certain members kept insisting that it had to be applied in Sociocracy. The others finally accepted this:

"[The Double Link is challenging when you don't have many members], Yeah, that's why we did not start with that, we never did the Double Link. We just had the coordinators [in the General Circle] and we just started that, because that calling came. We set up a separate organization circle this year that concerns itself with that. [...] Multiple people from there were hammering down that the Double Link is really necessary. And then we thought 'Yeah, okay, Sociocracy, okay, I suppose that's needed then'. [...] But yeah, like you said, do we have enough people for that?" - Respondent A.

Ecovillage Nova is now experimenting with the Double Link. One such experiment is that the Representatives now have the choice if they want to attend decision-making meetings in the General Circle (BSK), or not:

"We have gone from a General Circle meeting weekly, to a bi-weekly meeting. And the representatives can choose if they join that or not. So it is up to them what they want to do. But the task of the representatives, we are basically still figuring out. That hasn't fully settled for us yet. So we use Sociocracy, but we use our own form. We do not want to put more importance on the 'form' than on what lives in our community. So that comes into expression for example with the representatives." - Respondent A.

Again, even though the representatives are reportedly added to the General Circle now, the alteration in which representatives can choose to opt out of General Circle meetings goes against the Double Linking principles of SKM. Overall, it can be said that Ecovillage Nova has not applied the Double Link for most of its existence, and is now only starting to figure it out. This is also apparent / related to the fact that they have only started defining proper domains and tasks for circles since about one year.

Foundational Principle 4: Sociocratic Elections

Ecovillage Nova reportedly follows the principle of the Sociocratic Elections according to the SKM requirements. In the case of the election of a Coordinator, a profile of the qualities that the Coordinator of a specific circle should possess is made first. Input for these qualities is first asked in the overall inhabitant circle (BK). In the BK, people can name people and state why they think those people are suited for the role. That is noted down, and taken to the General Circle (BSK). The General Circle is the one who makes the decision on who becomes the Coordinator of the respective circle. This is also according to the SKM principles. The Coordinator has to be a full member of Ecovillage Nova, and can not be an aspiring member. The coordinator is voted on anonymously, using pieces of paper. Representatives are chosen within the respective circle, and are also allowed to be aspiring inhabitants (not full members yet).

Ecovillage Nova has multiple noteworthy adaptations to their sociocratic elections. One adaptation that they have made is that they added a rule that no two members of a (romantic) couple are allowed to be part of the General Circle. Although no direct reason was given for this, it can be presumed that this rule was made to avoid the banding together, or the power dynamics, of one 'household' being more represented in the General Circle than the rest.

"We have a lot of couples at the ecovillage. We don't want to have couples in the General Circle, for example." - Respondent B.

There is another finding that is very noteworthy about the sociocratic elections of Ecovillage Nova. There is a reported general sentiment that the founding members of the ecovillage have on the one hand, much more of a desire to have a say in everything than the members that joined later, and on the other hand these founding members generally do not feel heard enough, or represented enough in the forming and guiding of new projects, or other decisions. Therefore, Ecovillage Nova has chosen to purposely elect these founding members in the role of Representatives in the General Circle, so that they feel more heard:

"To say it very generalized: the founding members, at least a few of them, did not feel heard enough. And that is about small and big decisions. And again very generalized: the people that joined as the second, third, and fourth group, they feel heard just fine, or think it's okay. [...] So, those people were elected to be the representatives in the General Circle. And in the General Circle, some more projects come in at a starting phase. And I believe that helps. That they feel more heard, or more involved with the emergence of projects etcetera." - Respondent B.

Although technically speaking this decision to elect (only) the founding members as the representatives in the General Circle, could be made sociocratically, it seems that in this case the representatives are not chosen according to a clear profile of the role, or the best objectively fitting person to this profile, but for an alternative reason. This does not follow the (conventional) SKM requirements.

6.2.3 Ecovillage Luna

Foundational Principle 1: Consent decision-making

Ecovillage Luna reportedly follows the official steps in the consent decision-making process (in the order of Clarifying Questions, Quick Reactions, Consent) in line with the Foundational Principle 1: Consent decision-making as described in the SKM method. As will be discussed more extensively in the later sections, this is mostly the (highest) extent to which Ecovillage Luna follows Sociocracy (they do not seem to follow foundational principle 2, 3 and 4 according to the SKM requirements).

While Ecovillage Luna does not show noteworthy alterations to the sociocratic consent decision-making approach as described in the SKM method, they do reportedly have a somewhat diverging approach to their objections. One main reported finding from Ecovillage Luna is that there

is a very subjective and/or widely interpretable nature with regards to an objection being accepted or not, as well as in the explanation of the objection themselves:

"It is still up to the group if the objection gets accepted or not. So you have to argue it so that it gets accepted by the group. So somewhere, it stays subjective. You put a lot of frameworks, and you assume good intentions, and, you know, you try to find bridges. But it stays subjective. At least, that is how I perceive it." - Respondent A.

"[What a 'reasoned' objection needs to be weighed against?] Yeah, that's a hard one. I suppose it is a combination, and dependent on the topic. It can definitely have to do with us, with our desires, with our mission and vision. [...] So yeah, we attach it to the financial, we attach it to the mission / vision, but also more the personal themes. So if we let someone in the community, then it has to do with an element of safety, with a feeling, with a click. So it is very dependent on the topic, how we weigh the objections. And if a feeling of safety or unsafety is concerned, that is rock solid [and doesn't need to be argued further]." - Respondent B.

Named grounds for arguing for an objection include weighing the arguments against their mission and vision, financials, personal themes or even arguing from the perspective of the ecology of Ecovillage Luna. Regarding how the mission / vision / aim statements of Ecovillage Luna relate to the basis of the justification of objections, there is reportedly a challenge in how widely such a mission / vision can be interpreted:

"Well, again, we are pretty small, we are the community. We recently had a sort of strategy meeting, which we called 'are all the noses still facing the same direction?'. But we found out that all our noses are facing to the place, [Ecovillage Luna], but we are not all facing the same direction. [...] And even if you define [the mission] very well, people will always interpret it in different ways. [...] We can find ourselves in our shared values, which we really believe in. But in this case - we try to have an ecological footprint as small as possible and [the decision to have cats on the property even though an expert stated that the ecology of Ecovillage Luna could not handle that] was not according to this value. So just that argumentation alone didn't hold up. [...] Sometimes you have to find compromises to move forward." - Respondent A.

Personal trauma or inner conflict reportedly regularly comes up in the explanation of the objection. In this case, the circle will try to understand where this is coming from. This can be during the same decision-making meeting but it may be moved to a later moment as well:

"Someone that is very negative, like 'no, no, no'; yeah, you have to explain why 'no'. And if that is something that has to do with a personal thing, like 'I have a trauma here' or whatever, then that person has to try to fix that themselves, and they can't fully stop the process. And the way I experienced that myself, is that then you hear each other out and try to understand where the internal battle is, where the conflict is coming from. What is stopping you from agreeing to this proposal? And that evokes positivity." - Respondent A.

Foundational Principle 2: Circle Structure

Ecovillage Luna reportedly does not follow the principle of the Circle Organization. Both respondents say they had not heard of the concept, or do not follow it:

"Well, actually we do not yet work with [sociocratic circles]. At least, it has not been defined like that, in my experience." - Respondent A.

Ecovillage Luna do have their different departments (or circles), including the domains of Garden, Maintenance, Volunteers, Facility Care, Organization, Community and Marketing. The community of Ecovillage Luna is so small (11 adults) that multiple circles have just one person. Ecovillage Luna does not have a General Circle. Each circle - sometimes person - can make decisions within their own domain up to a budget of €500. Any amount higher than that automatically makes it domain-transcending ('overkoepelend'). For decisions with a higher budget or decisions that are more impactful, the entire community carries out consent decision-making together:

"Well, we try to decentralize to move forward with things. So in theory, in your own circle, you can make your own decisions. This is always the case up to the €500. And if you want more than that, you need everybody's consent. [...] But what I like about [the more informal way of checking if the group agrees with a decision when someone has initiative] the most is that you don't stop the energy. So if someone feels energy for something, you go along with that. That is a pleasant thing. We do more energy management than time management." - Respondent A.

Ecovillage Luna works with an alternative approach called the "DeelGenootschap", as adjusted from the book of Damaris Matthijssen. Whenever a new (temporary) project starts, it is done through the structure of the DeelGenootschap. And when one wants to have a say into the specific details of that project, that person is encouraged to step into that DeelGenootschap to have decision power:

"And that is why we work a bit with DeelGenootschappen. So if you really want to have your say about something: step into that DeelGenootschap. Otherwise you have to - harshly said - shut up and put your trust in the others." - Respondent B.

Although Ecovillage Luna does not have a General Circle, they are an officially registered association, with a board that does hold some decision power. Only full inhabitants are part of the association (9 individuals). There are 3 people on the board of the association. The board takes care of accounting, initiating general meetings with its members, and legal matters. Also, if external mediation is needed, the board is responsible for this. In the general members meetings, budgets are approved, and members joining or leaving are formalized. Although the association and its board are the first 'safety net' for these matters, they do not assume a guiding or leading role:

"The board of the association is comprised of 3 members; the chairman, the secretary and the treasurer. And then there are a number of people that are the official members of the association - I think we are 9 now. Eventually you want to, you know - we are board members and domain-transcending, but that does not take away from the fact that we still do everything based on consent, and everybody is still involved." - Respondent B.

