

Compass for community project development and organization

A holistic perspective on development and facilitation of community projects

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Background

"When one dreams alone it is only a dream. When many dream together, it is the beginning of a new reality." (Don Helder Camara)

This is our experience: When many dream together, this can be the beginning of a new reality and a powerful contribution to the further development of our society. Most of the successful projects of civic engagement led by the "pioneers of change" are projects involving many people in their free time.

And often we see how projects have a lot of initial enthusiasm and numerous people generate wonderful ideas, without ever coming to a focus or the implementation phase; or they bloom quickly and fade soon after without leaving a lasting impact on society. However, some initiatives have consequences, as described by Margaret Mead in her statement:

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

What makes the difference? When do community projects succeed – may it be a co-housing project, a citizens' energy cooperative or a neighborhood or transition initiative? When do they really manage to contribute towards the "change of the world"? How will the community project development contribute towards everyone's well-being and the global shift?

We as co-founders of a large and initially utopistic-looking project "Ecovillage Sieben Linden" have recently analyzed our experience of more than 20 years of project development of our own projects, of living in a community, of working as project consultants and adult educators. Out of these experiences, we have designed a

holistic project development model "Compass for community project development and organization".

The model

The "Compass for community project development and organization" is inspired by the real-life experience of community projects and the dedication for their further development. It contains the essence of what is needed to create and, above all, to implement successful and sustainable community projects. It takes a holistic approach as a fundamental condition for a vibrant and durable engagement of civic groups.

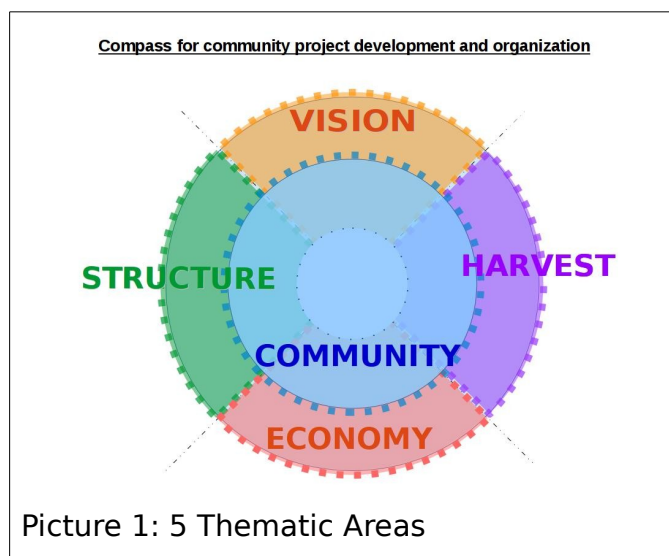
Five thematic areas

With our compass, we have identified **5 areas** that are essential to make successful community projects: **Vision, Structure, Economy, Harvest** and **Community**.

Our basic assumption is that attention, expertise and conscious development is needed in all these five thematic areas for community projects to succeed.

Community takes a central position, as it is essential for a successful long-term engagement – for project members and stakeholders to gain contentment and solidarity and to get motivated to stay with the project.

But community does not just happen – it requires conscious attention and care in all phases of the project and during the work with all other thematic areas.



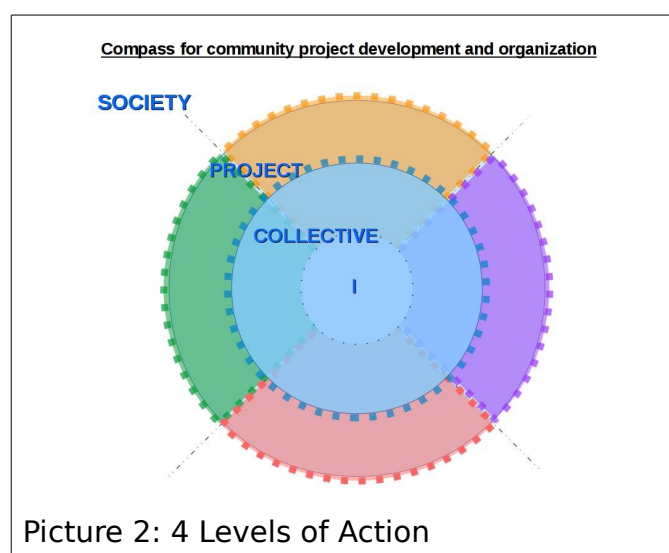
Four levels of action

Holistic projects are supported by actors at **different "levels of action"**:

"I" as the individual (indivisible) with one's personal qualities, skills, needs and experiences of life, especially as the only truly acting actor (at all other levels individuals act as part of a larger organism);
The "Collective" as the social organism, resulting in the coexistence and collaboration of individuals, that we find in countless forms in the world, created deliberately or as a natural consequence of the interaction of living things;

"Project", in which people create external elements, structures and materials for themselves and often for the environment;

"Society", in which projects and communities are embedded and with which they are in various interactions.

