



Ecovillage Design Education on the Nile: a journey towards a regenerative ecosystem

Organized by the Nile journeys at Tiriji Ecovillage and Russinga Island Organic Farmers Association, in Kenya from September 22 – October 22, 2023.



Executive Summary

The Ecovillage Design Education (EDE) program on the Nile, stands as a transformative and educational beacon, aimed at nurturing resilient, sustainable communities through an immersive curriculum centered on ecological stewardship, social justice, economic viability, and the celebration of cultural diversity. Orchestrated by the Nile journeys, in collaboration with GAIA Education, Tiriji Eco Village and Russinga Island Organic Farmers Association, this initiative represents a pivotal step towards realizing a sustainable future. By bridging diverse cultures and disciplines, the EDE program fosters a community of learners empowered to enact change within their local contexts, reflecting a shared commitment to global sustainability goals.

Introduction to the Program

Spanning one month, the EDE program offers an unparalleled holistic learning experience, meticulously designed to engage participants from the Nile Basin and beyond in a profound exploration of sustainability's four dimensions. Set against the backdrop of the Nile's rich ecological and cultural tapestry, the program provides a fertile ground for innovation, learning, and the exchange of ideas, equipping participants with the knowledge and tools to lead sustainable community transformations.

The program was organized by the Nile journeys, a regenerative platform that aspires to connect Nile citizens and communities in order to nurture life-affirming actions. The NILE in the name NILE Journeys refers not only to the Nile River but also to the energetic field of this majestic river. To this effect, the word NILE becomes an acronym for “Nurturing Impulses for Living Ecosystems”. The NILE Journeys creates and connects community spaces across the region, called Community Hubs. These will act as acupuncture points along the Nile for impact and regeneration of the social and ecological fields.

Participant Demographics

The program welcomed 28 participants from 12 different countries across the Nile Basin, East African Region, Europe, and North America, showcasing a diverse range of ages, genders, and ethnic backgrounds. This mix of participants enriched the learning experience, providing a multitude of perspectives on sustainability and community living.

Course Rhythms and Curriculum

The curriculum's structure was a careful blend of theoretical instruction and hands-on practical experience, thoughtfully arranged to ensure participants were engaged, reflective, and actively applying their learnings. The workshop was a balanced with dedicated to interactive learning sessions and workshops, complemented by an equal measure of



practical, project-based work in local communities or natural settings. This approach ensured that participants not only absorbed critical knowledge but were also able to see and experience the direct application of sustainable practices.

The EDE program, spanning four weeks in Meru and Rusinga Island, Kenya, offers an intensive and immersive experience focused on equipping participants with the knowledge and skills necessary for sustainable community development. The curriculum is meticulously structured around the daily rhythms of learning, reflection, and community engagement, with a strong emphasis on the integration of theoretical knowledge with practical application.



Image: Mongy taking the attendees through the flow of the overall program

Daily Schedule and Routine

The program commences each day with optional meditational practices, offering participants the opportunity to center themselves and prepare for the day's learning. This is followed by a communal breakfast, setting the stage for social interaction and the strengthening of community bonds. The morning session, from 9:00 am to 12:30 pm, is dedicated to intensive modules and sessions that delve into the four dimensions of sustainability: social, ecological, economic, and worldview.

After a lunch break, the afternoon sessions resume from 3:00 pm to 6:00 pm, continuing the exploration of thematic areas with interactive workshops and practical activities. The day concludes with an evening program from 7:30 pm to 8:30 pm, which varies daily and includes night outs, movies, and special presentations, further enriching the participants' learning experience.