Foundational Principle 3: Double Linking

Both interviewees stated that they did not know about the principle of the Double Link. Upon the explanation of the Double Linking principle, they stated that Ecovillage Luna does not apply a Double Link, because they do not have representatives. It was reportedly not a conscious choice to leave out the Double Link, but instead it was just never installed in the first place:

"Well, we don't have that, because we also do not have representatives. [...] And no, not applying the Double Link was not a conscious choice, because if it was, I would know more about it [laughing]. Yeah, but it is probably because we are so small. Because actually, you know, we have circles that are just comprised of one person, so then..." - Respondent A.

Foundational Principle 4: Sociocratic Elections

Ecovillage Luna does not apply the principle of the Sociocratic Election according to the SKM requirements. There are no reported clear role descriptions and subsequent nominations of members according to those descriptions, but at Ecovillage Luna, distributing the different roles goes organically, and roles are chosen based on personal preference; "I like this or I like that". People share that they have the ambition to fill a certain role when it comes available. Reportedly, Ecovillage Luna focuses more on following people's natural energy for a topic, something they feel inclined to do because of their small size:

"It was more from the personal side, like, 'I like this and I like that'. [...] Again, because we are small, we have to accept that not everything can get done. So then, what do you commit energy to and what not? [...] If you let people do what they like, they become much more efficient as well." - Respondent A.

When two (or more) individuals share the desire to take on a certain role, this has generally been resolved by a private conversation between the two. For roles in the Ecovillage Luna association, if multiple people would still want to take on the same role after a conversation about it, the members would reportedly take a vote:

"In the example of the treasurer, someone let that position go and now I am taking that role. Well, if someone else would have wanted that role as well, then we would have voted on it. Then the association members would have to vote on that. Actually there was someone else that showed interest, but we talked about it, about our motivations for it, and came to the conclusion together that she would take a step back and that I would take the role." - Respondent B.

Ecovillage Luna does not perform any kind of (intermediate) evaluation of how (well) individuals take on roles. One of the respondents stated that the community tries to address/ confront each other when something is not going well, but that they mostly focus on "positive reinforcement". There have been reported challenges at Ecovillage Luna with this addressing / confronting each other:

"You know, confronting others, speaking out, is nerve-wrecking for some people, for many. To really hold a mirror in front of someone. You know, that can be nerve-wrecking. So sometimes there is tension, or emotion that comes up in that process. [...] Confronting others or holding them accountable does not always happen. There is still growth possible in that area." - Respondent B.

6.3 Cross-case analysis & Validation interviews

Foundational Principle 1: Consent Decision-Making

Across all 3 ecovillages under study, it has been observed that the steps of the consent decision-making meetings according to the SKM method have been followed, in which a proposal is entered into the group, after which there is a round of Claring Questions, then Quick Reactions and finally a Consent round, and where in each round each individual is asked by a facilitator to speak one by one. There are a few noteworthy alterations found under this principle (role of the Heartkeeper at Ecovillage Terra; the project plan of the DeelGenootschap for proposals, as well as the option for supermajority voting in case of a malicious objection in Ecovillage Nova; and the implementation of the DeelGenootschap in proposals in Ecovillage Luna as well).

There are two generalizable findings that came back across all three cases under study. One finding is that all three ecovillages have reported there being a lack of a clear, consistent idea of what constitutes a valid objection ('reasoned and paramount', or 'overwegend beargumenteerd bezwaar'). The concept of the reasoned and paramount objection is at the core of the SKM method and its functioning. The unclarity around it and the subsequent subjectivities cluttering the consistency of the decision-making process have caused problems in the investigated cases. This main finding was discussed with the validation experts. In the following section, the responses of the validation experts to this main finding are given (including their perceived generalizability of the result for Dutch ecovillages as a whole, and their interpretation of the findings). To add additional clarity, fitting thoughts from the interview with expert 1 are reiterated to give more context to the interpretation of the findings:

Main Finding 1: All three ecovillages report frequent problems with there being a lack of a clear, consistent idea of what constitutes a valid objection ('overwegend beargumenteerd bezwaar')

Expert Interpretations

Both Validation Experts confirm that this is a finding that they recognize, and see across (Dutch) ecovillages using Sociocracy. They confirm the generalizability of this result.

Expert 1 and expert 2 both hint towards a possible reasoning for why this is a frequent problem among Dutch Ecovillages, in that this is caused by a lack of education or experience; that there is a certain belief, or mindset, that needs to be trained where objections are perceived as opportunities for improvement of a proposal, rather than a "block". Expert 1 mentions the importance of good facilitation skills, guiding the circle in articulating objections with reason, not personal preference, emotions or feelings.

Expert 3 emphasizes that this is a problem that is more apparent in ecovillages than in a company, because in a company the scope of purposes (against which objections are argued) is very limited, while in an ecovillage there is an overwhelming complexity of purposes that its people hold.

The valuable (international) insights of expert 3 showed itself in his comparison of the specific issue of the unclarity of the valid objection, between ecovillages in the Netherlands, which tend to only use the traditional SKM method - in which a valid objection has to be measured against the Mission, Vision, or Aim - as compared to a number of other Sociocracy "spin-offs", such as Sociocracy 3.0, Holacracy, and 02, that according to him, have in their own way "solved" the issue at hand by relating to the 'purpose' of the organization and its implications for what constitutes a valid objection, in a completely different way.

Another generalizable finding that came back across all three cases under study, is that all of the three Dutch ecovillages under study report that frequently, emotions come up during decision-making meetings, slowing down the consent decision-making process and causing additional friction between members. Two of the 3 ecovillages have tried to mitigate this by installing separate sharing circles / meetings, in which these emotions can be shared so they do not interfere with the decision-making process. Despite these efforts, this perceived problem still remains. This main finding has been discussed with the validation experts.

Main Finding 2: All three ecovillages report frequent problems with emotions and tensions coming up during decision-making meetings

Expert Interpretations

All three experts mention this issue as extremely common, not only among Dutch ecovillages, but among Sociocracy practitioners across the board. Expert 1 describes that this is a deep rooted issue that goes beyond Sociocracy, because it has to do with behavioral patterns that are written into our DNA. Expert 2 explains this finding by pointing towards the influence of personal trauma, which everybody carries with them. He emphasizes that unless there is an active approach towards asking the members of the ecovillage to look in the mirror, and be willing to face their own issues for the benefit of the communal interests, this problem can be almost impossible to resolve. Expert 2 says that there is still a lot of 'informal leadership', that a lot of people still try to be the boss, even though this goes against Sociocratic thinking. He points to subconscious "power play" as one of the main explanations for the high amount of tensions and emotions coming up. He agrees that emotions should be discussed in sharing meetings, not in decision meetings.

Expert 3 suggests two important things that are often overlooked, that exacerbate this problem. One of those things is that it is often overlooked, especially in ecovillages - because they adopt Sociocracy in and of its own, without having an existing (company) governance structure to lay it on top of - is that in SKM there should be a distinction between *policy meetings* and *operations meetings*; not everything should be (consent based) policy decisions. Because policy decisions affect everybody in the future, and create limitations to people's freedom. This is controversial, and creates a lot of emotions and problems.

Another important point that expert 3 touches upon is that there is a distinction that is often overseen. Making people feel heard, which is a central ideology of SKM and Sociocracy in general, is encouraged in the structure of the SKM consent-decision making steps through the '(Quick) Reactions round'. Here, everybody is allowed to say anything they want, is not limited to non-violence, and is

allowed to bring up emotions. So expert 3 points here to the fact that bringing up emotions, or even tensions, is allowed in this specific step of the consent decision-making structure of SKM, which is mostly intended to make people feel heard. But expert 3 states that this does not mean that one's reaction qualifies as a reason, when going to the next round; the objection round (Consent round). He explains that it is common in Dutch SKM that the facilitator will allow a person that is giving an objection based on emotions, not reason, to be heard, but expect them to resolve their own issues and have a reasoned argument in the next meeting.

