

# Co-housing in The Netherlands

I'm very happy to be here and to tell you something about cohousing in The Netherlands.

## *I begin with a definition*

In this presentation intentional community is defined as a group of 3 or more grown-ups, with or without children, not exclusively being family or partners, who have chosen to form a community in their living situation. They share companionship, facilities, one or more rooms or buildings and more or, perhaps fewer, possessions. New members are chosen by the community.

Co-housing is a special form of intentional community where each household has its own facilities and where the community shares one or more rooms, meeting places, gardens, etc.

## *Let's look a little bit of the history of cohousing in The Netherlands*

A new generation of communities started in The Netherlands in the sixties. Many, mostly younger, people developed new perspectives on society and on personal relationships. This included:

- Relationships developing within the community became as important, or even more important, than family relationships.
- People were feeling the need for more democracy and less hierarchy, in their politics, work and in personal situations.
- Feelings and emotions became just as important as logic in decision-making.
- Women began claiming fair and equal rights.
- Men began to express their 'feminine' qualities.
- Adults became more aware of their 'childlike' playful sides.
- Increasingly people believed that the nuclear family, with its relatively few intimate contacts, provided a poor environment for raising children. (Perhaps you know the African saying, "It takes a village to raise a child")
- There was a growing concern about western consumerism.
- Greater awareness about nature and the environment.
- And for many, the unequal distribution of wealth became a big concern.

The wish to do something concrete with these issues led to the creation of the first communal living groups (**woongroepen**) in the late '60s and early '70s. The idea of co-housing (**centraal wonen**) first appeared in the early seventies and the MW2 projects ( Environmentally and People Friendly Living and Working - **Mens- en Milieuvriendelijk Wonen en Werken**) came a few years later. In the 80s, communities for seniors were developed and, around 1990, came the idea of building an eco-village.

It's unlikely that 'communes', where you share everything, still do exist in The Netherlands, but all the other forms of intentional communities still exist and their number is gradually increasing. We estimate that the total number of intentional communities is over 10,000.

## **Co-housing (*centraal wonen* in Dutch)**

The idea of co-housing arose at the end of the sixties, both in Denmark and in the Netherlands. Co-housing in The Netherlands can be described as having a community of people or households, where each household has its own house or apartment with all the normal rooms and facilities, but also with shared community resources such as living areas, kitchens, laundries, gardens, community buildings, hobby-rooms and workshops. Usually a co-housing project will have about 30 to 70 households.

About half of the projects are divided into clusters of houses. Each 'cluster' has its own common facilities (living-room; kitchen; laundry; garden) and the members of each cluster choose their own (new) members. Additionally, the whole community has a common building, very much like a village hall, for parties, social events, meetings and so on.

In co-housing without clusters, usually a group is selected to choose new members.

The first co-housing project was completed in the seventies. Currently there are about 90 projects defined as co-housing. Besides these, there are many, mostly smaller, intentional communities that resemble co-housing, in that each household has its own facilities. Exact numbers of the latter are not known.

Most co-housing projects consist of rented houses, normally owned by housing cooperatives, which are wide spread in The Netherlands. Renting allows low-income households to be part of co-housing communities. There are also projects with a mix of owned and rented homes and some with only owned homes.

Almost all new co-housing projects are initiated by people who have little or no real co-housing experience but are attracted by the concept and ideals.

To build and live in an environmentally sound way are often important goals for co-housing communities: several projects have car-sharing initiatives, use solar panels, buy food boxes from local farmers etc..

## **Now the National Union for Co-housing or *Landelijke Vereniging Centraal Wonen* (LVCW)**

60 Co-housing projects come under the umbrella of the LVCW [www.lvcw.nl](http://www.lvcw.nl) Although the LVCW was officially formed in 1977, its first project came earlier, around 1971.

## **Now, looking at Co-housing for seniors**

The idea for co-housing for seniors appeared in the '80s, to meet the needs of the growing population of 50-plussers.

At the moment there are about 230 co-housing projects for seniors.

Co-housing for this group often enjoys greater support from local governments due to the expectation that this will reduce care costs.

Most of these projects refer to themselves as *living groups of the elderly* rather than co-housing communities.

Just as with the mixed-generation co-housing communities, new projects are started by interested individuals and couples rather than by the government, housing associations or private enterprise.

Most co-housing projects for the elderly are organized by the LVGO (*Landelijke Vereniging*

## Groepswonen van Ouderen - The National Union of Group-living Elderly )

Since 2004 the LVCW and the LVGO have been working together in the **Federatie Gemeenschappelijk Wonen** (FGW: The Dutch Federation of Intentional Communities). The goals of the federation are:

- to provide a network for all organisations representing intentional communities
- to give communal living a stronger say in public, government and building affairs
- to create a knowledge bank on communal living
- to advise new-initiative groups
- to develop a network of contacts within all organisations and firms involved with intentional communities
- to maintain a resource, a website, where people can find a community, and communities can advertise for new members
- to initiate research into the benefits of communal living. For example, in 2008, the FGW commissioned a study into the level and quality of mutual caring experienced in co-housing communities.

On May 16<sup>th</sup> this year the FGW organised the first national communal living day. 87 communities opened their doors to visitors. The main goal is to make communal living more known and understood, and individual communities used the occasion to find new members. It is hoped to repeat the event every year on the 3rd Saturday of May.

To me, it feels natural to live in a community, and not, as so often happens in modern society, to be isolated in a nuclear family, where it feels as if your neighbors, family and friends are kept at a distance.

Until relatively recently, people lived in large communities: villages; tribes and extended families. In many parts of the world this is still the normal way to live.

It is really quite a new idea that you can choose, as an individual, who you have frequent and close contact with, based upon your own personal interests, likes and dislikes.

For me, communal living, cohousing, is not in opposition to individualism.

This kind of living together needs strong individuals, who can live with the conflicts that can arise in an intentional community.

When most community members have strong individuality there is no need for 'leaders'. No family- or tribe-elder, no guru, no father who has the 'last say' or the final word.

Members are able to talk with each other based upon their own uniqueness, who they are and how they feel, and also from out of their own sense of responsibility.

Community living is a social experiment, a place to learn how to really live together in a 'true' democracy, where everyone is equal, everyone thinks together, makes decisions together and shares responsibilities.

I also find that contact has the quality of being more open and direct, including between children and adults.

That these experiences can be exchanged, that ideas and solutions can be shared, this is one of

the things I find enjoyable and interesting about these international conferences – these great councils.

I really believe that sharing our experiences informs and opens up possibilities for how we can live together.

For me communal living is important because I see it as an opportunity for people to learn how to get on with each other better. Mostly, but not always, that's how it works.

I call it a breeding ground for basic democracy. One learns by experience (better), in an equal way (there are no leaders) to get on with each other, to cooperate and to take responsibility.

Human beings are social animals, and at the same time individuals who feel a natural need to belong.

In the past, and still in many cultures you 'belonged' in your community, in whatever form that took.

Individualism, to me, means to find and develop yourself. To become independent from common norms, culture, etc. To discover what is important and 'real' both to you and in you. Bob Dylan wrote 'Don't follow leaders' and 'To live outside the law you must be honest'. I like to translate this as 'To live outside of common rules you must be honest to yourself'

Whether you are a man or woman isn't really important. What is important is simply to be human. And then choose from out of yourself which groups or communities you want to join. Not from what others expect from you, but from what your heart desires, based on freedom and individual choice.

Peter Bakker, June 2009