Weekly Themes and Activities

The curriculum is designed to progressively build upon each dimension of sustainability, with each week dedicated to exploring specific themes and concepts:

- **Week 1 (Introduction and Social Dimension):** The program begins in Nairobi with orientation activities, an overview of the course, and introductions to the principles of the journey. Activities focus on building a foundation of trust and understanding among participants, with an emphasis on embracing diversity and exploring personal and collective identities.
- **Week 2 (Ecological Dimension):** Transitioning to Meru, participants engage deeply with ecological concepts, including permaculture design, nature connection, and holistic worldview practices. This week includes practical activities such as tours of local sustainable initiatives, hands-on design exercises, and discussions on African leadership models and spirituality.
- **Week 3 (Economic Dimension):** Moving to Rusinga Island, the focus shifts to the economic aspects of sustainability. Participants explore permaculture design in greater detail, visit local projects, and engage in group activities aimed at understanding and designing sustainable economies.
- **Week 4 (Integration and Future Planning):** The final week is dedicated to integrating the learnings from all dimensions, with a focus on transforming consciousness, designing local economies, and planning for personal and collective future actions. The program concludes with evaluations, celebrations, and reflections on personal outcomes and intentions.



Image: Attendees visited the Giraffe center to further understand the wildlife conservation efforts by the organization and sustainable environmental practices



Throughout the course, participants are encouraged to engage in deep listening, conflict transformation, and gender reconciliation, fostering a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics within sustainable communities. Practical exercises, such as treasure hunts, design exercises, and project presentations, ensure that participants can apply theoretical knowledge in tangible ways.

Highlights per Dimension

- **Social Dimension:** Participants embarked on a journey of self-discovery and community integration, mastering communication skills crucial for diversity and inclusion. The program presented innovative community-building exercises, though navigating the complexities of intercultural communication posed occasional challenges.



Image: participants engaged in group activities exploring the SDGs.

- **Economic Dimension:** The exploration of sustainable livelihoods within the program revealed the intricate dance between local economies and global economic systems. Participants engaged with case studies and simulations that illuminated the path towards economic sustainability, though translating these models to varied local contexts required innovative thinking and adaptability.





Image: participants used theatre as a means to explore economical possibilities

- Ecological Dimension:** A cornerstone of the program was its focus on permaculture and sustainable living practices. The practical application of these principles in local ecosystems provided hands-on learning opportunities, though the adaptation of these practices across different ecological contexts challenged participants to think creatively.



- **Worldview Dimension:** Through guided reflection and immersive experiences in nature, participants were encouraged to reconnect with the natural world and reconsider their personal and collective worldviews. This introspective journey was profound, though confronting and reshaping deeply held beliefs was recognized as a challenging yet rewarding process.



Image: Participants explored the different dynamics of the Nile ecosystem

Core Facilitator Profiles

- **Mugove Walter Nyika's** biography is a testament to his dedication to fostering resilience and food sovereignty across Africa. His work emphasizes sustainable land-use and the empowerment of communities to steward their environments for the common good.
- **Macaco Tamerice** embodies the spirit of community-building and personal transformation. Her extensive experience within the Damanhur community and GEN Europe showcases a lifelong commitment to regenerating our planet and human systems.
- **Mohamed El Mongy** brings to the table over two decades of facilitating sustainable development and conflict transformation across Africa. His co-founding of the Nile Forum exemplifies his passion for creating platforms for meaningful collaboration and dialogue.
- **Dr. Karambu L. Ringera** offers a holistic approach to peace education and community empowerment, leveraging her background to support initiatives that foster self-reliance and sustainable development.



Projects and Activities

Permaculture Design and Practices: The program offered extensive training in permaculture design and practices, including hands-on activities such as planting over 200 trees and exploring permaculture principles. Participants engaged in creating permaculture designs for the Rusinga Island Organic Farmers Association (RIOFA) and individual farmers, learning the art of sustainable land use and ecological stewardship.

Ecological Sustainability and Conservation Education: A visit to the AFEW Giraffe Centre in Nairobi introduced participants to wildlife conservation efforts and sustainable environmental practices. This experience emphasized the importance of conservation education and showcased innovative practices in waste management and water treatment.