Foundational Principle 2: Circle Structure

When looking at the circle (organization) structure of the three ecovillages under study, the Dutch ecovillages (under study) reportedly all use different ways to structure their Sociocratic Circles, and centralize or decentralize their decision-making. At least two out of the three ecovillages do not follow the SKM principle that the General Circle - representing a smaller delegation of the communal interests, with coordinators and elected representatives from each next-lower circle - makes consent decisions about domain-transcending topics (crossing an individual circle's domain or budget). Ecovillage Terra does apply a General Circle with decision-making power over the ecovillage as a whole (though with an extra role of a 'general coordinator' added to it). Ecovillage Nova has a General Circle that only decides whether a proposal from a next-lower circle is ready for a consent decision meeting, but does not have decision-power on circle transcending topics, and instead almost without exception send this decision-making responsibility to the circle that includes *all* of its inhabitants (and/or creating general confusion about 'who gets to decide'). In the case of the last ecovillage, Ecovillage Luna, there is no General Circle applied at all. While they do have budgets and domains for individual circles (or in the case of the small population of Ecovillage Luna, persons), they default to deciding on the circle transcending topics with everybody in the community. This main finding has not been discussed (in any official capacity) with the validation experts, because at the time of writing it was not found to be a similarity, thus not 'generalizable' by the researcher, not deemed relevant to share with the Validation Experts. However, it could be argued that it might still be generalizable for Dutch ecovillages as a whole, when looking at it from a different perspective and saying the generalizable point is actually that all ecovillages have a different approach to 'what gets decided where' (see Discussion). The finding is stylized in the following way:

Main Finding 3: All three ecovillages have a different approach to 'what gets decided where'

Foundational Principle 3: Double Linking

When looking at the Double Linking principle of SKM, it has been observed that across all Dutch ecovillages under study, Foundational Principle 3: Double Linking has been reported to have been let go (for a period of time), or never applied.

Ecovillage Ecovillage Luna never applied it at all, and both respondents report to never have heard of the principle in the first place. This is in line with the general finding that Ecovillage Luna seems to only apply Sociocracy in the capacity of SKM's Foundational Principle 1: Consent decision-making, but not further.

Ecovillage Terra had applied the Double Link early on but purposely removed it for a long (but temporary) period of time, in which only the circle's coordinators were in the General Circle), bringing it back later. Reasons given for this are on the one hand that there were too few inhabitants to fill all the roles, resulting in an unnecessary and impractical ('over') representation of each other, but on the other hand, reported stagnation in the General Circle with people not giving consent, therefore needing to cut the General Circle in half to make it easier to get consent decisions.

Ecovillage Nova has only applied the Double Link recently, having had a General Circle with only the individual circle's coordinators for most of the community's lifespan. The reason for the eventual implementation of adding the role of the Representatives in the General Circle reportedly came from a push from members of the organization circle, 'hammering down' that the Double Link is necessary in Sociocracy, which was finally accepted by the rest. However, the role of the representatives (in the General Circle) is still not solidified at Ecovillage Nova, and they are still experimenting with its implementation.

This main finding of the Double Link being removed / not applied at all three ecovillages was shared with the validation experts.

Main Finding 4: All three Ecovillages have in some way removed the Double Link

Expert Interpretations

In the context given by expert 1, it was mentioned that it frequently happens that in ecovillages, the role of the representative (in the Double Link) is not applied. She points to two things in her explanation. Firstly, she mentions that people (in ecovillages) tend to get 'scared' of this new idea of a representative, while they are used to just having a leader or manager, and thus default (back) to only having this 'top down' and not 'bottom up' structure. Secondly, she mentions that the Double Link is often let go because people in ecovillages generally are protective of their time, since most have other main responsibilities (jobs, etc.) next to their commitment to the ecovillage, and therefore do not feel like they have the time to also sit in on meetings in the General Circle as a representative. Expert 1 does emphasize that ecovillages and communities often overlook how much a hierarchy (of abstraction) in Sociocracy in the form of a Double Link can actually free up a lot of time, energy and emotional commitments of its individual members. And that it is generally hard for people in communities and ecovillages to accept that they can no longer directly decide on the issues discussed in the General Circle, while at the start of the community they were part of every decision.

Both validation experts state that they recognize this finding, and that this is something that they have seen happen more often in (Dutch) ecovillages, but also in other organizations in their experience. Both validation experts say that applying the Double Link is the only thing that ensures that there can not be a hierarchy of people, but only a hierarchy of responsibilities (or abstraction). Similar to expert 1, expert 2 points to the dominant mechanical worldview in western society, in which hierarchies of power are abundant, as a possible reason for ecovillages to default to these hierarchies, and to be tempted to let go of the Double Link (resulting in only coordinators, but no representatives being in the General Circle). Expert 3 offers an interesting perspective on why ecovillages tend to let go of the Double Link; an often overlooked distinction (most prevalent in ecovillages that adopt the 'empty' method of Sociocracy without having a pre-existing governance structure) between *policy* meetings and *operational* meetings. By naturally assuming that every decision has to be a *policy* decision, going against the intentions of Endenburg, an ecovillage creates an enormous demand for, and strain upon, the Double Link, which infers a huge 'cost' to applying it. Expert 3 emphasizes in this respect that Endenburg's SKM is an *additional update* to an existing

structure with operational meetings, leadership roles and some autonomy, but it is not a complete program. And when applied like it is a complete program, ecovillages tend to overuse consent (*policy*) decision-making.

Foundational Principle 4: Sociocratic Elections

Overall, there were not any significant, generalizable results found on the principle of the Sociocratic election. The ecovillages generally did not report many problems with their elections, and seem to have their own ways of applying the principle.

Noteworthy is that while Ecovillage Terra generally follows the SKM approach in their Sociocratic elections, they reportedly do not strictly specify the role requirements or evaluation criteria with it.

Ecovillage Nova follows the SKM approach to the Sociocratic elections. They have made two noteworthy adaptations. Firstly, they do not allow both members of a romantic couple to be elected into the same General Circle. And secondly, they have purposely elected the founding members of the ecovillage into the General Circle as representatives, in an attempt to tackle the reported feeling of founding members 'not being heard enough', making them more involved in the emergence of (new) projects. While it is somewhat ambiguous if this is Sociocratic, it is certainly noteworthy that the first focus of the election of the representatives here is not on the profile of the role described, and the fit of the person to this profile, but instead on other personal reasons.

Ecovillage Luna does not follow the principle of the Sociocratic election (role selection is very informal, and the only official voting happens in the board roles of its association). But this can be expected with the lack of a Double Link, or a General Circle, and a very small population.

7. Discussion & Conclusion

7.1 A brief summary of the main findings

For this discussion, let us go back to the research question that was posed as the central focus of this study:

"How do Dutch Ecovillages apply Sociocracy & which challenges do they face in applying the method?"

The objective of this study was twofold; on the one hand, find out how Dutch ecovillages apply Sociocracy, and on the other hand, find out which challenges they face in the application of the method. Summarized very shortly, this study found that the Dutch ecovillages (under study) do not apply the principles of SKM Sociocracy rigorously, and have significantly adjusted, removed or simply never followed the respective principles.

While all the investigated Dutch ecovillages seemed to follow the most important foundational principle of Sociocracy, Consent Decision-making (and the structured steps through which to consent to a proposal), there is a reported problem with the (un)clarity around the validity of objections to proposals, as to when an objection can be considered reasoned and paramount (Main Finding 1). This issue is generalizable to Dutch ecovillages in general, according to the experts interviewed. Secondly, all the investigated Dutch ecovillages reported problems with emotions and tensions coming up during decision-making meetings (Main Finding 2), which seems to be a problem not exclusive to ecovillages, but Sociocracy practitioners in general, according to the experts. Thirdly, it was found that all three ecovillages have a different approach to 'what gets decided where' (Main Finding 3). Of the 3 cases, two did not apply a General Circle with decision-making power on (circle) domain-transcending topics and proposals, defaulting to 'deciding with everyone' when in doubt, which is not in line with the SKM principles as taught by the Sociocratic Center Netherlands. Finally, an important deviation from the Sociocratic Circle Method was observed across all ecovillages in the removal of SKM principle 3, the Double Link (Main Finding 4). All experts interviewed state this as a more common, but problematic, phenomenon among Dutch ecovillages and ecovillages in general.

7.2 Discussion of the main findings

Main Finding 1 is in line with the findings from Christian (2023), who emphasizes the difficulties of applying Sociocracy with a widely interpretable Mission, Vision and Aim often found in ecovillages. Christian (2012; 2013) explains how Sociocracy works best (as an alternative to traditional consensus) for ecovillages and communities with a clear purpose. Because according to the SKM method, objections have to be weighed against the communities' mission / vision / aim, and because ecovillages have much more complicated and widely interpretable purpose statements than conventional organizations, Main Finding 1 could have been expected, and is not out of the ordinary (Sociocratisch Centrum Nederland, 2020; Christian, 2023). This analysis adds to the existing literature in that it gives concrete examples of the specific (subjective) reasons that are given for objections, the problems they can cause, and the way (Dutch) ecovillages try to deal with them.

Main Finding 2 is consistent with SKM founder, Gerard Endenburg's paper describing the advantages and disadvantages of applying Sociocracy, where he names how the method "requires careful implementation planning, necessitates training in new concepts, may arouse varying intense emotions during implementation" (Buck & Endenburg, 2012, p. 21). In the context interview conducted with Sociocratisch Centrum trainer Jette Schneiders, it was highlighted how little ecovillages actually commit to Sociocracy training, while at the same time highlighting that it takes a lot of training to get rid of old behavior patterns and internal power struggles. Without this extensive training, it is logical that the same issues with (negative emotions due to) power dynamics that exist in many other forms of decision-making (corporate hierarchies, consensus, cooperatives, representative democracy) are present in the case of Sociocracy, too (March & Simon, 1993; Hamilton & Gioia, 2010). But since in Sociocracy, every member of a circle is asked to speak and share their opinions, one by one, this might just expose underlying tensions that were already there to begin with, rather than the method exacerbating them. In conclusion, Main Finding 2 could have been expected according to the literature, and does not come as a surprise to the researcher. This analysis adds to the literature in that it shows different (practical) approaches that Dutch ecovillages have taken to deal with this issue, as well as expert interpretations of underlying reasons for its occurrence.

