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Grassroots Innovations and Projectification: Diffusion Processes of the European Ecovillage Movement

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ABSTRACT

Grassroots innovations are increasingly recognized as crucial actors in sustainability transitions, offering localized, bottom-up solutions to local and global challenges. These initiatives contribute to sustainability by diffusing sustainable innovations and practices to broader societal sectors. However, the functioning of grassroots innovations is influenced by projectification, that is, the structuring of efforts around temporary, grant-funded projects. Projectification has a significant impact on both the development and diffusion of grassroots innovations. This process also plays a key role in shaping the internal governance and functioning of grassroots innovations networks, influencing how these initiatives operate and evolve. Focusing on the European branch of the Global Ecovillage Network, we explore the interaction between projectification processes and the diffusion of ecovillage practices. Employing the embedding framework, we analyze how projects facilitate or constrain the diffusion of sustainable practices across and beyond the network. Methodologically, the research is based on in-depth fieldwork trips to three European ecovillages, resulting in 16 semi-structured interviews with ecovillage members and members of the European ecovillage network. Our findings indicate that while projects enable certain embedding processes, they also introduce tensions that could limit the long-term sustainability of these initiatives. This study underscores the need for a balanced approach to projectification, ensuring that it supports rather than undermines grassroots innovation's objectives.

1 | Introduction

Sustainability transitions studies have addressed global challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and social inequality (Markard et al. 2012). These transitions require systemic shifts in how societies organize their economies, technologies, and infrastructures to create more sustainable futures (Köhler et al. 2019). In this article, we refer to grassroots innovations (GIs) as novel bottom-up solutions for sustainable development that emerge from civil society groups and respond to local needs and values (Seyfang and Smith 2007). We use the term GI initiatives to describe local groups that create and spread these innovations within a particular region. GI networks refer to specific organizational networks that connect multiple GI initiatives.

GIs offer alternative socio-ecological paradigms, emerging from community-driven efforts to provide localized, bottom-up solutions to global problems (Seyfang and Smith 2007). Unlike top-down initiatives, GIs often operate outside mainstream market and policy frameworks, emphasizing inclusive,

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participatory approaches, and offering new ways of thinking and acting that challenge dominant systems (Fressoli et al. 2014). By diffusing their sustainable innovations and practices to larger society, GI initiatives can play an important role in sustainability transition.

However, despite their potential contributions, GIs also face significant limitations and challenges within sustainability transitions. Some key limitations of GIs include their limited potential for scalability due to reliance on volunteer labor and informal structures, challenges in sustaining long-term engagement, internal conflicts arising from differing goals or values among members, and difficulties in navigating or influencing established political and economic structures (Feola and Nunes 2014; Smith et al. 2014).

One prominent example of a network of GI initiatives is the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN), which promotes sustainable living practices by linking ecovillages across the world. GEN-Europe, its European network, plays an important role in facilitating knowledge exchange and communicating the voices of ecovillages at the European level. By supporting translocal connections, GEN-Europe increases the capacity of ecovillages to influence broader societal transitions (Ulug et al. 2021).

However, as GIs increasingly rely on institutional support and external funding, projectification has become a significant dynamic shaping their development. Projectification refers to the proliferation of project dynamics in various organizational contexts, affecting their strategies, goals, timelines, and deliverables (Fregolente et al. 2022). While projects offer resources and platforms for experimentation and collaboration, they also impose a certain logic that can influence the evolution and diffusion of GIs. It is therefore crucial to examine critically whether projectification processes enable or constrain the transformative potential of GIs. This project-based approach is especially strong at the European Union (EU) level, where grants serve as a central mechanism for promoting sustainability transitions (Cerne and Jansson 2019). However, questions remain about how project structures influence the capacity of GIs to diffuse beyond their immediate contexts and become embedded in society.

This article explores how the use of projects influences GIs in ecovillages and in the networks they create, as well as the relationship between projectification and the diffusion capacity of GIs. Specifically, it examines how GEN-Europe and individual GI initiatives use projects to support the diffusion of ecovillage practices, and whether project structures enhance or hinder the ability of these initiatives to spread their sustainable innovations to broader societal sectors. While project grants have enabled GI initiatives to gain visibility and resources, it remains unclear whether they provide the conditions necessary for the long-term diffusion of innovative practices. The central research question, therefore, is: How do projectification processes influence the diffusion capacities of grassroots innovations within translocal networks?

To investigate this, we conducted empirical research within GEN-Europe, focusing on how the network and individual ecovillages use projects to foster the spread of its sustainable innovations. In our analysis, we connect the embedding framework (Roysen et al. 2024), used to describe diffusion processes of GIs, to projectification processes on the individual ecovillage and translocal network levels.

The next section (2) presents the theoretical framework, focusing on the literature on GI diffusion and projectification. This is followed by (3) the research methods, outlining the empirical research within GEN Europe. The subsequent section (4) presents the results, highlighting how project structures influence the diffusion of GIs. The article concludes with (5) a discussion of the implications of projectification for sustainability transitions, offering insights into how projectification influences the diffusion capacity of GIs. Finally, in section (6) we conclude the article by drawing its implications for theory and practice.

2 | Theoretical Framework

2.1 | The Role of Grassroots Innovations in Sustainability Transitions

Sustainability transition studies emphasize the roles of various actors and institutions in driving the sustainable reconfiguration of socio-technical systems (Geels 2002). One increasingly recognized actor in this field is grassroots innovations (GIs) (Hossain 2016). GI initiatives generate "novel bottom-up solutions for sustainable development; solutions that respond to the local situation and the interests and values of the communities involved" (Seyfang and Smith 2007, 2). Their potential contribution to sustainability transitions stems from their ability to diffuse sustainable practices within their local social environments and broader society (Seyfang and Smith 2007).

Building on this perspective, Avelino et al. (2019) have significantly contributed to our understanding of grassroots initiatives by conceptualizing them as part of broader eco-social transformations. Their work highlights how such initiatives are embedded in and shaped by political-economic structures, including governance regimes, welfare institutions, and systems of capitalist accumulation. Rather than viewing grassroots innovations as isolated or purely oppositional, Avelino et al. emphasize their entanglement with dominant power configurations, showing how they contest, negotiate with, and sometimes reinforce existing institutions and socio-technical systems. This literature underscores that systemic change is not only technological but also social and political, shaped by welfare state regimes, governance arrangements, and societal power relations.

Zimmermann (2024) shows how welfare state configurations shape the risks, conflicts, and legitimacy of green transitions. For example, in Nordic countries, where universal welfare, strong redistribution, and participatory governance are prevalent, green transitions are often framed as inclusive and socially innovative, reducing conflict. In contrast, Southern European regimes, marked by weaker redistribution and fragmented governance, face more tension, with green policies sparking legitimacy struggles, especially among marginalized groups. These differences affect how grassroots actors position themselves: either as legitimate transition partners or as challengers to dominant policies.

This also relates to how grassroots movements respond to environmental and social crises. Forno and Graziano (2014) analyze how these movements seek to re-embed economies in local solidarities and practices as a way of resisting precariousness and institutional neglect. The strength and orientation of such responses are often shaped by the welfare context: in settings where state support is weak or uneven, grassroots actors are more likely to develop autonomous infrastructures of care and provision. Thus, welfare state configurations not only influence the political opportunities for green transitions but also condition the forms and functions of grassroots responses to socio-ecological crises.

These contributions underscore the need for analytical tools that can account for the strategic, multi-scalar, and context-sensitive ways in which grassroots actors engage with their wider environments. Grassroots innovations are increasingly recognized not only as niche actors but as political and institutional agents capable of reshaping governance arrangements, cultural norms, and material infrastructures (Fiore et al. 2025; Smith and Raven 2012).

Intermediary organizations also play an important role by connecting local GI initiatives with wider networks, resources, and policymakers, amplifying their impact (Hargreaves et al. 2013). By linking these grassroots efforts to larger systems, GIs can become important contributors to sustainable transitions, promoting structural changes in policy, economy, and culture.

To further contextualize the diffusion and transformation potential of GIs—and to address the tension between their oppositional positioning and their gradual incorporation into institutional frameworks—this study draws on the literature on translation from organizational sociology and actor-network theory (ANT). In this tradition, translation is understood not as a neutral process of transferring ideas from one context to another, but as a situated and contested negotiation in which practices, meanings, and identities are reconfigured (Czarniawska 2008; Latour 1987). Rather than treating GIs as stable "best practices" that can be replicated wholesale, translation theory highlights how they are reshaped through encounters with new institutional, cultural, and political settings.

This is particularly relevant in light of the mainstreaming dynamics observed in the empirical material. While GIs are often conceived as alternatives to dominant systems, their engagement with funding structures, public policy, and broader public frequently requires them to adapt their language, goals, and formats. As Mukhtar-Landgren and Fred (2019) argue, policy translation involves not only movement but framing and reframing, where certain elements are emphasized while others are muted or excluded to ensure compatibility with dominant governance logics. Applying this lens allows for a more critical analysis of how diffusion is not only enabled but also disciplined by existing institutional contexts.

By integrating this perspective, the article seeks to problematize assumptions of linear diffusion and instead explore how ecovillages strategically navigate different institutional landscapes to gain legitimacy and effect change.

To effectively analyze the relationship between projectification processes and diffusion capacities, this study employs the embedding framework on the diffusion of GIs (Roysen et al. 2024). The use of this framework is a logical step when building from broader debates on sustainability transitions and eco-social transformations, as it allows for a more detailed understanding of how grassroots actors move between niche experimentation and structural engagement. The embedding framework was specifically designed to analyze how grassroots initiatives interact with external environments in strategic and context-sensitive ways to enhance their diffusion potential. Rather than prescribing a normative approach, the framework categorizes these interactions into five empirically observed embedding dynamics, offering a flexible yet systematic tool for analyzing grassroots contributions to transformation processes.