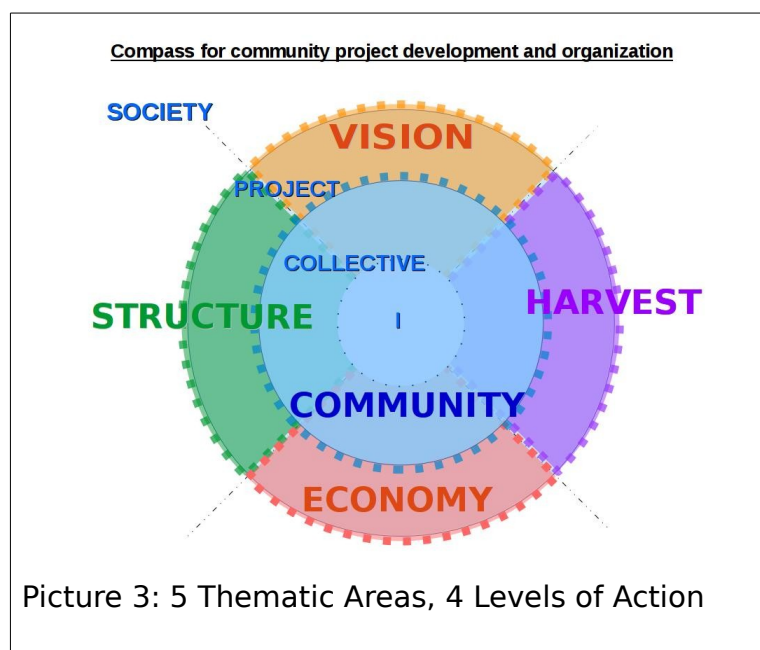


Similar to the 5 thematic areas, the 4 levels of action also need a conscious attention and competent design.

A well-functioning **“Collective”** is very much based on an "I" that has a high self-awareness, and an awareness of its role in the whole and its responsibility towards the group.

The **“Collective”** can only work in the long run, if individuals feel comfortable in it, if they see the meaning in their communal work and when they mutually appreciate and support each other. The collective then develops further along with the internal growth of individuals, that is - with the further development of their (self-) consciousness, decision making skills and sense of responsibility. A group of people can provide a fundamental and intense experience-space for development of personal consciousness, if it focuses on it and cares about an adequate contact between each other.

This applies to all groups of people (from couples in relationship to the global community): each and every one of us eventually carries the biggest responsibility - that is, the ability of concrete actions. After all, whether in team or community, who decides with his or her voice? Who is showing initiative or ends up doing something? With this responsibility and ability it is not so easy to shift everything to "someone" ("someone should do something about that") with which very often nobody feels addressed in the specific case. Therefore the individual as actor **"I"** is both in the center of the thematic area **"community"** and in the core of all four levels of action. That is why we integrate the individual consciousness and awareness work in our guide of community processes as a rule.



We make a distinction between **"Collective"** and **"Project"** purposefully because the interpersonal aspects in the "Collective" level are the primary starting points for potential development. Concrete factual aspects and organizational tasks appear in the "Project" level, growing up around the realization of collective dreams. Everything material, such as the shared houses of a housing project and the garden plot of urban gardening project as well as intangible elements such as policy documents and contracts or activities such as concrete events, festivals, political actions, etc. belong to the "Project" level.

Education for holistic project management

Most Methods that we apply in our community and in consulting and that we use in our project management seminars are methods that lead to very concrete project-level results while at the same time contributing to the development of the collective level of action. Thus, this work helps to strengthen the sense of community, while the group proceeds with the project-level's development.