Main Finding 3 is not consistent with the expectations of the researcher. As is described by the Sociocratisch Centrum Nederland, and Endenburg himself, the ideas of decentralization, feedback loops, equal top down and bottom up control, and the layering of circles in a hierarchy of responsibilities, are all central to the method, and the concept, of Sociocracy (Sociocratisch Centrum, 2020; Buck & Villines, 2017). Having a General Circle (comprised of the representatives and the coordinators of the next-lower circles) that can make decisions on domain-transcending topics for the community as a whole, is so essential to SKM that it was very surprising for the researcher to find that the Dutch ecovillages under study, who all self-identify as using Sociocracy, have either never had a General Circle (Ecovillage Luna, which decides on all domain-transcending topics with everybody), a General Circle without decision power (Ecovillage Nova, which has a GC that, when agreeing to a proposals' readiness to be voted upon, sends this voting responsibility to the group with all inhabitants), or a General Circle that (temporarily) removed the representatives and instead only had its (self-appointed) coordinators (Ecovillage Terra, Ecovillage Nova). Expert 1 highlighted that in her experience as a Sociocracy trainer, communities tend to struggle, when Sociocracy is implemented, with feelings that something is being taken away. She highlights that in communities, there is a desire to hold on to one's ability to (still) have decision power over every topic, which contradicts Principle 2 of SKM. Expert 1 also highlights the rejection of any kind of hierarchy, even in language, that is typical of ecovillages. Although a General Circle implements a hierarchy of abstraction, not of power dynamics, this fear of hierarchies and fear of letting go of direct decision-making power could certainly explain part of Main Finding 3.

Main Finding 4 is also not consistent with the expectations of the researcher. For the same reasons given for Main Finding 3; The Double Link is at the center of the SKM ideals of feedback loops, top down and bottom up control, decentralization and the layering of circles according to a hierarchy of responsibility. Again, the principle of the Double Link is so essential to Sociocracy that it was very surprising for the researcher to find that all 3 case study ecovillages have either never had a Double Link (Ecovillage Luna, which also does not have a General Circle), have not applied the Double Link for the majority of its existence (Ecovillage Nova, which only had Coordinators in its General Circle until very recently) or have removed the Double Link for a period of time (Ecovillage Terra, which removed the Representatives, leaving only the Coordinators in the GC). Leaving only the Coordinators in the General Circle is, according to all the interviewed experts, problematic in terms of power dynamics because the domain-specific Coordinators are chosen in the General Circle, and as such without the role of the Representatives that are elected within the domain-specific circles

themselves, there is nobody that can oversee or 'check' the power of the GC (for instance by Representatives using their right to call a re-election of any of the Coordinators when found necessary). Both expert 1 and expert 2 point towards a dynamic in which people are so used to the dominant hierarchical structures of our world that they tend to default to the dynamics of having a leader or manager out of a sense of 'comfortability', or a fear of letting go of the norm, while the idea of a Representative is new, and is associated with extra work and more time intensive, especially in smaller communities. Although this makes a logical argument, it would be in direct contradiction with the rejection of any form of hierarchies in ecovillage culture, as described by Jette.

7.3 Strengths of the research

There are a number of strengths of this research. First of all, this research is, to the knowledge of the researcher, the first study to look into an in-depth exploration of how Sociocracy is applied in ecovillages in practice, and the specific challenges that go along with it. The exploratory nature of this research is, considering its novelty, a strength, and is guided by the semi-structured interview set-up conducted with the ecovillage inhabitants. This allowed room for a wide variety of topics and examples to be discussed, while staying true to the structure of the sociocratic principles as the guiding framework in the interviews - ensured through the clear, logical theoretical framework. Additionally, the integration of the expert perspectives of Sociocracy trainers, ecovillage experts and a trainer from the source of the (Dutch) SKM - the Sociocratisch Centrum Nederland - add considerable value to the validity and generalizability of this research and the knowledge field as a whole. Finally, the extensive nature of the interviews with the ecovillage inhabitants and the experts (all 1 hour or more) has allowed for an extensive set of data to draw examples and conclusions from, adding to the depth of the research.

7.4 Limitations of the research

There are also a few limitations of this research that should be addressed. First of all, there are the limitations caused by the inherent qualities of the research design. Because of the qualitative, explorative nature of this study, no quantitative or statistical inferences could be made. However, this research can inform future research suggestions in these areas. The (holistic) multiple case study approach allows for in depth findings, but only allows for a small sample size, making it more challenging to generalize the findings, in this case to the level of Dutch ecovillages in general. This flaw has been significantly mitigated by the inclusion of validation interviews with experts, with both a Dutch and international perspective, who were able to confirm the generalizability of the results (except for Main Finding 3, which has not been put forward to them, but should have been in hindsight). In terms of the selection of the ecovillages at hand, despite their self-identification as using Sociocracy, it could be critically reflected upon that not all the cases actually apply Sociocracy seeing as none of the cases consistently followed the 4 foundational principles of SKM. The convenience elements of the sampling method may have contributed to this, and might have been prevented with a more structured, (expert informed) selection of cases. The consequences of this issue for the generalizability for (Dutch) ecovillages who apply Sociocracy as a whole, were also mitigated by the expert validation interviews, which were able to confirm this generalizability to the scope of Dutch ecovillages as a whole. A similar point can be made for the convenience sampling of the individual inhabitants that were interviewed for each ecovillage. Especially in the inference about the *challenges*

and problems with applying Sociocracy (most apparent in Main Findings 1 and 2) the subjectivity of the individual respondents has a large influence on the perspective of 'challenges and problems', and the eventual results. Finally, although the researcher attempted to request access to such data with limited success, there have been no observations of sociocratic meetings made in this research. The data is heavily dependent on the subjective interpretations of the ecovillage inhabitant respondents. This subjectivity has been mitigated by the use of a theoretical framework which directly follows the foundational principles of SKM, putting the majority of focus on if, and how, the cases follow these principles and less on the subjective perceptions of (the use of) Sociocracy (as was the case in the previous iteration of the researchers' research angle).

7.5 Practical implications

There are a number of practical implications that can be shared as a conclusion to this research. Firstly, as a practical implication for Dutch ecovillages, and ecovillages in general, the researcher would like to give the advice to improve the understanding of Sociocracy by their members. While it certainly would be an advice to commit more resources to the training of Sociocracy, with full implementation tracks (at for instance the Sociocratisch Centrum Nederland), the step that comes before that which comes at no additional cost, but might greatly improve the social dynamics with Sociocracy, is to make sure that whenever a (new) inhabitant join the ecovillage, they get an extensive explanation of what Sociocracy is, they hear about the history of Sociocracy in the ecovillage and why the decision was made to use this method, an explanation is given as to what is required of this new inhabitant and what it takes (in terms of time but also in terms of reflectivity and their change in mindstate) to commit themselves to this method, and the new inhabitants are educated on the foundational principles of Sociocracy, and - importantly - are explained which deviations from these foundational principles the ecovillage applies, or has applied in the past, and why. There is a lot to gain, in terms of clarity, commitment and social dynamics with this 'simple' step. This step might be extra challenging if it becomes clear that the majority of the inhabitants do not actually have a justified explanation for many of the abovementioned questions. But in that case especially, it is important to go into discussion, find out the reasons or even make changes to the application if no good reasons can be given. During the interview process, every ecovillage inhabitant was asked how they first got in contact with Sociocracy, and why their ecovillage decided to apply the method. And in almost every case, the inhabitants reported that they did not know about it before, were very quickly 'thrown' into sociocratic meetings and forced to learn through practice, and often were not aware of the reason or the process that caused the ecovillage to adopt Sociocracy - defaulting to answers such as "I don't really know, it was just said that 'that's how we do it here'" or "I don't know why, but I would guess we applied it because [...]".

Another practical implication that ecovillages can take away from this research, is that the difference between *policy* decision-meetings and *governance* structures for the implementation of those policies, is very important, but much more challenging to understand for ecovillages than for conventional organizations (for which Sociocracy was originally designed). As was suggested by the experts interviewed in this study, making this distinction and not defaulting to (*policy*) consent decision-making for every single meeting, can relieve a huge amount of pressure of the inhabitants and result in less negative emotions, less time commitment, less controversies, and more efficiency.