This framework identifies five different embedding dynamics:

1. *Expansion* (the strategic efforts of grassroots initiatives to create projects and collaborations with actors from outside their niche); Examples of expansion include GI initiatives getting involved in local political councils and building stronger connections between GI initiative members and local communities.
2. *Reframing* (the cultural impact of grassroots initiatives in wider society by challenging dominant frames); Examples of reframing include GI initiatives' efforts to educate the public about climate change and their involvement in protests against polluting industries.
3. *Circulation of knowledge* (the knowledge production and dissemination by grassroots innovators); Examples of the circulation of knowledge include GI initiatives' efforts to share their knowledge on regenerative agriculture through pamphlets and courses with external actors.
4. *Shifting material arrangements* (the shifts and reassemblages in the materiality of contexts outside the niche). Examples of shifting material arrangements include GI initiatives' efforts to contribute to the conservation or regeneration of degraded lands, as well as their impact on local economies.
5. *Replication* (the recruitment by grassroots initiatives of new actors into their practices, and the reproduction of such practices in different contexts). Examples of replication include new groups adapting the entire ecovillage model or adapting specific sustainable practices learned at the ecovillage in new contexts.

While replication may initially appear contradictory to innovation—since it involves reproducing existing practices—it often facilitates context-specific adaptations and incremental innovations, significantly contributing to broader diffusion and innovation dynamics (Hargreaves et al. 2013; Smith and Raven 2012). Additionally, many of the specific practices being diffused by ecovillages were not necessarily invented by them. Ecovillages "usually act as 'hubs' of early adoption, experimentation and diffusion" (Roysen et al. 2024, 7).

The connection between the different embedding dynamics is displayed in Figure 1. Through these embedding dynamics, GI

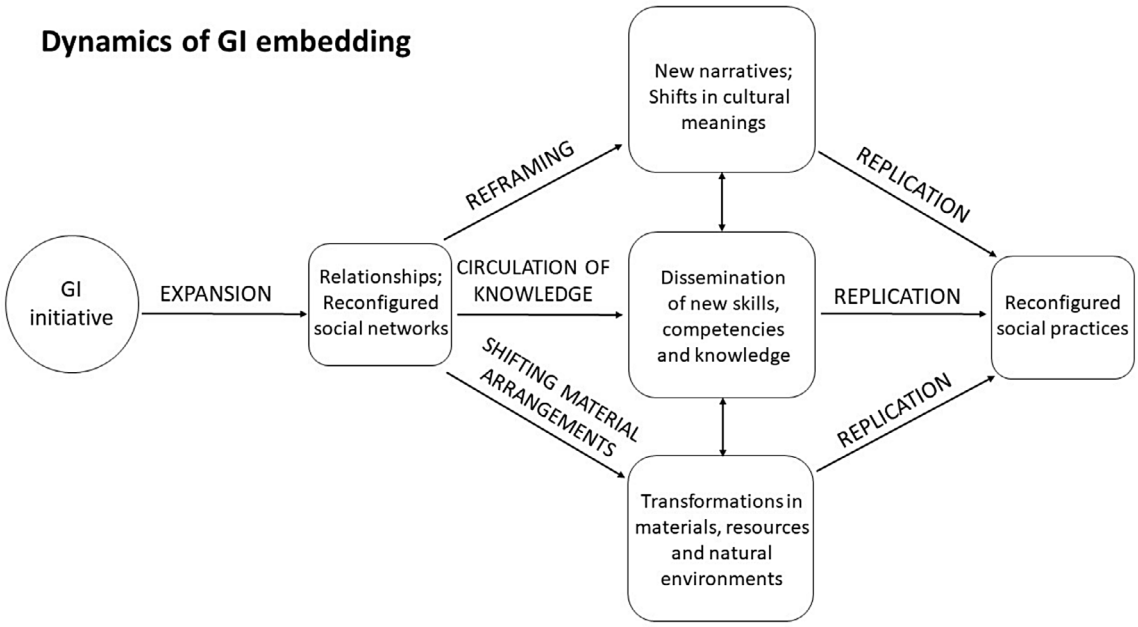

FIGURE 1 | Dynamics of grassroots innovations, the embedding framework (Roysen et al. 2024).

initiatives can influence broader sustainability transition processes. They do so by reconfiguring the social networks and promoting innovative cultural frames, competencies, material arrangements, and social practices in a certain context.

While the embedding framework was initially focused on local collaborations, this article applies this framework to translocal collaborations. The aim of this study is to analyze how each of these dynamics is influenced by projectification processes. In order to do so, we will first discuss the concept of projectification in the next subsection.

Figure 1 Dynamics of diffusion of grassroots innovations: the embedding framework (Roysen et al. 2024, 9).

2.2 | Projectification

Projects are temporary, action-focused organizational frameworks designed to accomplish specific tasks within a defined timeframe, targeting desired transitional changes (Lundin and Söderholm 1995). For much of the twentieth century, projects have been a dominant form of organization to solve tasks and work assignments in a wide range of organizations of different sizes and types (Maylor 2001). The flexibility and cost-efficiency associated with project work are well-suited to fostering agility and innovation, making this model widely adopted (Godenhjelm et al. 2015; Henning and Wald 2019).

The term "projectification" was first coined by Midler (1995) in his attempt to define a concept that he observed happening at a Renaut factory during the period of the Twingo project, of which he was a participant and an observer (Midler 1995; Aubry et al. 2012). Despite the various definitions of projectification (see Fregolente et al. 2022) we consider it as the increasing prevalence of projects as a method of action across various organizational contexts, including industries, corporations, governments at all levels, networks, multinational companies, NGOs, local initiatives, and individuals (Fregolente et al. 2022; Godenhjelm 2023; Lundin et al. 2015).

As a result, the diffusion of projects has expanded beyond the corporate sector, permeating various aspects of society. Some scholars describe this phenomenon as "the projectification of everything" (Jensen et al. 2016), while others refer to it as "the project society" (Lundin 2016), or even the "new spirit of capitalism" (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005). These terms highlight the widespread adoption of projects across all levels of society, including work and personal life (Kovách and Kučerová 2006; Kovách and Kučerova 2009). There are very few studies calling attention to projects in the context of Gis. The work of Creamer (2015) shows how projects play a role in one local initiative in Scotland, and explores the dichotomy between structural change and the project-based model of GIs (Creamer 2015; Emily Creamer et al. 2019; Smith et al. 2014). Therefore, there is a noticeable gap in the literature linking projectification processes with GIs, particularly concerning the diffusion aspects of projectification.

To better understand the dimensions previously mentioned, Jałocha (2019) developed a typology that distinguishes between different levels of projectification.

2.2.1 | Levels of Projectification

The levels of projectfication in the typology developed by Jałocha (2019) are the mega level, macro level, meso level, meta level, and micro level. The levels of analysis are explained as follows (Jałocha 2019):

- Meta—Relations and trends transforming global social structures;
- Mega—Societies, countries, supranational organizations;

- Macro—industries, sectors;
- Meso—organizations; and
- Micro—individuals.

Differentiating levels of projectification is essential for understanding its impact and influence, as it allows researchers to precisely define the scope and focus of their analysis. Consequently, it allows for a better understanding of the trends and characteristics of development at each level. The interaction between different levels is crucial, as some studies play a vital role in exploring the dynamics of more complex systems (Jałocha 2019).

In this study, we explore the dynamics of diffusion from the meso-level perspective of projectification and its interactions with the mega-level, both described by Jałocha (2019). Specifically, we examine how EU project grants—as a manifestation of projectification at the mega-level—shape the professionalization.

In this study, we explore the dynamics of diffusion from the meso level perspective of projectification and its interactions with the mega level, both described by Jałocha (2019). Understanding the dynamics at the mega level, specifically the EU project funds as a policy-making established dynamic (Büttner 2019), and the transition to the meso level, or the organizational level, through workforce professionalization, is essential to this research (Jałocha 2013). This analysis considers the influence of EU project grants, which play a crucial role in the professionalization process necessary to access EU-funded projects and disseminate innovative practices. Thus, understanding the EU's projectified grant system (Büttner 2019; Godenhjelm et al. 2015; Jałocha 2013) is key to comprehending how project-supported networks operate as professionalized entities using projects to diffuse their innovations.

2.2.2 | Projectification of EU Grants

The EU plays a pivotal role in project activities within its member states, serving as a key driver of projectification in the public sector. A significant portion of EU policies across various domains is executed through project-funding mechanisms (Büttner 2019; Fred 2018; Godenhjelm et al. 2015; Kovách and Kučerova 2009; Kovách and Kučerová 2006). This approach encompasses the majority of the EU's budget, which is allocated and managed through these project-based funds (Fred 2018).

The EU funding landscape operates through a cohesive structure where organizations can seek funding either from national agencies overseeing specific funds or directly from sector-specific directorates in Brussels (Fred 2018; Mukhtar-Landgren and Fred 2019; Mukhtar-Landgren et al. 2019). These frameworks delineate detailed action schemes and work programs, including project calls that specify funding priorities and eligibility criteria across diverse sectors such as regional development, employment policies, agriculture, and research (Nylén 2021). Participation in EU funding necessitates adherence to specialized knowledge and technical standards inherent in EU project management, reflecting a distinct social world shaped by projectification—a strategy employed to align local policies with EU objectives (Büttner and Leopold 2016; Jałocha 2013; Nesheim 2019).

Furthermore, EU-funded projects are characterized by their time-limited nature, which creates job insecurity among project workers, often referred to as the project class (Kovách and Kučerova 2009; Kovách and Kučerová 2006). This condition of precarity stems from the reliance on short-term project-based employment, requiring continuous efforts to secure future funding and partnerships post-project completion (Büttner and Leopold 2016; Lundin et al. 2015; Prouska and Kapsali 2020).

2.2.3 | Professionalization of Project-Supported Organizations

Working with and within projects requires a degree of knowledge in this non-routine dynamics. Over the past decades, there has been a multitude of associations, courses, universities, and initiatives engaging in teaching project management and project work (Maylor 2001; Wagner et al. 2022; Schoper et al. 2018). Therefore, through education and practice in project-related work, be it through roles of project manager, project coordinators, or intermediaries of project funds, the past decades have seen a higher level of professionalization of project work (Ekstedt 2019; Henning and Wald 2019; Palm and Lindahl 2015).

We understand professionalization as a contingent and open process of social positioning that spans a continuum between layperson and expert, varying in degrees of specialization, complexity, and required training (Büttner et al. 2015; Pavalko 1988). This understanding captures the full spectrum of professional involvement in EU Affairs, from top-ranking positions in Brussels to technical roles in EU policy implementation across Europe (Büttner et al. 2015).

