



Conversation with Mette Beckhof

Ashley Hopkinson

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Ashley Hopkinson: Can you introduce yourself and tell me a little bit about your role?

Mette Beckhof: My name is Mette and I live near Cologne in Germany and I'm part of the Economy for the Common Good Movement here in Germany in the local chapter in Cologne.

Ashley Hopkinson: Can you tell me more about how you got started and what your role entails?

Mette Beckhof: So I have no economic academia background, so I'm not very deep in economics, but I've always wondered why organizations or companies have to thrive by raising profits every year, making more and more money. I've always been on the search or on a quest to find out if there could be other ways. And at some point, I read about the Economy for the Common Good movement and what the Economy for the Common Good as an economic system means. I thought that I had found the right place and so I joined the movement about four years ago in the local chapter here in Cologne as a volunteer. My role for the past two years has been a coordinator of the group. It's basically an organizational role within the local chapter.

Ashley Hopkinson: How would you describe the work of Economy for the Common Good?

Mette Beckhof: One of the main things we do is actually organize. We set up a booth on the street or at any festivals that are related to sustainability or have some sustainability background. And then we give out information on the idea of the Economy for the Common Good to raise awareness within the public. Regular people who are not in the economy, who are just interested in doing things differently and trying to save the planet. We just give out information on the idea itself.

The main purpose of the local chapters is to support the idea and to spread the idea {...} In Germany and maybe some other countries in Europe, the ECG has already become part of the curriculum so if you study economics at university, it's also already taught there. It's part of the general curriculum when it comes to alternative business models. But us as the volunteers and the local chapter, we don't really have a strong connection to that. We just support pairing up universities with the right people.

Ashley Hopkinson: For the everyday person who is at one of these events where you have a booth, what is the overall message you use to raise awareness?

Mette Beckhof: The movement, at least in German, has the slogan that would translate to '*the good life for all of us*,' which is in German a very good pull slogan where you can get people interested in the topic. This is basically what our hook is to get people into conversations that we start the conversation with, "Don't you want *the good life for all of us*? And if so, what do you think the economy could change? What has to change or what could change in order to have a good life for everyone?" And since the topic is so broad, you always get into conversations very easily because at least most of the people who stop have some idea that goes into the same ideas that the movement has. And then you can take those hooks and start the conversation from there.

Ashley Hopkinson: How do you define an economy that's working to better prioritize communities and the environment? How would you define that from your perspective?

Mette Beckhof: I would say balance is one of the keywords for me. Everything needs to be in some form of balance. When it comes to basic human rights, basic human needs, everybody should be treated as equally as possible. So no large gap between the richest and the poorest of a country or a city. Everything in a balance— that is basically my ideal of the economy. At the moment, most companies are still looking for profit and most of the tax laws and all the other laws and incentives for companies are still focused on them making more and more money and producing more and more of whatever they produce. There's an imbalance. And so ideally the politics, the economy and everything needs to change so that we can go back into balancing that out {not so} individuals can get richer richer richer, but the whole of the society gets a fair level of equality.

Ashley Hopkinson: Do you have any insight into what you think it might take for the conversation to just really reach a very practical level? Is that connected maybe to some of the earlier things that you mentioned, like it's being taught in school, maybe just not in economics class, but maybe more so in other areas?

Mette Beckhof: Yes, I think demystifying is a really, really good term in this case because as we all know, as a private individual, you don't really have any connection to the city council legislation on a

local level, but also no legislation on a national level and so on and so forth. And so individuals often have the feeling that they can't do anything because it's them making the laws. And so I think educating from a very early age on being bold, speaking your mind, really basic things that you do not have a direct connection to politics, but teaching children to speak up, to speak out when they see things going wrong. Things like this are really skills that need to be taught from early on. And I think maybe opening up administrative organizations and the city council to be closer to the public also helps. Because if they're behind closed doors and if they speak in a language that you don't understand, then you will always feel it's them doing things and I can't do anything.

And narrowing that down, breaking these barriers is really important so that people feel empowered and know that if they want to change something, the doors are open, they can go and work in the city council or go into local politics if they want to. And this from an early age on, I think the Fridays for Future movement here in Europe has really, really changed the view on that a lot over the past three years. It was school children going on demonstrations and they learned in school ... that demonstrating for the climate is working. Over the past years, I was really amazed by how much impact that had on how people see their personal level of impact that they can reach by speaking out. We need much more of this, in my opinion, just doing things, just speaking out.

Not only demonstrating, but also being aware that you can go and do stuff. But this is also both sides. The government has to open up. We need more information in education, children need to learn more about this. I talked to a young lady at a network event and I found this really interesting. They have an organization that organizes pupil governments. So they go to schools, teach about democracy and organize pupil governments and help them to understand how legislation works. And {students} can also go and speak before the city council and have actual connection to the real people doing the jobs. This is so important and so cool.