There are also some practical implications that can be very relevant for any Sociocracy training - ranging from the Sociocratisch Centrum Nederland to individual Sociocracy consultants and trainers that work with (Dutch) ecovillages. It is easy, especially from an expert Sociocracy trainers'

perspective, to dismiss some of the findings of this study - that show how Dutch ecovillages have not strictly followed the sociocratic principles, removed them or changed their application of them - as simply being a result of a lack of training in the traditional SKM approach. And subsequently say that more of this training will solve all the problems and challenges. But there is a noteworthy 'elephant in the room' when it comes to training (specifically Dutch) ecovillages in Sociocracy. Although no official statistics were found, according to expert 1, Sociocracy trainer at the Sociocratisch Centrum Nederland (the original source for the SKM method), there are about 100 or less companies that currently function sociocratically, as far as she is aware of. But as we previously mentioned, Sociocracy has become a huge trend in the world of ecovillages. Again, there are no numbers available on this, but multiple respondents already hinted that as far as they knew, every Dutch ecovillage uses Sociocracy (to some degree), and the Global Ecovillage Network has actively spread word of the method and even included it in its educational (CLIPS) curriculum. The point here is that Sociocracy might, by the (educated) guess of the researcher, be equally, or even more, popular in (Dutch) ecovillage settings than in the conventional organizations setting. Sociocracy and the SKM method, however, were designed to fit on the line structure of a conventional company, and were not designed to be used as an 'empty' method. But many ecovillages across the world are using it as such, anyway. This begs the question: if ecovillages are in so many ways very different from the conventional organizations that the traditional SKM method was designed for, should organizations such as the Sociocratisch Centrum Nederland perhaps be open to creating a (new) version of the SKM method that is better adjusted and specialized for the needs of ecovillages? Or: should organizations such as the Sociocratisch Centrum Nederland at least create a specialized training method that better aligns with the specific challenges and needs of (Dutch) ecovillages? Advised areas of interest to focus on in this case would be addressing how ecovillages can deal with Sociocracy (and for example the demands of the Double Link) with a very small population, working with the complicated and often broadly interpretable Mission statements of ecovillages and looking into how these interact with the concept of the *reasoned* and *paramount* objection (and how it has to be weighed against the former), and how a more clearly demarcated difference between *policy* and *governance* may be introduced in the training and the structuring of Sociocracy in (Dutch) ecovillages.

7.6 Future research suggestions

Before going into the area-specific future research suggestions and reflections on the research at hand, there is an important point that needs to be made that has become very present and apparent in the perspective of the researcher. This has to do with the supposed educational mission of ecovillages, and the education potential of ecovillages.

It is a much repeated point: Ecovillages are here to educate the world on how we can live together sustainably, in connection with our community and in connection to our natural environment. The Global Ecovillage Network states this focus on education ever so clearly in its international purpose statement:

"Our shared purpose is to link and support ecovillages, educate the world about them, and grow the regenerative movement – to inspire, scale and facilitate communities and people from all walks of life to become active participants in the transition to a resilient and regenerative human presence on Earth."

And while the Global Ecovillage Network might certainly do its best to pursue this purpose, it is the general (educated) sense of the researcher that within ecovillages themselves, this educational mission very quickly gets lost in the pursuit to look inwards, fix 'our' problems, and run 'our' organization. Ecovillages often emphasize their educational mission, yet they seldom share materials on their unique role as hubs of social and sustainable innovation. Ecovillages can be (relatively) open to visitors that want to experience or learn about ecovillage living, and the way to have access to this is often to come in for volunteering days or specific (occasional) events. However, this informal education primarily reaches those already interested in ecovillages. The current approach limits the exposure of these lessons to a small, already-informed audience. Consequently, the broader educational potential of ecovillage lessons for the broader public, and society at large, is largely untapped. Ecovillages have significant educational and academic potential due to their role as living laboratories for social and sustainable innovations (Kunze, 2009). They can offer valuable insights into alternative governance models, ecological design, renewable energy usage, and community-based social structures. But it is exactly this type of knowledge that is lacking, both in informal sources and in academia. In the example of the research at hand: reading about an on-the-surface description of the fact that ecovillages tend to use Sociocracy often, is something of much lower value than getting to know the specific lessons that the ecovillages have learned, the challenges faced, and the alterations made, with their application of such a social innovation; within their role as living laboratory for social and sustainable innovations. It is the latter that can actually have a meaningful impact, where others might not have to go through the same (hard) lessons in trying to play with configurations of social innovations, because the ecovillages have shared the progress that they have made in their 'laboratories' and found ways to spread these lessons in different ways to other facets of society that could very well use it (think: new forms of co-housing in cities, political initiatives around direct democracy, shared economy and ownership structures, (urban) permaculture projects for social cohesion, etc.).

Having said this, the researcher wants to urge ecovillages to stay true to their aim of spreading sustainability education, inspiration and experience to the broader public. To achieve this, ecovillages should reconnect with their educational roots by actively sharing their knowledge with the external world. This includes being open to researchers and potentially actively forming partnerships with universities, writers or other forms of media exposure. In general, the researcher wants to urge ecovillages to be creative with the ways in which they might inspire change on a scale higher than the already-informed audience.

On the side of academia, the researcher wants to urge other researchers to dive deeper into the social innovations that ecovillages are involved in; to not just describe different methods, or sketch images of the overview of the different social practices ecovillages experiment with, but actually dive into the how, the why, finding out the challenges and problems with their approaches, in a way that can be useful for non-ecovillage applications. Ultimately this also comes down to looking beyond the limiting scope of ecovillages as only micro-hubs focused on sustainability, but acknowledging their significant value as an experimentation site for deep social and environmental change, especially *because* they are hubs that are somewhat isolated from external society - that is what makes them great laboratories.

To continue with area-specific research suggestions, there are a number of interesting directions that could be academically explored, in which the study at hand was limited in its scope. One of the most important findings of the research at hand was the (temporary) removal of the Double Link across all case ecovillages. Researching the effects of this phenomenon in a quantitative manner, for instance by measuring some concept related to (the feeling of) representation as it is experienced by ecovillage inhabitants while they apply the Double Link, versus while the Double Link is not (longer) applied, could add value to the research field. Reproducing the (exploratory nature) of the

research at hand in different contexts could also be interesting; in a different country, and/or with ecovillages that use any of the alternative spin-offs of SKM (as described by expert 3), such as Sociocracy 3.0, Holacracy, or O2 (Organic Organization). In this respect it would be of interest to find out if the same issues come up in those contexts, particularly relating to the issues experienced with the concept of the valid objection. A (more) systematic approach to the sampling of the ecovillages in question would be suggested in all the above suggestions. Similarly, the researcher would suggest a more systematic approach to the sampling of the individual respondents within each ecovillage - for example, including some specific proportion of founding members, coordinators, representatives, or non-General Circle members. Finally, observation-based research within sociocratic meetings of ecovillages could be of interest. In this light, observations around other social innovations frequently applied in ecovillages - for example, non-violent communication or the application of the Forum (from ZEGG) - would add considerable value to the research field, furthering the in-depth exploration of social innovations as practiced in ecovillages. There is a lot of untapped potential in extracting the lessons that ecovillages can bring to broader facets of society, in light of their role as living laboratories of social and sustainable innovation.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide ecovillage inhabitants version 1 (used for Ecovillage Terra)

Introductie

- Kun je me een beetje over jezelf vertellen?
- Hoe ben je bij dit ecodorp terechtgekomen?
- Kun je me een beetje over je ecodorp vertellen? Wat zijn de leidende waarden en normen van je ecodorp?
- Hoe lang woon je hier, en hoe heeft het je leven veranderd?

Hoofdvragen

Persoonlijk verhaal en waarneming

- Zou je sociocratie eens in je eigen woorden kunnen beschrijven?
- Hoe ben je voor het eerst in contact gekomen met sociocratie? Waar heb je er voor het eerst van gehoord?

Sociocratie bij jouw ecodorp

- Kun je me vertellen wat je weet over hoe en wanneer sociocratie is geïmplementeerd in jouw ecodorp?
 - Waarom? Wat was de motivatie?
 - Welke opeenvolging van gebeurtenissen leidde daartoe?
- Wat leidde ertoe dat jouw ecodorp sociocratie heeft aangenomen als bestuursmethodiek en besluitvormingsmethode? Welke redenen zaten daar achter?
- Waarom nemen ecodorpen sociocratie überhaupt aan?

Sociocratie in de praktijk

- Kun je beschrijven hoe sociocratie in de praktijk wordt toegepast in jouw ecodorp?
- Welke sociocratische methodes en toepassingen worden over het algemeen gebruikt, en hoe functioneren deze in jouw community?
- Hoe werkt de sociocratische besluitvormingsmethode in jouw ecodorp?
 - Kun je me eens een recent besluitvormingsproces / dorpskring beschrijven, stap voor stap?

Waargenomen voordelen

- Welke voordelen ervaart u bij het gebruik van sociocratie in uw ecodorp?
- Wat zijn de sterke punten van de aanpak (in het algemeen)?
- Hoe heeft sociocratie uw ecodorp ten goede veranderd? Heeft het bijgedragen tot het welzijn van de bewoners? En de duurzaamheid binnen het ecodorp?

Ervaren uitdagingen

- Wat zijn de nadelen van het gebruik van sociocratie in het algemeen?
 - En voor ecodorpen in het bijzonder?
- Heeft u uitdagingen of beperkingen ondervonden bij het gebruik van sociocratie in uw ecodorp?

- Hoe hebben jullie geprobeerd deze problemen/uitdagingen aan te pakken?