The professionalization of project work has opened up new opportunities for organizations to enhance their engagement with projects (Bredin and Soderlund 2010). Additionally, it has provided communities, non-profit organizations, and grassroots initiatives with access to project funds, enabling them to develop their activities through project-based initiatives (Cicmil and O'Laocha 2016; Jałocha and Bogacz-Wojtanowska 2016; Kuura et al. 2014). On the one hand, this has allowed these groups to reach unprecedented levels of development, particularly when funded by external entities such as the EU (Harrison et al. 2024). On the other hand, this reliance on project funding has resulted in a project-oriented workforce, which can have significant personal consequences for individuals working in these organizations (Büttner 2019; Mukhtar-Landgren et al. 2019). The temporary nature of projects often leads to job insecurity and can contribute to issues such as burnout, as workers navigate the uncertainty and instability inherent in project-based employment (Małecka-Dobrogowska 2022; Velasco and Wald 2022).

In summary, EU funding schemes are designed to reach various societal levels, from member states to local governments

and grassroots initiatives. However, they also establish a power dynamic that centralizes control within higher European institutions. This dynamic arises from the increasingly professionalized funding system, which imposes stringent standards that must be met to access these funds at all levels. While these schemes provide opportunities through EU-funded projects for local governments and initiatives, they also reinforce the dominance of EU higher authorities as the ultimate decision-makers. Additionally, projectification may generate tensions observable across multiple levels, which must be recognized as potential consequences of adopting a project-based approach.

2.3 | Embedding Dynamics Meet Projectification

The process of projectification has become a reality across European GI initiatives, shaping the operational dynamics and strategic development of these initiatives (Smith et al. 2014). As we elaborate in Section 4 (results), projectification manifests itself in diverse forms in the context of GIs, ranging from internal capacity-building activities and community-focused endeavors to externally oriented projects aimed at engaging broader societal actors. Therefore, projects serve multiple functions, including strengthening internal governance structures (Ekstedt 2019), fostering collaboration among members, enhancing the visibility and legitimacy of grassroots initiatives, and facilitating connections with external stakeholders and funding bodies (Jensen et al. 2018).

The embedding framework (Roysen et al. 2024) provides a structured analytical lens for examining the implications of these varied projectification practices for GI diffusion processes. Specifically, it helps clarify how projects actively facilitate or, at times, constrain different embedding dynamics. Through this lens, we can systematically understand how projects are strategically employed by GI initiatives to diffuse their sustainable practices and innovations. Thus, the embedding framework allows us to critically assess the impact of projectification, revealing both its potential to amplify grassroots influence and the tensions it introduces within the complex ecosystem of GIs.

In summary, this study aims to shed light on the complexity of using projects as a support for diffusion in GI contexts, as well as the benefits it carries as a trampoline for diffusion, innovation, and for GI initiatives to meet the standards of funding bodies through a professionalized workforce. In the next section, we delve into the methods, where we explain how we conducted this research, how we collected data, which cases were used, and how we processed and analyzed the data collected.

3 | Methods: Data Collection and Data Analysis

3.1 | Research Design

This article is the result of a collaboration between members of two distinct projects: EuroREGEN – Transnational networks for regenerative development in Europe (Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, PTDC/SOC-SOC/2061/2020) and EVIST – Ecovillages as Incubators for Sustainability Transitions (Swiss National Science Foundation, 10001A_197351). [Correction added on 27 August 2025, after first online publication: The preceding sentence has been corrected in this version.] Data was collected separately by members of each project, analyzed separately, and further combined for comparison and debate.

This research is characterized by a qualitative and exploratory approach (Flick and Flick 2011). It is exploratory because it seeks to examine an under-researched area concerning the relationship between projectification and GI diffusion processes in the specific context of European ecovillages. The qualitative nature of the study emphasizes an in-depth understanding of how projectification processes manifest within grassroots contexts, with particular attention to the meanings, interactions, and dynamics perceived and constructed by the involved actors (Flick 2018; Yin 2011). Additionally, given the complexity and context-specific nature of ecovillages, a qualitative approach enabled the research to effectively capture the intricate, non-standardized processes and practices occurring within and across different cases.

The chosen qualitative method also allowed flexibility to adapt data collection to each ecovillage's unique circumstances. Standardized methods would have been insufficient due to significant variations in each case's project engagement and operational context (Yin 2011). Thus, data collection combined multiple qualitative methods, including participatory observation and semi-structured interviews, permitting iterative and adaptive interactions with each community studied (Flick 2018). This research design facilitated comprehensive and contextually grounded insights into the diffusion dynamics influenced by projectification across diverse GI contexts.

3.2 | Case Selection and Description

Below, we briefly contextualize each case studied. Additionally, Appendix B provides further details on the individual cases, including the specific data collection processes and the respective research projects responsible for collecting and analyzing the data.

3.2.1 | GEN Europe

A European network connecting over 700 ecovillages, supporting sustainable living through knowledge exchange, capacity building, and sociocracy. GEN-Europe was selected due to its role in coordinating ecovillage initiatives and participating in transnational projects.

3.2.2 | Arterra Bizimodu Ecovillage

A recently established Spanish ecovillage focused on sustainable building, regenerative agriculture, and collaboration with external partners. Arterra Bizimodu was selected due to its active involvement in local, regional, and transnational EU-funded projects and hosting GEN-Europe's office.

3.2.3 | Suderbyn Ecovillage

A Swedish ecovillage promoting regenerative society principles through permaculture and sustainability practices. Suderbyn

was selected due to its prominent role in EU-funded projects and strong connections within GEN-Europe.

3.2.4 | Ecovillage Boekel

A recently established Dutch ecovillage focused on sustainable building, regenerative agriculture, and collaboration with external partners. Boekel was selected because it serves as a model for early-stage ecovillages receiving diverse funding sources, including EU and local funds.

The primary aim of selecting these cases is to comparatively analyze how varying levels of project engagement—ranging from extensive EU-funded involvement to predominantly local activities—impact diffusion processes within GIs. This is reflected in the cases' differing approaches to utilizing projects for diffusion. One ecovillage (Suderbyn) is highly active in the transnational realm, heavily leveraging EU-funded projects. Another (Arterra Bizimodu) balances both local and national projects, occasionally supplemented by EU funding. The third case (Ecovillage Boekel) focuses primarily on local and national projects, without direct reliance on EU-funded initiatives. This diversity in project engagement provides a comprehensive understanding of how different ecovillages utilize projectification to achieve their sustainability and community development goals. Although other ecovillages also engage with various types of projects, the selected cases were chosen because they exemplify diverse approaches in terms of the scope and depth of their involvement with EU-funded initiatives. Additionally, these ecovillages provided exceptional access by welcoming us physically into their communities, actively participating in interviews, and readily responding to online communications.

3.3 | Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection and analysis followed an abductive approach, characterized by iterative and flexible processes (Timmermans and Tavory 2022). This approach combined multiple methods of data collection and analysis, allowing for continuous refinement of understanding as new insights emerged.

This study utilized participatory action as one of the primary sources of data (Flick 2018; Flick and Flick 2011), especially through participant observation during the entire process of an EU-funded project and during fieldwork visits to individual ecovillages. This close engagement with the subject of study enabled the researchers to gain insights directly from their interactions and observations. Additionally, notes and memos were generated throughout the process, fostering a constant dialogue between the "field and desk" (Charmaz 2012; Czarniawska 2014). This ongoing discussion helped inform the subsequent rounds of interviews.

Another source of data of this study consists of semi-structured interviews conducted with key members of the network and members of the ecovillage case studies. A total of 16 interviews were used in this study. These interviews were carried out using snowball sampling to identify and connect with relevant individuals and essential cases within the networks (Yin 2011, 2018). This approach led to three rounds of interviews, which were conducted online and during field visits to the case sites and the facilitation of a focus group discussion in one of the cases. The list and details on the interviews and field visits can be found in Appendix A.

At the project EuroREGEN, the qualitative data analysis software **Atlas.ti** (ATLAS.ti Scientific Software Development GmbH 2023) played a crucial role in processing and systematically organizing diverse empirical materials, including documents, transcripts from semi-structured interviews, and extensive field notes. [Correction added on 27 August 2025, after first online publication: In the preceding sentence, '[ADD name after review]' has been changed to 'EuroREGEN' in this version.] The coding was conducted in three iterative rounds. The **first round** employed open and inductive coding, enabling themes and patterns to emerge directly from the data without predetermined categories. This process led to a second round of coding, which involved a deductive approach. In this phase, codes were pre-selected based on the themes identified during the thematic analysis, allowing for a more focused exploration of the data (Charmaz 2012; Flick 2014). Finally, the **third round** reverted to an inductive approach, carefully examining previously coded data to illuminate embedding dynamics (Roysen et al. 2024), revealing deeper connections and nuances within projectification processes. This iterative coding procedure allowed for a structured yet flexible exploration of the rich qualitative data collected in this study.

The data from the EVIST project was analyzed using MAXQDA (Verbi 2024). [Correction added on 27 August 2025, after first online publication: In the preceding sentence, '[ADD name after review]' has been changed to 'EVIST' in this version.] In this case, a combination of interactive and deductive coding was applied. Since the embedding framework was already part of the project's initial theoretical design, the data was coded from the outset with the intention of identifying occurrences of the five embedding dynamics, alongside other theoretical categories. As part of the collaboration for this article, these initially coded segments were re-examined specifically to assess whether and how the embedding dynamics intersected with projectification processes. This approach ensured that relevant overlaps, tensions, or co-occurrences between embedding strategies and project-based structures were explicitly identified and brought into the comparative analysis.

The coded data from **Atlas.ti and MAQXDA** were subsequently integrated into a **Miro board** to visually map the relationships and interactions among empirical findings and the theoretical background. The Miro board facilitated a structured visualization process, clarifying connections, highlighting emerging patterns, and explicitly identifying tensions between empirical observations and existing literature on projectification and GIs. This visual synthesis created the basis for the writing process of this article.