Ashley Hopkinson: What would you say is a challenge you face in getting the word out about economic sustainability and environmental change especially at events?

Mette Beckhof: I think it's the topic more than the area {of Germany}. The topic of changing economic systems is more difficult to attract people than the area where you want to do that. So as the local chapters, we try to organize within our city and our local chapter. But then we have states within Germany, you have the whole of Germany, but we also have 16 states. We try to organize events that are a little bit bigger in their target circle. But even then, sometimes you don't get as many people as you would like to.

Ashley Hopkinson: What are some of the things that you think can help the volunteer group overcome that challenge in terms of turnout? Have you found any successful strategies or are there any things that are coming up that you think, "Oh, maybe we'll try to give this a try?"

Mette Beckhof: The same question you asked, we're asking ourselves. A meeting is like, "What else can we do? How can we break it down? How can we make it more interesting?" And also more, how to say, closer to the public because it's so... Economic systems are so high level, and we always try to brainstorm on finding new ways to attract people and not only stand there and ask them if they want to have *the good life for everyone*. It's difficult. It's really difficult.

Ashley Hopkinson: It's a great question. What is a good life for all of us? I don't think people always connect the dots of their everyday activities to economics. What's the point of me taking my bag to the grocery store? What's the point of me walking? But if there is more energy around a movement does that incentivize a city to create more sidewalks, to create policies around plastic use?

Mette Beckhof: But wouldn't it be much easier if it were the other way around, that the legislation in any form or the organization of a city would automatically incentivize those things. And not the public needs to stand up and needs to demand changes, needs to demand more sidewalks, needs to demand more bike lanes, and then they will ride their bikes and then they will walk. It would help more if it were the other way around because of the things that I said earlier, that people don't feel that they have any impact, that they can't change. And so it's like a vicious circle because if they think they can't change anything, they won't.

If the city doesn't hear from them, they don't change it. And so some party needs to step out of the vicious circle. And for me, basic logic, I think it would be much better if the cities and counties and national government were to take the first steps and change it from their side than to wait for the public. But as we've all learned, {that} doesn't really work. So now we need to empower the public to do it the other way around.

Ashley Hopkinson: I read somewhere on the website where ECG stated that the local chapters are the backbone of the organization. And so maybe that's a part of the organizational structure too, that we would have these little chapters grow and then the knowledge would become bigger and bigger and bigger. Do you find that that's a part of it in terms of what is needed to scale?

Mette Beckhof: The hurdles we have here is that most of it is volunteer work, and we've really felt the impact of the pandemic here that people are just so tired out. Volunteer burnout has become a new phrase that has been coming up. I don't know if you've read it somewhere or heard about it, that

people burn out because the pandemic has taken so much energy and now they do volunteer work and they can't do the volunteer work anymore because they're burned out from all the things going on over the past three years. So we have a hard time finding new people at the moment to support, and that makes it... As a volunteer organization, it really makes it difficult.

We'll see how it goes. I think we need to professionalize the ECG movement a little bit more. The scaling up process can't be done if you don't have enough people. And if it's all based on volunteers, you have a high fluctuation because people come and go, because if something goes on in their personal life, then they're gone, then they leave the group and you have to rearrange. In a company, when we always talk about high retention, you need to keep your staff on because if you have a high retention and people stay for long, you have all the knowledge. If people quit their jobs all the time and you have a high fluctuation in a company, the knowledge gets lost because people take the knowledge with them and so on and so forth. And that's the same in a volunteer organization.

And the volunteer part makes it even more difficult because people leave much quicker because they don't have to... They have no notice period. They can just decide from one day to the other, "It's too much. I can't do it anymore. I quit." And then they're gone. And the knowledge and all the work they have done so far leaves with them. And so this was one of my learnings over the past years that a volunteer organization is much more fragile than a business operation or an organization that has people who officially work for them because of that factor.

Ashley Hopkinson: I would like to close by asking you one last question, and it's almost the flip of what we just talked about. What inspires you to stay in this work, to stay in your honorable co-lead position that you have right now?

Mette Beckhof: My own personal value system and the connection to the cause. There's so much overlap that I think this is the right place for me to put my energy in and the people in the organization. This was my first real volunteer job that I ever took in my life. I've done sports club-soccer; I was a soccer mom, baked cakes and stuff like that. But this is my real volunteer job. And the people I met so far, not only in the local chapter but on the national level who have the same ideas, that gives so much energy. If you talk to like-minded souls who want to change things like the way you want to change things, this gives so much power to the group {...} Those two things at the core make it really important for me and keep me in the movement.

Ashley Hopkinson: Okay, wonderful. Thank you.

Ashley Hopkinson is an award-winning journalist, newsroom entrepreneur and leader dedicated to excellent storytelling and mission-driven media. She currently manages the Solutions Insights Lab, an initiative of the Solutions Journalism Network. She is based in New Orleans, Louisiana.

** This conversation has been edited and condensed.*