Social Engagement and Community Empowerment: Engagements with local initiatives like the Edmund Rice Centre in Nairobi showcased efforts in youth empowerment and support for children with disabilities. Participants observed and learned from projects focusing on urban farming, self-care, and socio-economic empowerment, underscoring the role of education and community support in fostering resilience.

Conflict Transformation and Peace Models: Workshops on conflict transformation, including explorations of peace and conflict models, facilitated discussions on personal and communal conflict resolution strategies. Activities encouraged empathy, understanding, and practical approaches to conflict transformation within communities.

Economic Sustainability and Local Economies: The economic dimension focused on exploring concepts such as the eight forms of capital and designing local economies. Participants analyzed economic systems, discussed sustainable development, and brainstormed on ways to integrate ecological practices into economic planning, aiming for a holistic approach to sustainability.

Cultural and Historical Exploration: A treasure hunt activity about the Nile and Africa provided an engaging way for participants to explore African history, culture, and geography. This activity culminated in the creation of a map, celebrating Africa's diversity and fostering a sense of pan-African unity.

Leadership and Personal Development: Sessions on leadership presence, decision-making, and governance tools in community settings focused on developing personal growth and leadership skills. Participants explored different leadership models and engaged in confidence-building exercises to enhance their effectiveness as community leaders.



Lessons Learned and Future Directions

The EDE program has been a journey of discovery, learning, and connection. Participants and facilitators alike have gained invaluable insights into the complexities of sustainability and the power of collaborative action. The lessons learned from this program will serve as guiding principles for future initiatives, shaping the direction of sustainable community development efforts globally.

Learnings

1. **Adaptability and Responsiveness:** The Nile journeys learned the importance of being adaptable and responsive to the dynamic needs of a diverse group of participants. This includes being able to adjust the program schedule, content, and methodologies to better suit the learning pace and interests of participants, ensuring an inclusive and engaging learning environment for everyone involved.
2. **Importance of Pre-Program Communication:** Effective communication with participants before their arrival emerged as crucial for setting expectations, preparing them for the experience, and building a sense of community even before the program begins. Future preparations could benefit from enhanced pre-program communication strategies, including detailed informational packets and virtual meet-and-greets.
3. **Cultural Sensitivity and Inclusion:** The diverse backgrounds of participants underscored the need for cultural sensitivity and the inclusion of a wide range of perspectives in the curriculum. The facilitation team recognized the value of incorporating more local knowledge, languages, and cultural practices into the program to honor and reflect the richness of the participants' diverse backgrounds.
4. **Logistical Planning for Field Activities:** The execution of field activities, such as visits to local sustainability projects and permaculture sites, highlighted the importance of meticulous logistical planning. This includes considerations for transportation, safety, and communication, ensuring that all participants have meaningful and accessible learning experiences outside the classroom.
5. **Feedback Mechanisms for Continuous Improvement:** Implementing structured feedback mechanisms throughout the program proved essential for continuous improvement. Future programs will benefit from regular check-ins with participants to gather insights and suggestions in real-time, allowing for immediate adjustments and informing long-term program development.

Future Directions

1. **Expanding Understanding and Application of Economic Concepts:** Future iterations of the program could delve deeper into economic sustainability by expanding on concepts introduced, such as "The eight forms of capital," to foster a more integrated understanding of economic systems. This could include practical



projects that allow participants to apply these concepts in their communities, enhancing local economies and promoting ecological integration.

2. **Fostering Pan-African and Global Partnerships:** The insights gained from the program point towards the potential for increased Pan-African cooperation and global partnerships focused on sustainable development. Future directions could involve creating platforms for collaboration among participants from different countries, facilitating exchange programs, and shared projects that leverage diverse skills and resources for mutual benefit.
3. **Continuous Learning and Community Engagement:** The program highlighted the value of learning in an environment free of performance pressure, open to big thinking, and individual contributions. Continuing this ethos, future programs could incorporate ongoing learning and engagement platforms for alumni, fostering a vibrant community of practice that supports members in implementing and evolving their sustainability projects.
4. **Integration of Digital Tools for Wider Impact:** Incorporating digital learning tools and platforms could extend the reach and impact of the program, allowing for continuous engagement, resource sharing, and collaboration among participants and beyond. This digital expansion could facilitate a broader dialogue on sustainability issues, connecting local actions with global sustainability goals.