4 | Results[1]

In line with our investigation into projectification dynamics within the context of GI diffusion, this section provides a detailed analysis of how project-based activities unfold in GEN-Europe and three ecovillage cases. Using the embedding framework developed by Roysen et al. (2024), we examine how projectification processes interact with the diffusion capacities of grassroots innovations across both network and local levels.

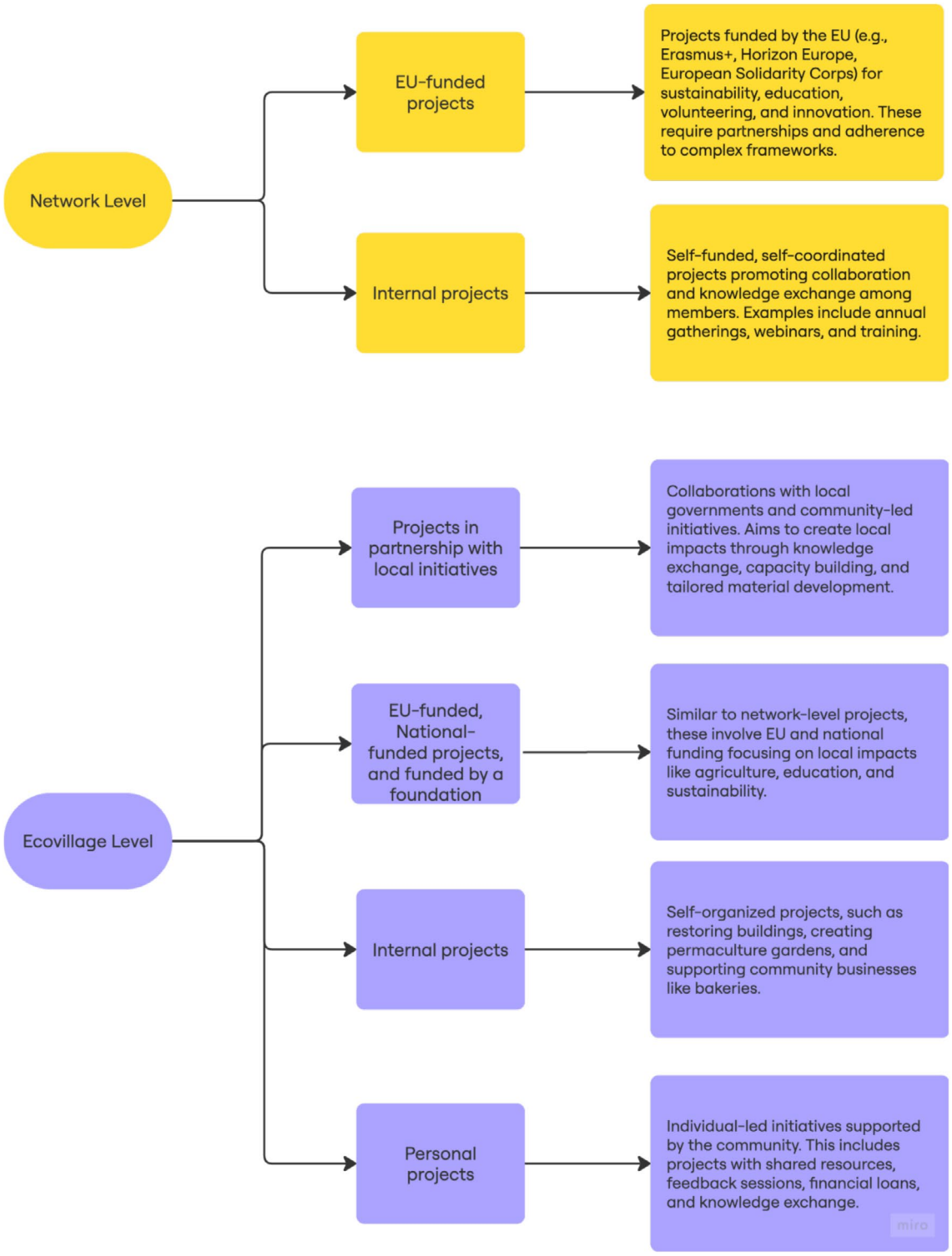

FIGURE 2 | Overview of project levels, types, and descriptions.

To guide our empirical analysis, we structure the findings around the five embedding dynamics proposed by Roysen et al. (2024)—expansion, reframing, circulation of knowledge, shifting material arrangements, and replication. These dynamics offer a systematic lens for understanding how diffusion capacities are shaped, enabled, or constrained by project-based activities in different contexts. By comparing how these dynamics play out in GEN-Europe and in the selected ecovillage cases, we can draw out both cross-cutting patterns and context-specific insights.

Various types of projects take place within ecovillages and GEN-Europe. We have identified and highlighted the most prominent ones, categorizing them into two distinct levels: the network level (e.g., EU-funded initiatives coordinated by GEN-Europe) and the ecovillage level (e.g., locally implemented sustainability

projects). This typology is presented in Figure 2 and provides the foundation for analyzing how projectification shapes the different dynamics of GI diffusion.

In the following subsections, we examine how each embedding dynamic is affected by projectification. Alongside this, at the end of the embedding dynamic presented, we identify a series of tensions that emerge through project-based engagements. While each tension is presented in relation to a primary embedding dynamic, many of them may intersect with others, reflecting the interlinked and ambivalent effects of projectification on diffusion.[2]

4.1 | Expansion

To better understand the various roles projects play in the expansion activities of ecovillages, we will examine specific examples of their efforts to build connections and influence beyond their immediate communities through projects.

The expansion activities of individual ecovillages are increased when they create projects in collaboration with external actors. For example, at Arterra Bizimodu, involvement in local governance includes having one representative on the Artieda council, which is the smallest governmental region they are part of, with a history of several ecovillage members previously serving on the regional council and having two members currently part of it. The ecovillage actively participates in selecting its representative who will run for the local council. Apart from that, Arterra does expansion efforts through projects in partnership with local initiatives, for example, with local producers and food growers to create a network for the region. This project is called Tejiendo la Dispensa[3] and is funded by a foundation (Fondation Daniel et Nina Carasso[4]) that grants projects in Spain and France which work with sustainable food systems and citizen art. One of our interviewees briefly explains this project in partnership with local initiatives:

> We are now running another project that's called Tejiendo la Dispensa, it's about meeting with the local organic producers and creating main brand of the region that is sharing our values and also creates a network and then create a stamp of the network. (Interviewee 2)

Suderbyn Ecovillage has limited expansion efforts with local initiatives and government, often relying on one or two of its founders. This is partly due to language barriers, as most residents are not Swedish speakers. Therefore, there is a lack of political involvement. However, one strong local connection they maintain through projects is with the university, facilitating student exchanges, short-term volunteering, and hosting visitors and workshops both at the ecovillage and on campus. They have a partnership in a Erasmus+ funded (EU-funded) project called Eco Anxiety Solidarity Project[5], in which the local university campus from Uppsala University is a major partner.

Ecodorp Boekel has collaborated with a local network supporting sustainable energy transitions (Boekel Energy). Through this partnership, Ecodorp Boekel aims to share its knowledge and experience in experimenting with more sustainable energy sources. The following quote of the initiator of the ecovillage highlights how his participation in the energy network contributes to an expansion of new external actors with whom the ecovillage is collaborating.

> I think my work on the board of Boekel Energy does have an impact. And I am, or eco-village Boekel is also regularly mentioned in the meetings of Boekel Energy, so we do have an impact there. We are also one of the first members at the cooperative, the cooperative is a member as a cooperative. No organization is a member of Boekel Energy except us (Interviewee 14).

At the network level, GEN Europe frequently incorporates project applications into its expansion and diffusion strategies, primarily through partnerships for EU-funded projects, which often involve multiple partners from diverse industries, especially under Horizon Europe. A notable example is the EC2 project[6], where GEN Europe collaborated with three municipalities from different countries, five universities across Europe, and four community energy initiatives, including Arterra Bizimodu. These EU-funded projects not only provide financial resources but also stimulate networking among ecovillages, encouraging collaboration on joint projects that enhance their collective impact. Participation in large European projects is crucial for GEN Europe, providing financial benefits and strengthening connections across the network. As one interviewee notes, "So for the network, having European projects, I think it's beneficial financially not only for the organization, but also like for all the members. It also brings a lot of connection." (Interviewee 2).

We identified tensions between the amount of time dedicated to projects and time dedicated to organizations' core work, both at the ecovillage and network levels. This tension was also identified at the personal level. It arises from the need to balance project activities with the core work of an ecovillage member or network staff. As more projects are undertaken, staff members may find themselves allocating an increasing amount of time to project-related tasks, which can divert attention from their primary responsibilities and overarching goals. It underscores the importance of ensuring that the projects align closely with the core mission to avoid dilution of focus. The process of "projectization" brings challenges on a personal level, where individuals working on projects can experience exhaustion, burnout, and loss of control. This tension can lead to a prioritization of the expansion dynamic over other embedding dynamics. This can also hinder the internal dynamics of the ecovillages.

Engagement in projects can also cause the network or ecovillage to lose sight of their core mission. The "trap" is becoming overly project-dependent and having much energy being consumed by project activities rather than focusing on serving the needs and goals of the network members. This leads to a potential misalignment where the inner dynamics of project work overshadow the network's core purpose in the case of GEN Europe; we have observed that this can also happen in the ecovillages, with mentions of that by previous project coordinators. This tension can lead to a prioritization of the expansion dynamic over other embedding dynamics.

4.2 | Reframing

In Arterra, our observations during field visits and interviews highlighted a significant engagement with the reframing dynamic, particularly evident in conversations with local residents. These discussions revealed that Arterra's events and gatherings frequently serve as platforms for raising awareness about climate change, sustainability, and socio-economic issues among those outside the ecovillage community. This outreach was especially noticeable during the "Sembrando Futuros" events we attended at the ecovillage. However, while Arterra's activities clearly contribute to reframing local perceptions about sustainable living, we cannot conclusively link these outcomes to any specific project undertaken by Arterra Bizimodu regarding the embedding dynamic of reframing.