Percepties van medeleden

- Hoe kijken uw medebewoners/gemeenschapsleden in uw ervaring aan tegen sociocratie als een bestuurs- en besluitvormingsmethode?
- Kunt u feedback delen die u hebt gehoord van uw gemeenschapsleden?
- Zijn er grote meningsverschillen over de methode binnen uw ecodorp?

Aanpassing

- Heb je aanpassingen gedaan aan de standaard sociocratische (cirkelmethode) aanpak om deze beter te laten aansluiten bij de behoeften van jouw ecodorp?
- Waarom werden deze aanpassingen noodzakelijk geacht en hadden ze het gewenste effect?
- Denk je dat ecodorpen in het algemeen baat zouden hebben bij een sociocratische aanpak die afwijkt van het klassieke voorbeeld?
- Als u de macht zou hebben om dit te doen, zou u dan iets willen veranderen aan de sociocratie / bestuursmethode van uw ecodorp?

Duurzaamheid

- Hoe sluit het gebruik van sociocratie aan bij de duurzaamheidsdoelen en -waarden van uw ecodorp?
- Op welke manieren ondersteunt sociocratie een duurzame en milieuvriendelijke levensstijl?

Gemeenschap

- Heeft sociocratie enig effect gehad op het gemeenschapsgevoel en de solidariteit / het gevoel erbij te horen in uw ecodorp?
- Denkt u dat u de huidige staat van gemeenschapszin had kunnen bereiken zonder sociocratie?

Visie voor de toekomst

- Wat is de visie voor de toekomst van sociocratie binnen uw ecodorp?
- Hoe ziet u de beoefening en de perceptie van sociocratie evolueren in de komende jaren?

Afsluitende opmerkingen

- Heeft u nog dingen die u graag zou willen delen?
 - Dingen die belangrijk kunnen zijn voor het onderzoek
- Heeft u nog feedback op het interview, de vragen, of de vraagstelling?
 - Kan ik iets verbeteren voor de volgende keer?

Appendix B: Interview Guide ecovillage inhabitants version 2 (used for Ecovillage Nova and Ecovillage Luna)

Introductie

- Kun je me een beetje over jezelf vertellen?
- Hoe ben je bij dit ecodorp terechtgekomen?
- Kun je me een beetje over je ecodorp vertellen? Wat zijn de leidende waarden en normen van je ecodorp?
- Hoe lang woon je hier, en hoe heeft het je leven veranderd?

Hoofdvragen

Persoonlijk verhaal en waarneming

- Zou je sociocratie eens in je eigen woorden kunnen beschrijven?
- Hoe ben je voor het eerst in contact gekomen met sociocratie? Waar heb je er voor het eerst van gehoord?

Sociocratie bij jouw ecodorp

- Kun je me vertellen wat je weet over hoe en wanneer sociocratie is geïmplementeerd in jouw ecodorp?
 - Waarom? Wat was de motivatie?
 - Welke opeenvolging van gebeurtenissen leidde daartoe?
- Wat leidde ertoe dat jouw ecodorp sociocratie heeft aangenomen als bestuursmethodiek en besluitvormingsmethode? Welke redenen zaten daar achter?
- Waarom nemen ecodorpen sociocratie überhaupt aan?

Sociocratie in de praktijk

4 sociocratische principes

1. Regerend Consent
 1. Was je al eens eerder blootgesteld aan consensus / consent beslissingen? Hoe was het om er aan te wennen binnen de community?
 2. "overwegend beargumenteerd bezwaar"
 1. Gevoel van druk? Geeft het je een gevoel van veiligheid? Pushen mensen / dreigen ze met een blok? Hoe wordt het "beargumenteerd" gewogen, wordt de ecodorp visie daarvoor gebruikt?
 2. Is er wel eens onenigheid over de visie / mission statement van het ecodorp, en hoe die gebruikt moet worden in (strategische / lange termijn) beslissingen maken?
2. Kringorganisatie
 1. Welke kringen bestaan er in jouw ecodorp?
 2. **In welke kringen ben jij betrokken?**
 3. Wat voor soort beslissingen worden in welke kring genomen? Hoe is de verdeling van beslissingen? (Decentralisatie vs. alles samen beslissen)

4. Met betrekking tot strategische, langere termijn beslissingen, waar worden die genomen?
 1. Hoe ligt de balans van het centrale vs. autonome beslissingen maken van de cirkels?
 2. Is dit een lastig onderwerp binnen jouw ecodorp?
 3. Hoe wordt er omgegaan met de drang van bewoners om mee te beslissen met alles? Is die drang er überhaupt?
3. Dubbele Koppeling
 1. Houden jullie je strikt aan de dubbele koppeling?
 2. Hebben jullie hier wel eens problemen mee gehad?
 3. Heb je het gevoel dat de dubbele koppeling het gewenste effect heeft? Voel jij, of de mensen van het ecodorp in het algemeen, dat er een goed gevoel van representatie heerst tot in de hogere kringen?
 1. Op welke manieren worden meningen / argumenten / voorkeuren van andere groepen meegenomen in desbetreffende kringen?
4. Sociocratische Verkiezing
 1. Kun je me eens uitleggen hoe een sociocratische verkiezing bij jullie te werk gaat?
 2. Waar worden mensen op 'geselecteerd' / genomineerd?
 1. Op skills? Interne motivatie? Karakter?
 1. Wordt dat gecontroleerd? Bijv. of iemand de skills heeft geleerd binnen een bepaalde tijd?

Waargenomen voordelen

- Welke voordelen ervaart u bij het gebruik van sociocratie in uw ecodorp?
- Wat zijn de sterke punten van de aanpak (in het algemeen)?
- Hoe heeft sociocratie uw ecodorp ten goede veranderd? Heeft het bijgedragen tot het welzijn van de bewoners? En de duurzaamheid binnen het ecodorp?

Ervaren uitdagingen

- Wat zijn de nadelen van het gebruik van sociocratie in het algemeen?
 - En voor ecodorpen in het bijzonder?
- Heeft u uitdagingen of beperkingen ondervonden bij het gebruik van sociocratie in uw ecodorp?
- Hoe hebben jullie geprobeerd deze problemen/uitdagingen aan te pakken?

Percepties van medeleden

- Hoe kijken uw medebewoners/gemeenschapsleden in uw ervaring aan tegen sociocratie als een bestuurs- en besluitvormingsmethode?
- Kunt u feedback delen die u hebt gehoord van uw gemeenschapsleden?
- Zijn er grote meningsverschillen over de methode binnen uw ecodorp?

Aanpassing

- Heb je aanpassingen gedaan aan de standaard sociocratische (cirkelmethode) aanpak om deze beter te laten aansluiten bij de behoeften van jouw ecodorp?
- Waarom werden deze aanpassingen noodzakelijk geacht en hadden ze het gewenste effect?

- Denk je dat ecodorpen in het algemeen baat zouden hebben bij een sociocratische aanpak die afwijkt van het klassieke voorbeeld?
- Als u de macht zou hebben om dit te doen, zou u dan iets willen veranderen aan de sociocratie / bestuursmethode van uw ecodorp?

[wanneer toepasselijk:]

Duurzaamheid

- Hoe sluit het gebruik van sociocratie aan bij de duurzaamheidsdoelen en -waarden van uw ecodorp?
- Op welke manieren ondersteunt sociocratie een duurzame en milieuvriendelijke levensstijl?

Gemeenschap

- Heeft sociocratie enig effect gehad op het gemeenschapsgevoel en de solidariteit / het gevoel erbij te horen in uw ecodorp?
- Denkt u dat u de huidige staat van gemeenschapszin had kunnen bereiken zonder sociocratie?

Visie voor de toekomst

- Wat is de visie voor de toekomst van sociocratie binnen uw ecodorp?
- Hoe ziet u de beoefening en de perceptie van sociocratie evolueren in de komende jaren?

Afsluitende opmerkingen

- Heeft u nog dingen die u graag zou willen delen?
 - Dingen die belangrijk kunnen zijn voor het onderzoek
- Heeft u nog feedback op het interview, de vragen, of de vraagstelling?
 - Kan ik iets verbeteren voor de volgende keer?

Appendix C: Interview Guide used for Context Interview (with Sociocratic Center Netherlands trainer Jette Schneiders)

Expert Interviews

Introductie

- Kun je me een beetje over jezelf vertellen?
- Hoe ben je hier (bij het sociocratisch centrum) terechtgekomen?
- Kun je me wat meer over het sociocratisch centrum vertellen?
- Hoe heeft het je leven veranderd?

Hoofdvragen

Persoonlijk verhaal en waarneming

- Zou je sociocratie eens in je eigen woorden kunnen beschrijven?
- Hoe ben je voor het eerst in contact gekomen met sociocratie? Waar heb je er voor het eerst van gehoord?

- Waarom geloof je in sociocratie? Wat is er speciaal aan?
-
- Hoe veel ervaring heb je al als sociocratie trainer? (Kwalificaties?)
- Wat voor soort trainingen geef je, en welke methodes horen daarbij?