Our seminars are always structured into four units, in which the thematic areas of "**Vision**", "**Structure**", "**Economy**" and "**Harvest**" are dealt with in-depth. Each of these thematic fields is explored in its entanglement with the **central theme "community"**.

There are numerous methods drawn from the trainer's wealth of experience, presented by examples and ready to be applied and experienced in individual projects.

The group of participants goes through a community building process during the days of seminar. They have to reflect consciously on this process and by doing so they gain community building skills rooted in their own experience and they are ready to be used in their own initiatives.

The five thematic areas

Vision

A shared vision is an essential prerequisite in order to implement a community project successfully. It is often implicitly assumed that everyone understands the same under the same title, and only later one has to realize how different are the dreams and visions of individual project participants. It is of the utmost importance to have an explicit common vision as a unifying and motivating element that lays the foundation for all work in the future. Therefore it is an essential pillar of our work with groups.

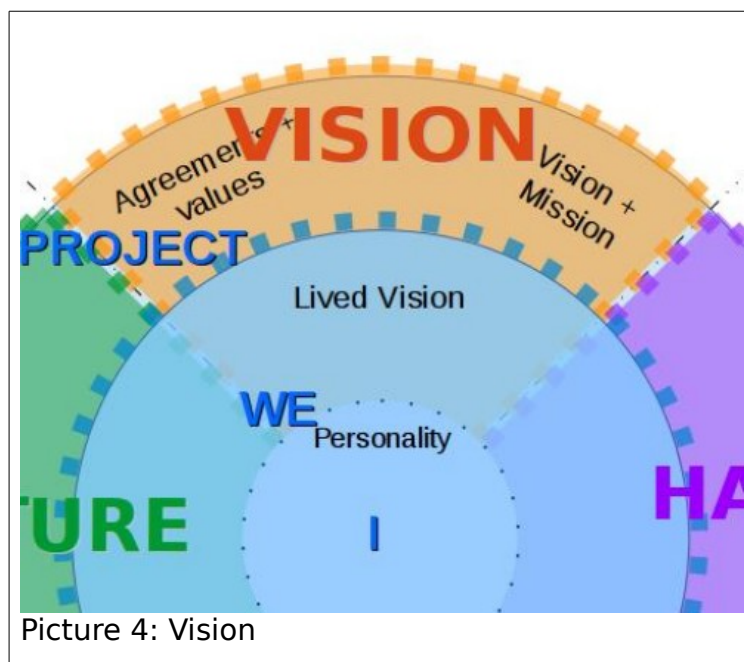
Here we often work with the "dreaming-circles" (inspired by Dragon Dreaming) to articulate and collect every wish of project participants regarding the common project. Here we like to integrate creative and symbolic elements such as painting, designing, illustrating, work with symbols and other activities.

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Ideally, at the end of the vision-work there is both: a clear and powerful image of the common goal, as well as a detailed description of the aspired state.

The "Mission" is examined in this phase as well - how will the common vision be implemented? And what do the community members specifically expect from each other?

However, an enormous potential of conflicts still can be hiding behind the flowery formulated visions due to the very different perceptions. Openly addressing any possible discrepancies and seeing whether and how the group would like to go with the contradictions in the different visions is an important step in this phase that lays an important foundation for the community of the entire project.