Projects play a crucial role in linking ecovillages with like-minded initiatives and activists focused on larger-scale issues. The EU-funded (Erasmus+) project "Growing Leaders Growing Change,"[7] led by Suderbyn, is a pertinent example of reframing dynamic. This project targeted key areas of environmental awareness, particularly focusing on climate change and waste management. By educating and empowering young activists, Suderbyn is involved in the development of a new generation of environmental leaders. This type of projects with activist goals is also something people from Suderbyn believe to be a way of influencing local and global levels, as mentioned by one of the interviewees:

> It's because we want to organize some protest somewhere, you know, because we have this huge cement factory on Godtland that is polluting so much. Uh, so that's, that's how we're gonna try to outreach to the local population is when we make a protest and we organize some event with the local Extinction Rebellion or the local Fridays for future. So that's the kind of stuff that we do on the local level. (Interviewee 7)

One example of reframing within GEN-Europe projects is the EU-funded (Horizon Europe) initiative, Bloom[8]. Over the course of this three-year project, GEN-Europe collaborated with a diverse range of partners to raise awareness and communicate with a wider audience about bioeconomy. Targeting various regions, the project focused on schools as one of its primary audiences. Additionally, it developed a web platform and produced educational materials, such as books and manuals, to disseminate knowledge on bioeconomic practices.

While projects may help ecovillages embed new frames in larger society, they may also lead to a constrained focus on specific themes or objectives, potentially limiting broader strategic thinking and innovation. The pressure to meet project goals may cause individuals to adopt a fixed frame, reducing their ability to consider wider perspectives or adapt to evolving strategies. As a result, this dynamic can hinder the reframing capacities of ecovillages.

4.3 | Circulation of Knowledge

One of Arterra Bizimodu's most notable efforts to foster knowledge sharing is through events and training sessions, for which they are well-known in the region. Currently, they are involved in a project called European University for Transition[9] (EU4Transition) to collaborate with local initiatives and create convergence in transition-focused education; this is a EU-funded Erasmus+ project where Arterra is a multiplier in the region. This project highlights their commitment as an ecovillage to build connections both locally and at the European level. One interviewee illustrated this through the example of an event that is part of the larger initiative, which we attended during our field visits:

> We are creating now what we call the University of Transition, where we want to start offering our own courses, like, for example, this Sembrando Futuros. So that's my way of saying that we build more bridges with Europe than the average ecovillage, at least in Spain for sure. (Interviewee 2)

Knowledge circulates not only within local networks of ecovillages but also across broader movements and between different ecovillages. A key example is the biogas digestors project, which was a nationally funded project from the Swedish Agency for Regional and Economic Grouwth. In this project, which had GEN-Europe as a partner, Suderbyn led efforts to provide training and build capacity for using this technology in Moldova. This project is called Community Biogas Moldova[10]. One interviewee involved in the project emphasized the importance of teaching others practical skills through such initiatives.

> Projects should be building capacity and giving to communities skills that allow them revenue streams. I worked with [name of the person], we went into rural Moldova, working with farmers, showing them that they could produce their own biogas for kitchen use and go away from Russian imported gas. (Interviewee 4)

Therefore, Community Biogas Moldova aimed to build capacity in rural Moldovan communities by teaching skills to generate local revenue streams. It involved a partnership between GEN-Europe and local stakeholders, focusing on training farmers to produce biogas for kitchen use as a sustainable alternative to imported Russian gas. The project began with a pilot in a Moldovan ecovillage, followed by a series of four hands-on workshops to train ecovillagers and rural participants on biogas production techniques. The project's culmination was a conference in Moldova's capital, involving the Ministry of Energy, where project outcomes were presented as a potential policy initiative. This dual approach targeted both grassroots empowerment and policy-level advocacy, working simultaneously with communities on the ground and governmental bodies.

Ecovillage Boekel tries to disseminate information about its sustainable innovations and practices through different

channels and strategies. An example of circulating knowledge by the ecovillage is through participating in a project from Europe-wide broadcaster Euronews. Two reporters of Euronews visited ecovillage Boekel to shoot a video as a part of a series about sustainable citizen-led initiatives in Europe. The initiator of the ecovillage was very happy with this project because it could increase the visibility of the ecovillage to millions of people.

One example developed by GEN-Europe in partnership with other ecovillages was a EU-funded (Erasmus+) project called CLIPS (Community Learning Incubator Program for Sustainability).[11] The project was designed to support and empower community-led initiatives, such as ecovillages and other sustainability-focused groups. Its main goal was to provide practical guidance, training, and tools to enhance collaboration and help communities navigate challenges related to group dynamics, organizational development, and sustainable living. By offering structured methodologies and resources, CLIPS aimed to improve the success rate of community projects by focusing on important aspects such as communication, conflict resolution, decision-making, and project management. This project fosters a holistic approach, addressing both the social and structural needs of communities. It encourages learning and capacity building within community-led initiatives to promote sustainable development, ensuring that communities not only survive but thrive in the long term. The CLIPS website functions as a resource hub, providing manuals, workshops, videos, and various supportive tools to help communities in their journey toward resilience and sustainability. The CLIPS project is also classified as one that promotes diffusion through replication, as further detailed in Section 4.5.

We observe that projectification significantly supports the diffusion of ecovillage practices by facilitating knowledge exchange across various contexts, particularly at international and local levels. At the network level, this diffusion occurs through partnerships with educational and other types of institutions and the co-creation of shared knowledge derived from ecovillage innovations, disseminated via online platforms, manuals, and workshops. At the ecovillage level, diffusion is enhanced by programs aimed at educating local initiatives and community members on topics directly related to everyday practices of ecovillagers. Therefore, projects serve as key platforms for generating and circulating knowledge.

4.4 | Shifting Material Arrangements

Projectification has led to income generation in ecovillages and provided them with funds to support local entrepreneurship and capacity building. This structured approach allows ecovillages to foster innovation and sustainability while offering financial and training opportunities for their residents. An example of this can be seen in Arterra Bizimodu, which is recognized within GEN-Europe for its strong entrepreneurial spirit. The community fosters internal support systems, providing training, financial assistance, and a supportive structure for its residents. One resident shared that a key factor in his decision to move to Arterra with his partner was the community's emphasis on rural entrepreneurship and its supportive incentives.

Suderbyn is recognized as a hub for education, particularly for young people, offering a dynamic exchange of knowledge and experimentation with new social interactions and projects. One resident emphasized these aspects:

> Because personally, me and also I know many other people see it as an educational place for people to encounter ecovillages and to start being part of a network and to connect and to experience life in a different way. (Interviewee 8)

This success is largely due to Suderbyn's consistent participation in the European Solidarity Corps (ESC), an EU-funded project, which brings many young people to experience rural, alternative lifestyles for up to 9 months. These volunteers often make up more than half of Suderbyn's population, and many choose to stay long after their volunteering period ends. According to the interviewee, this has become Suderbyn's most successful EU-funded project over the years: "As of right now, we have the ESC which is our biggest project." (Interviewee 8). The ESC volunteers are responsible for several entrepreneurial activities within the ecovillage. For example, during our visit, we observed a volunteer-run bike shop established by an ESC volunteer. This initiative involved repairing abandoned bicycles collected by the municipality of Visby, making them freely available both to Suderbyn residents and to external visitors. As a result, the volunteer created a fully operational, volunteer-managed bike shop providing free access to bicycles. By doing so, the ESC project has reshaped the material arrangements of the ecovillage and its surroundings, not only by increasing the resident population but also by supporting volunteer-led initiatives—such as the creation of a fully functional bike shop—that contribute to local infrastructure and accessibility.

GEN-Europe, on a different scale, uses projects to interact with the 'outside world' through education activities and knowledge sharing, just like they do with the internal audience, but with differences in the format. One project that exemplifies this practice of shifting material arrangements that aim to contribute to the broader audience is the EU-funded project called Regen4All[12]. Through this project, the network has altered the (digital) material arrangements by creating a platform called e-community research within GEN-Europe's website to connect ecovillages and researchers, gather material, curate the material, and share it through an organized library. It also created communities of practice in diverse regions of Europe to engage locally in research about ecovillage-related issues. While having altered the infrastructure of the European ecovillage network, this project also illustrates that individual projects can contribute to various embedding dynamics simultaneously. In this case, the created platform also contributes to the circulation of knowledge about ecovillages within and outside of the network.

Through the lens of projectification, we observe that structured project frameworks significantly facilitate shifts in material arrangements within ecovillages by providing crucial resources for capacity building, financial stability, and innovation. At the local level, this structured approach enables communities like Arterra Bizimodu and Suderbyn to support entrepreneurship,

education, and experiential learning, thereby attracting and retaining residents who sustain and expand their innovative practices. At the network level, GEN-Europe utilizes projects strategically to bridge the gap between ecovillages and external audiences, systematically disseminating knowledge through curated digital resources and fostering collaborative research. Thus, projectification acts as an enabling mechanism that materially strengthens grassroots initiatives, supporting their sustainability ambitions through structured financial and organizational capacities.

4.5 | Replication

In Arterra Bizimodu, replication often occurs through projects and partnerships with local government. Arterra collaborated with the regional government and the Iberian Network of Ecovillages to develop a project aimed at repopulating abandoned villages. The initiative, started by the government, saw the ecovillage and local network ready to collaborate. Together, they created educational materials, conducted training, and distributed land to support the resettlement of these areas with ecovillage-style communities. The project was motivated by the need to address rural depopulation, as many people had moved to urban centers over the years.

> The starting point was this: they showed us the demographic book of the towns. It says that all the towns have lost population except for those towns where there is an ecovillage or community. (Interviewee 10)

With that background they have developed a project together which they defined the outline and scope.

> We defined 14 steps for when an offer comes from a place that wants to host a group of people, outlining how those 14 steps would ensure a certain level of success. So, with the help and mentorship of people from the Iberian Network of Ecovillages, who have 30 years of experience, we said, 'Wow, if things are done this way, we could participate with the government.' So we started. (Interviewee 10)

This incubation project received significant traction among GEN-Europe's members, greatly contributing to the development of the CLIPS project that was previously explained. This initiative exemplifies the replication of ecovillage methods through the creation of the CLIPS manual and the delivery of training sessions to ecovillages and other initiatives. This serves as an example of how GEN-Europe members contribute to local expansion and create knowledge that is further developed through network projects, ultimately diffusing it to the network members, and broader society. We classify CLIPS as an example of diffusion through replication for both Arterra and GEN-Europe, as they were key partners in the initiative. This project serves as a dual example, being both a local partnership project and an EU-funded initiative, due to its different phases—starting with a local pilot and evolving into a broader, institutionalized project.