Conclusion

Reflecting on the journey of the Ecovillage Design Education (EDE) program in Kenya, it's clear we've embarked on something truly special. This initiative has stretched beyond the boundaries of traditional education, weaving together the ecological, social, economic, and cultural threads of sustainability into a rich tapestry of learning and connection. The experiences shared, lessons learned, and the diversity embraced have not just educated but transformed participants, fostering a deep, empathetic understanding of what it truly means to build sustainable communities. Through hands-on projects, heartfelt community engagements, and the sheer power of diverse individuals coming together with a common purpose, we've laid down the tracks for future actions that promise to spread this transformative energy far and wide.



The EDE on the Nile program is poised to amplify its impact, guided by insights on enhancing participant engagement, embracing cultural richness, and nurturing a supportive network of past participants. The commitment to pushing the boundaries of sustainability education, to exploring innovative and inclusive ways to share knowledge, and to fostering leadership and personal growth, sets a vibrant stage for the next chapters of this journey. As we carry forward the lessons and inspirations from our first EDE, The Nile journeys is reminded of the potential that lies in collective action and shared dreams.

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to all participants, facilitators, local communities, and organizations that collaborated to make this transformative experience possible. As the Nile journeys expands its facilitation of learning spaces across different platforms and approaches, we hope to engage all those who contributed to the EDE on the Nile to bring the learnings and reach more communities.



Reflections from participants



Nile Journeys has been a revelation for me. Learning about permaculture showed me the power of interconnectedness. Strong designs rely on diverse elements, and it goes far beyond just landscaping. It applies everywhere from communities to countries and international relations. Embracing diversity strengthens us all because nature thrives on diversity and so do we. Surprisingly, NJ has also deepened my connection to my own country. It's fostered empathy for the challenges facing Africa, replacing anger with a desire to find solutions instead. I'm eager to continue learning and growing with Nile Journeys and those I've been able to connect with through this experience.

- Tina, Ethiopia



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Mother Earth is selfless and loving and calls us back for Empathy, peace, restoration and unity for this the greatest tool for all creation.

- Patrick, Kenya



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I have realized the power of connecting with each other and working with the land to co-create regenerative designs that counters linear systems that are based on divide, extractions, and exploitation of social, cultural and economic resources. Creating a space where people around the Nile basin countries gather to bring heavy conversations reflecting mutual differences to unlearn/learn about each other stories, this is when differences shrink, and interpretation widens. Working with local farmers in Rusinga Island and planting seeds to revive community related practices is in itself a spiritual practice, that situated me on the path of getting back to the indigenous African roots and heritage while moving forward with the community spirit. This lived experience repurposed my sense of existence.

Now looking back to our one-month immersive experience of the EDE makes me feel that everything that I've lived in the EDE has prepared me to embody all these accumulations of knowledge and give it back in another learning space.

- Nourane, Egypt



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The necessary EDE learning, unlearning, and relearning outcomes were amplified effectively through collective practical actions that connected us deeply with the host resilient community-hubs and the land. It became evident that the probable areas of the workability of the idea of African unity prospects for the prosperity of its people and ecosystems that were unveiled, enhanced, and deeply internalised could be scaled up for further and broader actions through trans-local drives.

Making the Nile-Basin a conflict relieved corridor calls for having in place the purpose-designed youth-centered unity and peace building programmes running across the whole Basin, consistent with the NJs' trans-local drive.

- Mugaybuso, Tanzania

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