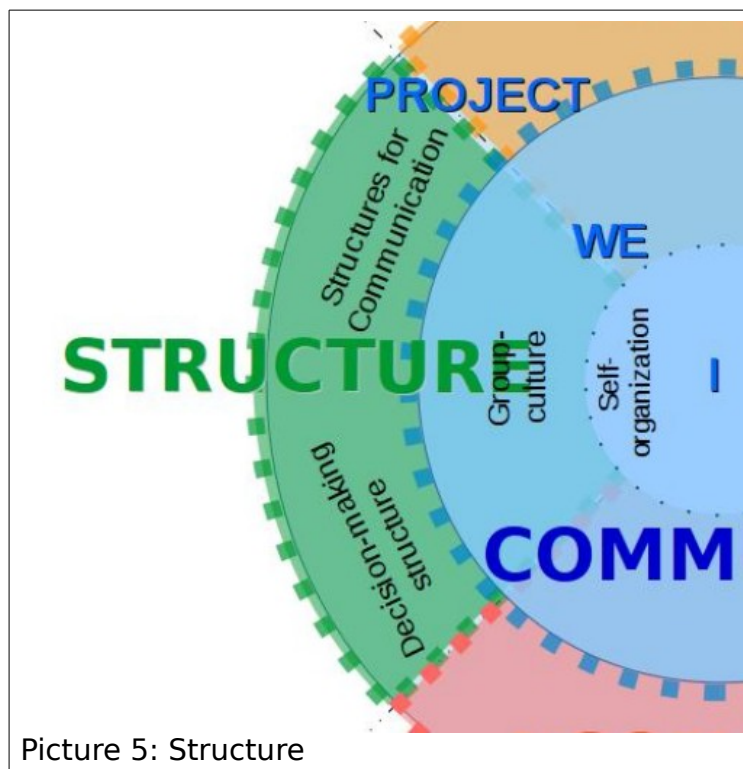
Structure

Structural issues have a very strong long-term influence on the development of a project. The question of the definition of the group, organization of team meetings, decision-making structures and distribution of tasks have a crucial impact on the success or difficulties in projects.

As part of our work, we accompany teams to find suitable structures and to raise the awareness of importance of structures and how significant it is to reflect on these structures over again and to adjust according to the reality of the project. We create awareness for the fact that the specified group structure goes hand in hand with the actual culture in the group, which in turn is influenced by the structure.

We draw from our wealthy experience at various group processes and decision-making structures and from seeing what consequences this can have on each specific group. This experience influences our consulting work.

At the same time, we create an experiential space for different ways of structuring group activities and finding the decision-making structure. By doing this, we give an experience which can be later applied in the everyday lives of the groups advised.

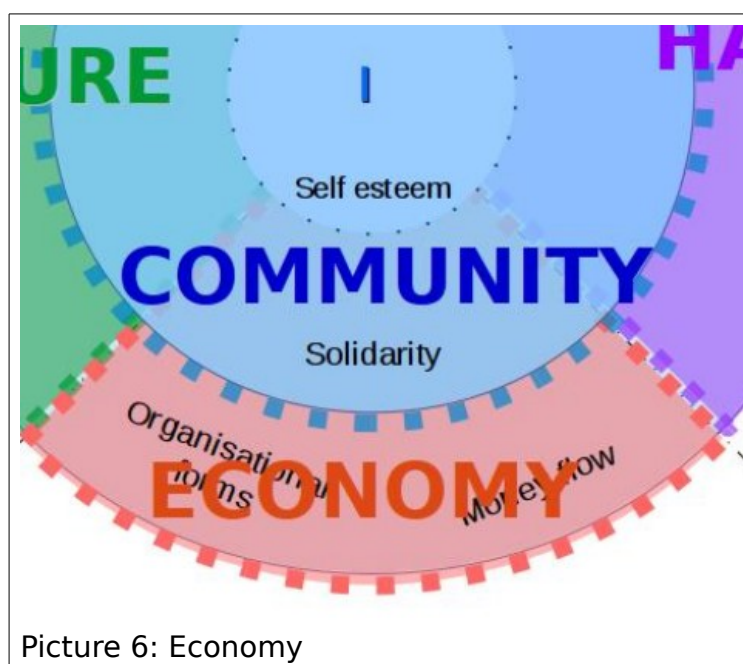


Picture 5: Structure

Economy

The thematic area "Economy" is the field in which the visions and plans "hit the ground".

The intersection point of both thematic areas "Economy" and "Structure" determines the legal and organizational forms. They shape a project and are more stable in a long run than many social structures. Therefore, it is very important for long-term projects to have a special focus on these structures. We offer experience-based advice on various legal and organizational forms for community projects. This advice does not replace the cooperation with lawyers and tax advisers for the legal and tax implications of the chosen legal form. But it shows which legal forms (in particular to property ownership issues)



Picture 6: Economy

have led to specific results in the community projects, which are the special features and how important it is to have well-considered and professionally guided decisions on the legal status.