Suderbyn aims to create international partnerships to run projects that reach broader audiences by developing materials designed for those groups. As an ecovillage, Suderbyn finds it easier to connect through transnational projects than local initiatives. It leverages its in-house developments to produce resources and provide training, thereby disseminating its technologies and models. A current example of that is explained by one of the interviewees involved in the project:

> Right now in Suderbyn we have this Biogas digestor that we try to use to make biogas and then we use a substrate of this fermentation process to grow Hydroponics. And we have this project partnership with a school in Latvia. And at the end of the project we have to write a DIY manual on Hydroponics and how to do Hydroponics at home. And that is the kind of stuff that allows us to do this outreach part much more. (Interviewee 7)

The project, called Z-Farm,[13] involved Suderbyn creating a comprehensive manual on how to start a do-it-yourself hydroponics farm, based on their experiences and experiments. This manual is now being disseminated in technical schools across Latvia. The Z-Farm project serves as an example of the circulation of knowledge aimed at fostering the replication of hydroponic innovations, though the actual replication of this technical innovation has not yet been fully realized.

In Ecovillage Boekel, replication is taking place through efforts to contribute to the spread of the ecovillage model. However, this is not being done through an ecovillage-wide project, but rather through a personal initiative. The founder of Ecovillage Boekel is working to support the development of other ecovillages in the region.

> Yes, we are helping. A couple of eco-villages in the area are helping also. And quite coincidentally, those are two freehold projects as well. So they have taken over so much from us, that we are happy to cooperate with that as well to accelerate that. Let's see, the ecovillage now under construction in Veldhoven also used the building materials we used that were still new in the Netherlands. So they also copied things from us, which I think is great (Interviewee 14).

This example illustrates how replication can emerge organically through interpersonal ties and shared values, rather than formalized project structures.

We observed, during the interviews and the events we participated in, an existing tension that EU-funded projects can foster elitism within networks such as GEN-Europe. Specifically, certain individuals and ecovillages repeatedly collaborate on multiple projects, leading to concentrated visibility, influence, and access to resources. Members frequently involved in these projects often participate in network councils and thus reinforce their status within the network. This pattern creates a hierarchical dynamic, potentially restricting inclusivity and equitable

participation across the network. Moreover, the limited number of ecovillages repeatedly involved in projects can hinder the broader diffusion of innovations, as it confines the circulation of knowledge primarily to these selected participants. On the other hand, we also observed—and it was reported—that there are ongoing efforts to promote the dissemination of knowledge and training on accessing project funds across multiple contexts. These include both online and in-person trainings, demonstrating that the network is aware of the risks of exclusion and is actively working to address them by fostering more inclusive access to project-related opportunities.

Table 1 summarizes the findings of this subsection by connecting each dynamic to the example of each case and explaining the key findings in the given example. In the next section, we discuss the findings in connection to existing literature and interpret our findings.

5 | Discussion

This discussion section is structured as follows. First, we discuss the relationship between projectification and diffusion capacities of GI initiatives and networks. Second, we discuss the theoretical implications of applying the embedding framework to the network level. This also invites some reflections on the connection between the GI initiatives and the GI network level. Third, we discuss how the above-presented tensions of projectification can be interpreted from the perspective of projectification literature. In doing so, we also further discuss what the connection is between the embedding framework and projectification processes.

5.1 | Relationship Between Projectification and Diffusion Capacities of GIs

The context of GIs exemplifies how projectification serves both as an organizational strategy and a diffusion tool. Within GEN-Europe, projectification promotes professionalization, aligning with literature that links these two processes (Jałocha and Bogacz-Wojtanowska 2016). This professionalization involves developing a specialized workforce adept at coordinating, applying for, and managing projects, particularly those funded by the EU, which are crucial for diffusion processes. GEN-Europe, along with other ecovillages, such as Arterra Bizimodu and Suderbyn, has over the years cultivated expertise in project management and coordination, thereby professionalizing their workforce to operate effectively within a project-based framework (Büttner et al. 2015; Jałocha 2013; Kuura et al. 2014). This professionalization trend is largely driven by the EU's project-based funding schemes, which necessitate specific competencies for securing and managing grants (Büttner and Leopold 2016; Jałocha 2013).

Our findings suggest a theoretical implication regarding the relationship between diffusion processes and projects financed through EU funding. These projects significantly impact the diffusion capacities and outcomes of both ecovillages and GEN-Europe. The recurrence of funding approval for proposed projects highlights the alignment between these initiatives and the EU funding bodies. The consistent success of certain initiatives in securing funds underscores a pattern of support from EU funding bodies for GI networks and initiatives that effectively disseminate their innovations locally and to broader audiences. This pattern suggests implications for other funders, such as foundations and national funding lines, which appear less prevalent in our case studies. The research implication is to broaden this analysis to determine if this trend is consistent across other GI networks and initiatives, utilizing such funds to enhance their diffusion capacities. Understanding this could significantly influence how funding schemes are tailored at both national and EU levels, potentially optimizing support for diffusion activities in GIs.

Another implication of this research is the potential for diffusion through projects that are internal to the grassroots initiative, personal projects, or locally funded. These projects often follow distinct pathways and have varying reaches. Notably, ecovillage Boekel and Arterra Bizimodu provide prominent examples. These initiatives typically foster direct local diffusion, deeply rooted in and directed toward building local connections and partnerships. Consequently, such projects tend to establish long-term relationships and collaborative networks. Additionally, the self-funded projects usually demand a lower level of professional management, allowing for greater flexibility in their administration and continuation. This inclusivity enables a broader range of participants over the lifespan of the projects. Therefore, an implication for the field of grassroots initiatives is to consider the benefits of diverse project approaches in supporting diffusion processes.

Lastly, our findings indicate that while different initiatives utilize various types of projects for diffusion, not all diffusion dynamics manifest through project-based approaches. The case of Arterra Bizimodu exemplifies this, as they consistently engage in reframing dynamics within their local environment and through local networks without necessarily linking these activities to specific projects. This observation underscores a critical theoretical implication: embedding dynamics may not always occur through projects, nor should projects be regarded as the sole strategy for grassroots initiatives. Instead, projects should be considered as one of several effective methods to achieve diffusion goals, rather than the primary or exclusive approach. This perspective encourages a broader and more flexible understanding of diffusion strategies within grassroots initiatives.

In this light, it is also important to reflect on the potential conflict between the niche character of grassroots innovations and the mainstreaming processes that projectification can enable. While initiatives like GEN-Europe and its member ecovillages engage with dominant funding regimes to diffuse their innovations, this engagement simultaneously risks reducing their radical, transformative qualities (Feola and Nunes 2014; Smith and Raven 2012). These dynamics echo broader concerns in the literature about how the institutionalization of alternative practices may lead to their depoliticization or co-optation (Kovách and Kučerová 2006; Pel et al. 2020). This highlights a fundamental ambivalence: projectification supports the visibility and reach of GIs, but it may also challenge their autonomy and counter-hegemonic orientation.

TABLE 1 | Summary of the application of the embedding framework to the cases studied.

Case	Type of diffusion	Name and type of project	Key findings about how projects applied by each case connects each type embedding dynamic.
GEN-Europe	Expansion	EC2 project—EU-funded (Horizon)	Strengthens collaboration between diverse sectors and networks, including universities. Therefore enhancing intersectoral collaboration, expanding GEN-Europe's reach across different networks and sectors.
	Reframing	Bloom—EU-funded (Horizon)	Raises awareness about various topics related to sustainability transition, for example, Bloom project targeted educational initiatives in various regions with focus on bioeconomy. Projects like Bloom educate and shift perceptions on sustainability, spreading innovative ideas across European regions.
	Circulation of knowledge	CLIPS—EU-funded (Erasmus+)	Projects like CLIPS enhance community-led sustainability efforts by providing tools and educational resources that facilitate the transfer and adoption of sustainable practices, thereby bolstering grassroots initiatives.
	Shifting material arrangements	Regen4All—EU-funded (Erasmus+)	Develops digital infrastructures that link diverse audiences with ecovillages, enhancing collaboration and providing tools across multiple sectors. The example of the project Regen4all bridges researchers and ecovillages, establishing a broadly accessible knowledge commons.
	Replication	CLIPS—EU-funded (Erasmus+)	A dual-phase project combining local pilot efforts with broader European network diffusion to different actors in the field, replicating the model and teachings of ecovillages to other initiatives.
Arterra Bizimodu Ecovillage	Expansion	Tejiendo la Dispensa—funded by a Foundation	Uses projects to foster cooperation among regional actors, contributing to expansion efforts. For instance, the project Tejiendo la Dispensa has established a local food network, enhancing collaboration between regional stakeholders and expanding the ecovillage's influence in local sustainable practices.
	Reframing	No projects directly linked to this dynamic.	At Arterra, interactions during field visits and through community events, notably 'Sembrando Futuros', highlighted their effective use of gatherings to shift perceptions on sustainability among locals. This effort aligns with the reframing dynamic by promoting awareness on environmental and socio-economic challenges, although not directly linked to specific projects.
	Circulation of knowledge	European University for Transition—EU-funded (Erasmus+)	Collaborates on projects with transition-focused education, creating new regional synergies and collaboration, acting also as a multiplier in the locality. This project leverages community resources and experiences to enhance informal educational offerings, broadening the impact and reach of transition-focused knowledge.
	Shifting material arrangements	Baratzan Blai—Internal projects	Supports and promotes internal projects that enhance member entrepreneurship, such as initiatives in organic farming and internal food production. These projects not only create employment opportunities within the ecovillage but also offer volunteers practical learning, for example experiences in organic farming techniques.
	Replication	CLIPS—Projects in partnership with local initiatives and EU-funded (Erasmus+)	A dual-phase project combining local pilot efforts with broader European network diffusion to different actors in the field, replicating the model and teachings of ecovillages to other initiatives.
Suderbyn Ecovillage	Expansion	Eco Anxiety Solidarity Project- EU-funded (Erasmus+)	Establishes partnerships with local universities and other local initiatives to collaboratively address pressing local issues through projects, focusing on sustainability related topics as promoted by the project Eco Anxiety Solidarity.