Sociocratie in ecodorpen

- Ben je een beetje bekend met ecodorpen? Ben je je ervan bewust dat een heel aantal nederlandse ecodorpen sociocratie (willen) gebruiken?
- Wat vind je daarvan?
- Past sociocratie goed binnen een ecodorp setting?
- Zijn er bepaalde moeilijkheden, of nadelen, bij het implementeren van sociocratie in een ecodorp?
- En de voordelen?

Duurzaamheid

- Hoe sluit het gebruik van sociocratie aan bij de duurzaamheidsdoelen en -waarden van ecodorpen
- Op welke manieren ondersteunt sociocratie een duurzame en milieuvriendelijke levensstijl?

- Hoe kan sociocratie het welzijn van de bewoners verbeteren?
- Heeft sociocratie een natuurlijke match met duurzaamheid?

Aanpassing

- Heb jij gehoord over aanpassingen van sociocratie binnen nederlandse ecodorpen? Het veranderen van de fundamentele principes?
 - Wat voor aanpassingen heeft je gezien / gehoord / zou je verwachten?

- Denk je dat ecodorpen in het algemeen baat zouden hebben bij een sociocratische aanpak die afwijkt van het klassieke (SKM) voorbeeld?

Lesmethodes

- Hebben jullie weleens sociocratische trainingen gegeven aan ecodorpen?
 - Hoe pakken jullie dit aan?
- Zijn er speciale training strategieën toegepast in deze gevallen?
 - Waren er moeilijkheden?

Percepties van bewoners

- Heeft u een idee van hoe ecodorpen en de bewoners ervan sociocratie zien? Hun percepties?
- Denkt je dat ze een goed / volledig beeld hebben van de methode?
- Heb je ooit feedback gekregen over de effectiviteit en passendheid van sociocratie van bewoners?

Succesfactoren

- Wat zou je advies zijn aan een ecodorp, als die morgen tegen je zegt dat ze sociocratie willen implementeren?
 - Wat zijn de cruciale factoren voor succes?

Vergelijking

- Heb je variaties opgemerkt van hoe sociocratie verschillend wordt toegepast, of ervaren, in verschillende ecodorpen?
 - Hoe komen deze verschillen denk je?

Visie voor de toekomst

- Wat is de visie voor de toekomst van sociocratie (binnen ecodorpen?)
- Hoe ziet u de beoefening en de perceptie van sociocratie evolueren in de komende jaren?

Afsluitende opmerkingen

- Heeft u nog dingen die u graag zou willen delen?
 - Dingen die belangrijk kunnen zijn voor het onderzoek
- Heeft u nog feedback op het interview, de vragen, of de vraagstelling?
 - Kan ik iets verbeteren voor de volgende keer?

Appendix D: Internal Document from Ecovillage Terra about its Sociocratic Circle Structure

Organiseren van de kringen

We willen een eenvoudige organisatie. We richten ons op de activiteiten die nu of in de nabije toekomst belangrijk zijn. De organisatie moet flexibel zijn en zich kunnen aanpassen aan de behoeften van het moment; dat zijn de zorg voor het terrein, het samen leven en werken en zaken als financiën, PR, verhuur van ruimten, organisatie van evenementen. Op de korte termijn is het bouwen voor ons een belangrijke activiteit en krijgt daarom een eigen kring in de organisatie. In de toekomst zal dat weer anders kunnen worden.

De verschillende activiteiten moeten centraal op elkaar worden afgestemd in een dorpskring. In een tekening zou dat er als volgt uit zien:



We willen het principe van kringvertegenwoordigers weer invoeren, zodat ook in een grotere organisatie bewoners en deelgenoten kunnen blijven meesturen.

De centrale dorpskring bestaat uit negen mensen:

Een vertegenwoordiger uit elke kring.

Een coördinator uit elke kring.

Een algemeen coördinator.

De rol van een coördinator blijft zoals we die reeds kennen:

Hij/zij is verantwoordelijk voor het coördineren van het werk binnen een kringdomein en is geselecteerd voor een termijn van twee jaren.

Een coördinator wordt geselecteerd door de dorpskring.

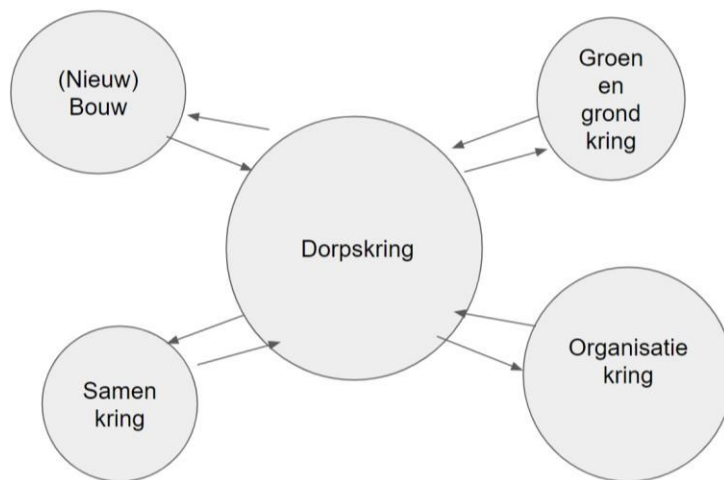
De rol van de vertegenwoordiger:

representeert de belangen van één kring en de kringleden bij de dorpskring

- wordt gekozen door de kring zelf voor een beperkte termijn
- neemt deel aan de governance van de dorpskring en kan:
 - items voor op de agenda voorstellen

- meedoen aan het vormen van voorstellen
- bezwaren hebben op voorstellen

De kringstructuur komt er dan als volgt uit te zien:



De kringdomeinen

In het domein van de Groen en Grondkring vallen bijvoorbeeld:

Groen terreinonderhoud (Bomen, snoeien, maaien, bladeren)

Tuin

Sanering

Oppervlakte water

Dieren

Voedselbos

Etc....

In het domein van de Samenkring vallen de meer mensgerichte activiteiten zoals bijvoorbeeld

Bewonersoverleg

Traject tot bewoner

Sociale activiteiten, Ceremonies

Vrijwilligersdagen etc.

Zorg voor de herberg

Ontvangen van en zorg voor gasten

Camping

Etc.....

In het domein van de (Nieuw)bouw kring vallen bijvoorbeeld:

Nieuwbouwproject (Infra, ontwerp, financieel, juridisch)

Onderhoud gebouwen

Gereedschappen en machines

Infrastructuur, wegen, energie, drinkwater, afvalwater

Veiligheid (brand, arbo)

Etc.....

In het domein van de organisatiekring vallen organisatorische, zakelijke en meer extern gerichte activiteiten bijvoorbeeld:

PR

Evenementen

Ondernemers

Juridische zaken

Financiële administratie

Contracten

Financieel beleid, jaarbegrotingen

Het in stand houden van een passende sociocratische organisatie

Etc.....

Wettelijk kader

De dorpskring is in ons Ecodorp het centrale orgaan en besturen doen wij met zijn allen via de sociocratische kringstructuur. Voor de wet hebben wij een bestuur nodig dat ingeschreven wordt bij de kamer van koophandel, tekenbevoegd is en juridisch aansprakelijk is voor wanbeleid. De vijf coördinatoren vormen gezamenlijk dit wettelijke bestuur.

De raad van toezicht

Concreet houdt de raad toezicht op:

- de maatschappelijke effecten of het maatschappelijke resultaat van de stichting
- de realisatie van het grote doel van de stichting
- de daartoe gestelde doelen van beleid en strategie
- het beleid en beheer van het bestuur met de bijbehorende resultaten en prestaties en risico's
- het naleven van wet- en regelgeving
- het voldoen aan de eisen van de financiële verslaggeving
- de integriteit en de identiteit van het bestuur en de organisatie

De raad van toezicht bestaat uit minimaal 3 leden en idealiter 4 leden met ervaring in en kennis van de gebieden:

1. Duurzaamheid
2. Sociaal
3. Economisch
4. Wereldbeeld (Cultuur - Spiritueel - Religie)

Leden van de raad van toezicht hebben geen directe persoonlijke belangen in het ecodorp (wettelijke eis)

Twee keer per jaar komt de raad van toezicht samen met de dorpskring.

Een raad van toezicht benoemt zichzelf

De raad van toezicht kan leden van het wettelijk bestuur (coördinatoren) ontslaan in geval van aantoonbaar wanbeleid op de punten waarop zij toezicht houdt.

Appendix E: Main Findings interpreted by the validation experts

Main Finding 1: All three ecovillages report frequent problems with there being a lack of a clear, consistent idea of what constitutes a valid objection ('overwegend beargumenteerd bezwaar')

Expert 3 - Frands Frydendal:

This is particularly a problem that gets enlarged in Dutch ecovillages. Because to be able to know what a valid objection is, in the original way of dealing with it in the Dutch SKM method, you need to have clear what the aim is. When you have Sociocracy in a company, you have a very limited scope of purposes, so this becomes easier. But in ecovillages, you have basically all the purposes that [its] people have. If you cannot conceptualize this complexity, you have a problem. And you have this problem especially in the Netherlands, because it has the original way of dealing with purpose. Because it has the Mission / Vision / Aim, against which a valued objection must be considered. This is 'solved' with multiple other versions of Sociocracy, such as Holacracy, Sociocracy 3.0, 02 (Organic Organizations), because they all have a totally different idea of purpose. They basically broke away from the Sociocracy Group of the Netherlands because of this problem.