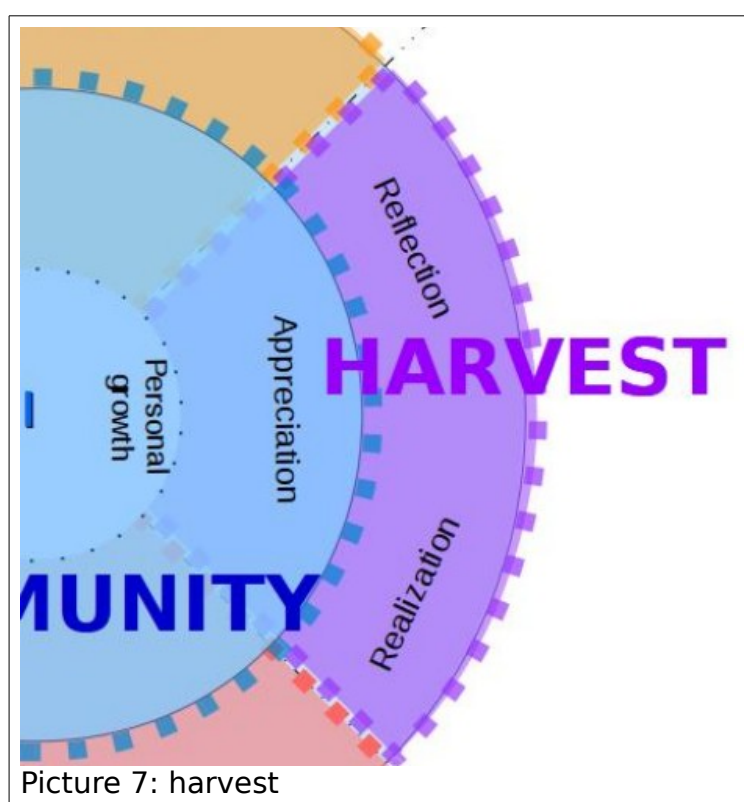
A different approach to money-issues is an important goal for many projects. However, there are very different opinions of how this solidarity approach would exactly look like. This topic can be one of the most critical issues for community projects. Therefore, it is essential to create a lot of transparency and reliability in this issue as a basic foundation for staying trusting and supportive towards each other. We accompany groups in the process of setting up their economic structures with all the related emotional and group dynamic issues coming together with it. The economy of shared-living projects include the preparation and implementation of the search for a suitable property.

Harvest

Often those involved in the projects burn out quickly, as projects require strong commitment without "giving back" a lot. The thematic area of "Harvest" brings our attention to how do we get, regain or even pass forward our strength out of what we have done before. "Appreciation" plays a key role in this thematic field. Building a group culture of mutual respect is a key focus of this thematic area.

The other questions belonging to this thematic area are following: What have we learned from the previous project experience? What can we improve? How can synergies be generated? How to turn the alleged "opponents" in public authorities or the surrounding environment into "allies"?

The concrete implementation of long-prepared projects we would also like to consider as the topic of "Harvest", as the implementation is the harvest of fruits that were sown in the time of preparation and planning.



Community

The life is cooperation and diversity; man is without a doubt a social being. The individual has been increasingly separated from the community, family, tribe and citizen-hood over the centuries of social evolution and especially through the era of industrial revolution. Today the individuality often counts more than common values, goods and fulfillment - but it seems that there is an opposite movement appearing orientated towards the commons, exchange circles, teamwork, inclusion, collective wisdom, inter-generational housing projects etc.

Community is in the center of our advising work and our model. Meanwhile, it is an aim in the sense of the quality of life and belonging, project and organization resilience as well as a development strategy for a society that most likely will need much more cooperation between each other and collective intelligence in order to enable long-term future prospects.

How does it work out to have a community as a unity of strong individuals? What is a community in the 21st century? How can we best support and use the strengths of individuals? How can we constructively notice, observe and solve separation and conflict as well as individual and collective crisis? How can a community be effectively designed to reach a considerable level of affluence?



Picture 8: Community

Learning community, in a community of people being on the way, from intentionally created experiences is the golden thread throughout our seminars and project consulting. We provide formats and methods in which community can arise easier. We give a tangible experience of how a space for community can be maintained and we keep it in a transparent way. We point out the essential factor of the "I" level's acting responsibility for a long-lasting community. We care for celebration, the gain of community experience, that everyone involved is recognized and valued, supported and assisted.

Trainers

The Trainers have over 20 years of personal experience in community living and buildup as well as in the self-organization of community projects. They are co-founders of Sieben Linden ecovillage and have been actively involved in project consulting and teaching design skills for project participants for over 10 years.

Martin Stengel - Dipl.Ingenieur (graduated engineer), communication trainer and adult educator

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More about us on our website: www.gemeinschaftsberatung.de

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The complete model