(Continues)

TABLE 1 | (Continued)

Case	Type of diffusion	Name and type of project	Key findings about how projects applied by each case connects each type embedding dynamic.
	Reframing	Growing Leaders Growing Change—EU-funded (Erasmus+)	Suderbyn leverages projects like Growing Leaders Growing Change to reframe societal views on environmental issues by educating and empowering young activists, fostering broader awareness and action on sustainability in their local regions.
	Circulation of knowledge	Community Biogas Moldova—EU-funded (Erasmus+)	Use projects for extend their reach and influence by sharing technical knowledge and practical skills beyond their immediate geographical and cultural boundaries. The example of Community Biogas Moldova helps to understand how knowledge produced in an ecovillage can circulate outside its borders and outside national borders through a project partnership.
	Shifting material arrangements	European Solidarity Corps—EU-funded	Supports youth engagement, with volunteers making up a large part of the community. By integrating young volunteers, the ecovillage not only rejuvenates its demographic structure but also reshapes its social dynamics and labor distribution. These volunteers often bring fresh perspectives and new skills, which can lead to innovative projects and enhanced community operations, thereby materially altering the community's functioning and sustainability practices. They are also able to do this in other settings in the future.
	Replication	Z-Farm—EU-funded (Erasmus+)	Use projects to replicate how sustainable practices can be applied in new contexts. Suderbyn uses projects like Z-Farm to promote educational outreach and, therefore, replicate sustainable agricultural practices, such as hydroponics, in broader educational curriculum.
Boekel Ecovillage	Expansion	Energy Boekel (local energy transition network)—local government funded	This project supports the expansion of external actors the ecovillage collaborates with. Specifically, Ecovillage Boekel is the only organization that participates in the local energy network: Energy Boekel. Through their participation in this project they got in touch with energy companies and other energy related citizen initiatives.
	Reframing	Local Newspaper Boekel—Internal ecovillage project	This project aims to positively impact the local perception of the ecovillage in the local social environment. By spreading information about the ecovillage in the local newspaper, the ecovillage hopes that also the sustainable innovative practices and frames of the ecovillage will influence people in their local surroundings.
	Circulation of Knowledge	*Euronews* project—participation in a EU project	This project supports the dissemination of knowledge about the ecovillage and its sustainable innovations throughout Europe. Through its involvement in this project Ecovillage Boekel can substantially increase the amount of people and countries to which knowledge about the ecovillage is being circulated to.
	Shifting Material Arrangements	Permaculture and Food Garden—internal project	This project alters the physical surroundings of the ecovillage and aims to contribute to nature preservation and biodiversity regeneration on this piece of land.
	Replication	Supporting creation new ecovillage—personal project ecovillage initiator	This personal project supports the replication of the ecovillage model in similar alternative sustainable co-housing projects in the region. The initiator of the ecovillage shares his knowledge and experiences about designing and ecovillage with other ecovillage enthusiastics. Different practices and innovations are replicated by the other ecovillage projects.

5.2 | Embedding Framework at the Network Level

Applying the embedding framework (Roysen et al. 2024) to translocal networks of GIs represents a significant theoretical extension, moving beyond its original focus on local initiatives. This study demonstrates the framework's applicability at a network level, where GIs operate across multiple locations and institutional settings, raising new theoretical questions about diffusion dynamics in translocal networks.

One major insight is the difference in how diffusion processes function at the local and network levels. At the local level, GIs

often rely on shifting material arrangements, such as new infrastructure or land-use practices, to anchor innovations within their communities (Smith and Seyfang 2013). However, in translocal networks, where initiatives are not tied to a single physical space, the role of material arrangements is less prominent. Instead, digital infrastructures, such as online platforms and tools, become critical in facilitating diffusion across the network. These digital resources, while non-material, perform a similar function by enabling knowledge exchange and collaboration between geographically dispersed initiatives (Hargreaves et al. 2013). This shift highlights the adaptability of the embedding framework to account for different forms of materiality at the network level, echoing concepts of virtual and digital spaces as emergent infrastructures in sustainability transitions (Seyfang and Longhurst 2016).

Another important theoretical implication concerns the convergence and divergence of diffusion processes in translocal networks. While local GIs often engage directly with their communities throughout the entire diffusion process, translocal networks exhibit a different pattern. During the early stages of network expansion, a wide range of external actors may engage with the network's innovations, creating broad collaborations (Geels and Deuten 2006). However, as the process develops, a smaller set of actors fully adopts or replicates the innovations. This pattern of initial convergence followed by later divergence reflects a key difference between local and network-level diffusion, where participation tends to narrow as innovations move towards full integration and replication. A clear example of this is the CLIPS project developed within GEN-Europe: while the early stages involved wide collaboration among ecovillages and external partners, its implementation and uptake became more concentrated among a smaller group of consistently active members, reflecting a narrowing of participation as the project matured. This insight invites further exploration of how translocal networks manage this dynamic and sustain innovation diffusion over time (Hossain 2016).

The mutual relationship between individual grassroots initiatives and translocal networks is another critical dimension. Local ecovillages, for instance, contribute to the network by sharing practices and insights developed through their local experiences (Hess 2007). At the same time, participation in network-level projects provides these ecovillages with access to shared tools and resources, such as digital platforms that assess local sustainability impacts (Smith et al. 2014). This reciprocal exchange of knowledge and resources enhances both the capacity of individual initiatives and the overall effectiveness of the network. It illustrates how the embedding process at the network level is not one-way but involves a continuous flow of influence between local and translocal scales, enriching both levels.

The process of projectification in GEN-Europe and the three ecovillages studied involves a bidirectional dynamic of workforce professionalization in projects and through projects, especially observed in the EU-funded projects context. On one side, the network maintains dedicated staff responsible for managing projects, writing project applications, and building partnerships, while also providing members with knowledge and training on navigating EU-funded project frameworks. On the other side, local ecovillages gain practical experience with EU-funded projects, incorporating this expertise into their internal strategies. Consequently, this creates a feedback loop where ecovillages increasingly engage in project cycles, strengthening their connection and contribution back to the broader network.

Therefore, professionalization in project management and grant acquisition is essential, given the competitive environment and limited availability of EU funds. Such professionalization opens diverse possibilities for developing and disseminating innovations within GIs and towards mainstream initiatives (Cicmil and O'Laocha 2016; Kuura et al. 2014). However, our findings indicate that increased dependence on project-based structures in the studied cases not only yielded positive outcomes but also generated tensions documented previously in the literature, concerning personal and organizational consequences (Büttner 2019; Mukhtar-Landgren et al. 2019).

While the identification of tensions related to projectification has enriched our understanding of how GIs navigate project-based environments, it is important to acknowledge that analyzing these tensions in depth was not the primary aim of this study. As such, we consider the treatment of these tensions a limitation of the article. However, the emergence of tensions—deviation from core mission, reproduction of narrow views, the creation of elitism within GIs and networks, and the dedication to project work vs. core work—signals the need for further investigation into the constraints and opportunities they pose for GIs. Future research could build on our findings by exploring these tensions more systematically, including their structural roots and how they intersect with broader dynamics of professionalization and internal governance. Moreover, there is considerable potential to deepen the dialogue between the embedding framework and the projectification literature, particularly in understanding how these tensions mediate or disrupt embedding dynamics such as expansion, reframing, and replication. Addressing these questions would offer valuable insights into the evolving role of projects in shaping the capacities, priorities, and internal structures of GIs.

6 | Conclusion

This study has investigated how projectification processes influence the diffusion capacities of GIs, focusing on GEN-Europe and three ecovillage cases. Using the embedding framework (Roysen et al. 2024), we examined how projects interact with five distinct diffusion dynamics: expansion, reframing, circulation of knowledge, shifting material arrangements, and replication. Across the cases studied, projects were found to play an important role in enabling certain diffusion practices—particularly expansion and knowledge circulation—by providing resources, visibility, and access to external networks. At the same time, our findings reveal tensions introduced by projectification, including mission drift, burnout, and concentration of participation among select actors, especially at the network level.

EU-funded projects emerged as especially influential in the cases of Arterra Bizimodu, Suderbyn, and GEN-Europe, where they supported a wide range of diffusion-oriented activities. However, the study also highlights the value of smaller-scale or self-initiated projects, particularly in Ecovillage Boekel, where

diffusion occurred partially through local projects not tied to EU funding. This suggests that a more diversified funding landscape—including support for non-project-based or flexible local initiatives—may help balance the benefits of professionalization with the need for inclusivity and long-term engagement in grassroots innovation work.

The limitations of this study rely on the examples of three local ecovillages and one network case; we therefore admit that extending the research to other types of grassroots initiatives can bring broader perspectives to the field. Additionally, incorporating quantitative data from other European grassroots initiatives would deepen understanding of how project-based approaches are used for diffusion and the prevalence of different project types across the sector.

Further research is recommended to explore the selection processes behind project types, compare the effectiveness of funded versus non-funded projects, analyze the effort versus reward in EU-funded initiatives, and further explore the tensions that arise from the interaction with projects both at the organizational and network levels. Such research will enhance our understanding of the strategic, operational, and contextual factors that influence the success and sustainability of project-based diffusion efforts within grassroots networks. Regarding the embedding framework, it is essential that future studies provide opportunities to deeply explore and address tensions encountered in the field, thus facilitating a broader scope for reflecting on and devising alternative diffusion strategies. In conclusion, while projectification provides valuable opportunities for the diffusion of grassroots innovations, it also necessitates a careful balance to mitigate associated risks and enhance the long-term effectiveness of these initiatives.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Endnotes

[1] For a comprehensive overview of the interviewees quoted in Section 4, please refer to Appendix A.

[2] For further details on the identified tensions, including empirical examples and interview quotes, please see Appendix C.

[3] To know more about the Tejiendo la Dispensa project access: https://www.cederna.eu/proyectos/tejiendo-la-despensa/. Last accessed on October 3rd, 2024.