The problem with defining the Mission / Vision Aim (MVA) is that it is a waste of time. But the problem with letting go of the MVA, is that you need to determine if an objection is valid. The problem with consent decision making, is understanding 'why is this a good idea'?

Generally, even if you don't know why you use sociocracy, it is still better than other decision making. But if you get into trouble, you get into deep trouble.

You should not have to explain why your proposal is rational. It should be respected that it always is. This way, you can create 'magic'. It is an incredibly deep thing to understand, why does it work, this magic? It works really well if it works.

Expert 2 - Fredjan Twigt:

There are a few questions you can ask, such as "Is it safe enough to try, is it good enough for now?". And when that is the case, then it should be tried out.

Sometimes objections can have a really good argument behind them that nobody had seen before.

The Mission, Vision, and Aims can all be used as the basis to arguing for an objection.

But it is often about power, or not daring to give an objection.

It can really be emphasized more that an objection means that there will be a better proposal, that something will be added to make it better, and that it is something good! And that is not a "block" of something. This is a perspective that is very often overlooked. This is very much stuck in the 'old' way of thinking, you can see this if you look at politics too.

There is a general lack of education of Sociocracy in this context. There should be a regular "check-up" or maintenance of the group's Sociocracy skills. That does not mean to spend hours in a classroom. People often think "oh, but I already get it". But it is actually about having trainers come by. It took me 3 or 4 years to finally get the gist of it too. It takes a 2 year course at the Sociocratisch Centrum to become an expert.

Main Finding 2: All three ecovillages report frequent problems with emotions and tensions coming up during decision-making meetings

Expert 3 - Frands Frydendal:

A lot of tensions arise because of a lack of the deeper understanding that is needed to reach the 'magic' of Sociocracy. The foundation of this is to get rid of all things that are 'preferences'. A basis for a good argument, is that preferences should not count.

What can you do about emotions and tensions coming up? There is a lot you can do about this, and I think the whole thing about using Sociocracy well, is doing something about this. First of all, you need to make a distinction, you need a reason to do policy-making. And this is why; policy-making is a limitation to your freedom. It is deeply controversial, and it feels bad sometimes. But if you try to make consent decisions about too many things, this can cause a lot of problems. I mean, what is private and what is not private? To quote Diana Leafe Christian; there 3 things that usually surprise communities as difficult; and that is the 3 P's: Pets, Parking and Parenting. When people get angry about something, like a pet that might take a poop on somebody's lawn, their first thought is often "Do we have a policy about this?". Well...

Endenburg's original Sociocracy has something beautiful in it, which is that when a proposal is being introduced, you have clarifying questions, and then you have a reaction round. And everybody is invited to say whatever they want, and whatever they feel, and whatever they react. And there are no limitations there. In original Sociocracy, they say 'brief reactions', but Holacracy is actually more radical there. They do not even have to be brief, and you can say absolutely anything you want. There is no limitation as to being non-violent or anything. Say just whatever you want. So that everybody can get to be heard! But that does not mean that it will or should make a difference. Because from the reaction round to the objection round, you will have to decide whether your reaction qualifies as a reason. And if you can't do it, the group will do it. Because we are not going to go with any kind of fear, or confusion, or whatever, because if that is going to happen then we are not going anywhere. So we have to make that separation between any kind of emotional reaction, and some kind of judgment about what is a valid reaction. And one of the most practical advices you can get, which is actually also used in Holland, is that you can say as a facilitator, when somebody comes up with an objection that does not have an understandable reasoning, then the facilitator can say something like "I hear you, this sounds very important for you, but I can't really see the reasoning". A proposal is to say: "I suggest we take you seriously. And we wait with our decision until the next circle meeting. In the meantime, we expect that you go out, and speak to somebody. Or even take psychotherapy, whatever it takes. But at the next meeting, we will expect that you will have a more reasoned objection. Unless you have that, we will allow ourselves to ignore it. Because then it is probably only emotions."

I also think it is a very very good idea to have separate meetings for emotions!

Expert 2 - Fredjan Twigt:

When there are tensions, they should be discussed in an (emotional) sharing meeting, not a decision meeting. There really is a *lot* of attention that needs to be spent on asking each member to really 'look in the mirror', and be willing to 'bend'. Is someone dealing with their ego, or with the communal interests?

The typical sayings about Sociocracy; 'good enough for now' and 'safe to try' are sometimes used as a tool to pressure people with, actually: "Is this not safe enough, if we push this through now?".

Informal leadership is still a big thing, while it should not be of course. There are definitely people that are still trying to be the boss. And often, that comes from a trauma from the past. "Where I am, I am the boss. And I never want to get hurt again like I was hurt in the past". And once people have that position, it takes a lot for them to let that go. Often there is a subconscious "power play" happening.

It is important to ask people to look at themselves. To ask if they are willing to work with the pain

and trauma. If people stay stuck in where they were, it does not get better, and it can even get worse. People can become "trenched in".
Everybody walks around with trauma. But conflict is fertilizer for growth, if you are willing to face it. Actually, you should ask people that join the ecovillage to develop those traits.
But the beautiful thing is that it is a whole learning journey before you have the skills to create a sort of 'magic' with Sociocracy that you could never create on your own.
The issue is not with the 'instrument' that is Sociocracy, it is the people that play the instrument that are making the music.

Main Finding 4: All three Ecovillages have in some way removed the Double Link

Expert 3 - Frands Frydendal:

I believe that the Double Link is sometimes let go because of the heavy perceived 'cost' of applying it. One of the ways to limit the 'cost' of Double Links, is to have at least two kinds of meetings. In the original version of Sociocracy as invented by Endenburg, there was a clear difference between *policy meetings* and *operational meetings*. In *policy* meetings, decisions have to be made with consent. When we make limitations to someone's (future) freedom to decide, we need to consent to that. Because *policy decisions* are actually automatizations of decision-making. But in *operational meetings*, there should be autonomy. But in the way Endenburg invented and first applied SKM - in a company setting - there was already a structure with operational meetings and governance. Apart from the way Sociocracy For All teaches the method, where they completely look past this point, it is as such in all the other well defined variants (SKM, Holacracy, Sociocracy 3.0, O2): 'Members have a general license to act and decide autonomously - unless and until a governance decision sets limits to that autonomy. The initiative to set those limits are up to those, who want a limit; it is not up to the one who wants autonomy to ask for it. Once you understand the logical difference, you realize it is a big difference for the friction in the system.'

The reason that Dutch ecovillages and communities 'overuse' consent decision-making, by assuming it is the standard way of decision-making, is because they mostly have only learned about Sociocracy for what it is, in and of itself. But in and of itself, Endenburg's new principles, structures and processes are only an *addition* to an existing structure with operational meetings, leadership roles and some autonomy. It is a very interesting update - it is not a complete program.

When this novel *addition* or update is taken only in and of itself and used as a complete governance system in an ecovillage with no existing leadership structure, they get to overuse consent decision making. This creates an enormous demand for Double Links, [and a huge associated 'cost' of applying them]. However, not applying the Double Link creates a power hierarchy, a hierarchy of people. While the Double Link is the thing that ensures that there is only a hierarchy of purposes, not a hierarchy of people!

Expert 2 - Fredjan Twigt:

It does occur relatively frequently that the Double Link is left out. It is the most difficult topic of Sociocracy to explain. It is somewhat logical that someone thinks, "isn't the role of the coordinator enough, why would we add another person?" But when it is not applied, the coordinator(s) can decide everything themselves while the rest are not able to oversee it at all. Then you lose one of the core principles of Sociocracy; that everybody has a voice, and that there is bottom-up and top-down control. You can say that if 'everybody is in the General Circle', then we don't need the Double Link, but actually that is not really true either. Because the representative is a function, a

role. So even if that means that one person has to fill multiple roles, it is just important that the respective circle still is able to have a say in the general policy. But of course I can understand how it can be less relevant in the case that 'Everybody is already in the General Circle'.

I think it is an essential part of Sociocracy, which allows for the feedback loops, which is what sets Sociocracy apart from other forms of democratic decision-making or other top-down hierarchies. That is the difference between the circle structure or a line structure. And when companies apply Sociocracy, they put the circle structure on top of the line structure. And then the emphasis is on those feedback loops.

One of the important reasons that I have come to see, as to why this occurs is that there is not enough education. And you honestly can not blame people, if they have only had one short training. It takes a long time to truly understand it.

Another reason that the Double Link is not applied, has to do with the mechanical worldview that is so dominant in western society. Hierarchies are so ingrained into that view, and in our decision-making, that we tend to default to this pattern. It could be that a new way of looking at the world is needed, to get to the place where inclusive decision making really works. Even Endenburg created a kind of model of the awareness and worldview conditions that would be truly needed [for Sociocracy to truly work on a large scale], and he said that he hopes that in 100 years, we would be ready.