Cohabitat Quebec - Quebec, CANADA

Case Study based on interview with Denis Côté
(member of Cohabitat Quebec since 2010)

by Damien Douté on 2017-02-08

Summary

Cohabitat Quebec is the first cohousing community in Quebec, located in the Saint-Sacrement district of Quebec City. This cohousing consists of 60 adults and 40 children. The project started in 2004 and has had inhabitants since June 2013.

Residents take part in all parts of the management of the homes.
Owner-residents commit to the harmonious integration with their neighborhood and contributing to the vitality of the Saint-Sacrement district.

Sociocracy and Non-Violent Communication (NVC) have been at the heart of the project since the start.

Legally, Cohabitat Quebec is a syndicate of co-ownership and a solidarity cooperative. The co-owners delegate administration authority to the coop and the coop delegates it to the sociocratic general circle.

A sociocratic project from the start

The project was initiated in 2004 by Michel Desgagnés. He was very determined and from the start wanted the project to be based on NVC and sociocracy. During this first phase of the project from 2004 to 2008, they did not apply sociocracy fully and it turned out to be problematic.

In 2008, Michel followed a year-long sociocracy training with Sociogest, a sociocracy consulting company based in Quebec, to become a certified Sociocracy practitioner.

A New start with full Sociocracy

After 2008, six people from the first attempt rebooted the project on new grounds. This time sociocracy was to be applied in its totality. To be part of the project a member must attend, at his/her own expense, a two day training in sociocracy and a two day training in NVC. Every member must be part of a circle and participate in decisions.

Once the cohousing was built, the circle structure changed to correspond to the new reality of their project.
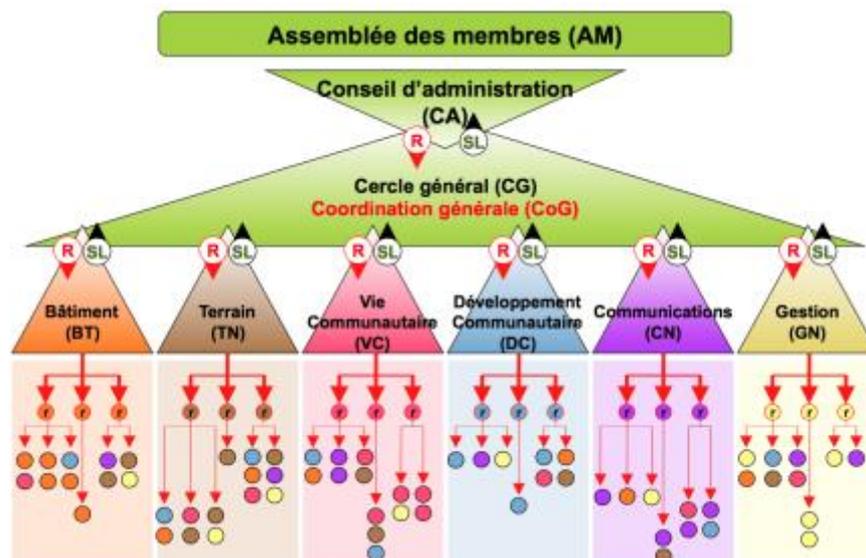
Sociocracy check-list

While they intend to apply sociocracy in its totality, some parts have yet to be fully implemented. Circles, double-links, elections and consent are used but proposal forming is not done in circles. One person or a few people write the proposal on their own and it gets improved and approved. But there is not a lot of group proposal forming.

Currently, feedback & performance reviews are not done. It is their current biggest challenge right now as a facilitator has recently quit the role. They are thinking about doing role reviews.

They are thinking of ways of how to provide support and learn from this experience. For now when a circle is not doing well, there is no support mechanism. They are trying to figure out how to have a support circle that helps everyone in the sociocracy process and keeps track of training needs for the group. They feel some kind of circle is needed to deal with the glitches they have with sociocracy, put in place a review system, coach facilitators and create a community of practice. A group for this formed last year but spent more time thinking then acting.

One of the members has created a sociocracy notebook containing all the training material they had on sociocracy. They bring it to their meetings in case the facilitator needs help on a specific topic or process.

Applying sociocracy in a cooperative

In cooperatives some decisions must be taken by the member's assembly. However sociocracy does not provide any method for handling assemblies, since it promotes circles of a limited size. Cohabitat Quebec has nevertheless adapted how assemblies are run in order to stay true to sociocracy.

When a subject concerns all the members of the coop, like regulations on joining the coop or selling a unit, the process is as follows: the concerned circle presents ideas or a draft proposal for consultation in a workshop where all members are invited (but it is not a formal assembly). The circle integrates the feedback and then goes into formal proposal adoption within the circle and, if necessary, within the general circle and the board.

Children are not part of the process as of now but it is in the intention of the group to bring them in. They are consulted from time to time for subjects that concern them.

Key aspect of sociocracy

For them the most important part of sociocracy is the rounds. They don't like taking turns in a popcorn style. Consent is also a very important part.

For new members understanding consent and objection is crucial part of the learning, the "good enough for now, safe enough to try." Understanding that a proposal doesn't need to be perfect for all eternity and that it is a constant trial & error process. Sociocracy is in itself a trial & error experience. Always review and adapt.

Reflection after 8 years of practice

In retrospect, they don't see how they could have succeeded without Sociocracy. It's effective.

Their next steps for improvement are:

- Having a mutual aid support system that makes sure sociocracy is implemented efficiently.
- Making sure the key roles have all the support they need.
- Constant monitoring of the implementation of sociocracy.

They gave a really strong recommendation for using sociocracy in its whole, and not bargaining parts of it. Also to do what it takes to make sure all members are properly trained. For a cohousing group, it is a winning strategy to invest in the social technology and in implementing a new culture of collaboration.

They agree that at first decisions will take a long time and seem complicated. But once decisions are made, it goes blazing fast since everyone has assimilated the decision. Also decisions benefits from the reflection of many people which enables us to take difficult decisions in a reasonable, responsible and peaceful way. This also creates confidence and trust in the group; you can trust the other circles.

Sociocracy For All