[4] To know more about the Fondation Daniel et Nina Carasso visit their website: https://www.fondationcarasso.org/es/. Last accessed on October 3rd, 2024.

[5] To know more about the Eco Anxiety Solidarity Project visit Suderbyn's project the web page: https://suderbyn.se/relearns-projects/. Last accessed on October 3rd, 2024.

[6] Information about this project can be found in their website: https://ec2project.eu/. Last accessed on September 3rd, 2024.

[7] Information about Growing Leaders Growing Change is available at Suderbyn project website: https://suderbyn.se/relearns-projects/. Last accessed on October 3rd, 2024.

[8] To know more about BLOOM project visit their website: https://bloom-bioeconomy.eu/objectives-and-approach/. Last accessed on October 3rd, 2024.

[9] To know more about the project European University for Transition visit the web page: https://eu-4-transition.essec.edu/. Last accessed on October 3rd, 2024.

[10] To know more about the project Community Biogas Moldova visit the web page: https://nextgen-ecovillage.org/?page_id=1033#:~:text=Community%20Biogas%20Moldova%20 (ComBioM)%20is,community%20biogas%20for%20rural%20Moldova. Last accessed on October 3rd, 2024.

[11] To know more about CLIPS project and to access their online platform, trainings and methodologies the link to the website: https://clips.gen-europe.org/. Last accessed on October 3rd, 2024.

[12] Page of Regen4All research platform (e-community research) can be accessed through the link: https://ecommunity.gen-europe.org/. Last accessed on September 6th, 2024.

[13] Information about Z-Farm project can be foun in Suderbyn's projects webpage: https://suderbyn.se/relearns-projects/. Last accessed on October 3rd, 2024.

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Appendix A

List of Interviewees, Organizations and Roles

Initiative(s) that interviewee is/was part of	Code for interviewees	Role
GEN-Europe, ECOLISE	Interviewee 1	Female staff, works in network-level projects
GEN-Europe, Arterra Bizimodu	Interviewee 2	Male staff, works in local and network-level projects
GEN-Europe, Suderbyn, ECOLISE	Interviewee 3	Male former staff, founder of ECOLISE, founder of Suderbyn, works in local and network-level projects
GEN-Europe, Suderbyn	Interviewee 4	Male. Former member of the council, works in local and network-level projects
GEN-Europe, ECOLISE	Interviewee 5	Male staff member. works in network-level projects
Suderbyn Ecovillage	Interviewee 6	Female former staff member, worked in local and network-level projects, project coordinator
Suderbyn Ecovillage	Interviewee 7	Male—worked with local projects
Suderbyn Ecovillage, GEN-Europe	Interviewee 8	Male—work with local and network-level projects
Ecovillage Arterra Bizimodu	Interviewee 9	Male—member of ecovillage, work with local projects
Ecovillage Arterra Bizimodu, GEN-Europe	Interviewee 10	Male—work in local and network-level projects
Arterra Bizimodu, GEN-Europe, ECOLISE	Interviewee 11	Female, – former staff, ex council member, ex director, works with local and network-level projects
Arterra Bizimodu, GEN-Europe	Interviewee 12	Female, staff member, project coordinator, work in local and network level projects
Ecovillage Ecodorp Boekel	Interviewee 13	Initiator Ecovillage Boekel—Interview
Ecovillage Ecodorp Boekel	Interviewee 14	Group interview with three members of Ecovillage Boekel about the connections between the ecovillage and the local social environment.
Ecovillage Ecodorp Boekel	Interviewee 15	External partner of Ecovillage Boekel. Local journalist who regularly visits the ecovillage and writes pieces about the ecovilllage's activities in the local newspaper.
Ecovillage Ecodorp Boekel	Interviewee 16	Member of Ecovillage Boekel. Member of the subgroup *green circle* responsible for garden and food forest in the ecovillage.

Appendix B

Cases Studied and Data Collection Process

Case studied	Description	Methods of data collection applied	Information about the data collected	Research Project EuroREGEN – Transnational networks for regenerative development in Europe (Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, PTDC/SOC-SOC/2061/2020) and EVIST – Ecovillages as Incubators for Sustainability Transitions (Swiss National Science Foundation, 10001A_197351).
GEN-Europe	A European network connecting over 700 ecovillages, supporting sustainable living through knowledge exchange, capacity building, and sociocracy. GEN-Europe was selected due to its role in coordinating ecovillage initiatives and participating in transnational projects.	Participant observation during an EU-funded project	Participation during the application, planning, and execution phases of the project.	EuroREGEN and EVIST
		Interviews with key members	Interviews were conducted during in-person events and online calls and were focused on project dynamics and network reach through projects.	
		Participant observation in events online and in-person	Observation of project meetings, General Assemblies (2023–2024), and GEN-Europe Gatherings (2022, 2023, and 2024).	
Arterra Bizimodu	A recently established Spanish ecovillage focused on sustainable building, regenerative agriculture, and collaboration with external partners. Arterra Bizimodu was selected due to its active involvement in local, regional, and transnational EU-funded projects, and hosting GEN-Europe's office.	Field visits and observation	Observation during in-person events with local networks, observation during meetings with local partners, and observation during the daily life of ecovillage for approximately two weeks.	EuroREGEN
		Interviews with key members	Interviews were conducted with key members and people previously and currently involved with projects during field visits and online (before and after the visits).	
Suderbyn Ecovillage	A Swedish ecovillage promoting regenerative society principles through permaculture and sustainability practices. Suderbyn was selected due to its prominent role in EU-funded projects and strong connections within GEN-Europe.	Field visit and observation	Observation for approximately 2 weeks in the daily routine of the ecovillage, observation during project meetings and general meetings of the ecovillage, observation of online events, and yearly General Assemblies (2022 and 2023).	EuroREGEN
		Interviews with key members	Interviews were conducted online before and after the field visits, and during the field visit one focus group was conducted but not directly quoted in this article.	
Ecovillage Boekel	A recently established Dutch ecovillage focused on sustainable building, regenerative agriculture, and collaboration with external partners. Boekel was selected because it serves as a model for early-stage ecovillages receiving diverse funding sources, including EU and local funds.	Field visit and observation	Observations took place during a month fieldwork trip to the ecovillage, in which one of the authors participated in daily activities, meetings, and collaboration activities of the ecovillage.	EVIST
		Interviews with key members	Interviews were conducted in person during the fieldwork trip.	

[Correction added on 27 August 2025, after first online publication: The last column of the table in Appendix B has been updated in this version.]

Appendix C

Tensions When Applying Projects to Diffusion Strategies

Tension	Explanation	Quote	Level connected	Connection to Embedding dynamic
Time dedicated to project work versus core work both at ecovillage and network level, but also at the personal level.	The tension here arises from the need to balance project activities with the core work of an ecovillage member or network staff. As more projects are undertaken, staff members may find themselves allocating an increasing amount of time to project-related tasks, which can divert attention from their primary responsibilities and overarching goals. It underscores the importance of ensuring that the projects align closely with the core mission to avoid dilution of focus. The process of "projectization" brings challenges on a personal level, where individuals working on projects can experience exhaustion, burnout, and loss of control.	"More projects for the staff of the organization, what it meant is that we were more and more being deviated because we were using more hours to do project work and less hours doing our core work. We have to make sure that the projects that we that we are like working in or the ones that we are applying for, they are completely aligned to what we actually want to do." (Interviewee 2) "I see there is always this projectization problem when you apply for projects to get the funding, and then have to work for the projects and everybody's exhausted, and then time and money like you just lost in all these papers and you have to have a sheet for every bloody thing you do. (Interviewee 4)	Network and ecovillages	This tension can lead to a prioritization of the **expansion dynamic** over other embedding dynamics. This can also hinder the internal dynamics of the ecovillages.
Projects (re)produce narrow views	This tension refers to how involvement in project work can lead to a narrow focus on specific areas, potentially limiting broader strategic thinking and innovation. The emphasis on meeting project goals may cause individuals to fall into a particular frame or niche, preventing them from considering wider perspectives or more holistic approaches, and making it hard to shift focus or adapt to broader strategies.	"I feel that people who come who could do these projects, they kind of fall into some kind of mental and physical niche or just kind of frame(...), and again, it's hard to get out of it. And then you just think and work in that kind of direction and then somebody comes with a broader strategic thinking. You don't think about it. You just want to be opportunistic and to use the project money for whatever you're doing there to have some form of some income." (Interviewee 5)	Network	This tension has the potential to reduce the **reframing capabilities** of ecovillage. At the same time, this tension can stimulate the **circulation of knowledge capacity**.
Projects deviate the core mission	Engagement in projects can cause the network or ecovillage to lose sight of their core mission. The "trap" is becoming overly project-dependent, where much energy is consumed by project activities rather than focusing on serving the needs and goals of the network members. This leads to a potential misalignment where the inner dynamics of project work overshadow the network's core purpose.	"The trap that often happens to networks and organization that they lose the scope. That They forget that they are here to serve the members. This is what I keep saying for GEN Europe, we need to think of whom are we serving no? The trap Is this that they become obsessed with projects and project dependent and a lot of energy goes into inner dynamics instead of in what it was supposed to be no." (Interviewee 1)	Network and ecovillages	This tension can lead to a prioritization of the expansion dynamic over other embedding dynamics

Tension	Explanation	Quote	Level connected	Connection to Embedding dynamic
Projects can create elitism	Within networks like GEN-Europe, there is a risk of power imbalances and perceived elitism arising from repeated participation of the same individuals or groups in project work. When certain members consistently gain visibility and access to partnerships through projects, it can lead to unequal recognition and influence, creating a hierarchy within the network. This highlights the need to be conscious of inclusivity and equitable participation in project activities.	"If you take our survey application that we did in GEN Europe, it's always the same partnership. It's not so healthy. You see some elitism inside the networks is building, and we have to be aware of this. We have to be sincere about this. And when we notice that this happens, try to act differently" (Interviewee 1)	Network and ecovillages	This tension can lead to the limitation of replication within ecovillage networks, and as such ultimately also to the replication capacity of individual ecovillages. In addition, this tension can lead to narrowing the circulation of knowledge dynamic to the ecovillages that participate in (EU) projects.