

THE VAAAG

A COLLECTIVE EXPERIENCE OF SELF-ORGANISATION



INTRODUCTION

FROM 1st-3rd June 2003, the G8 (Group of Eight, most industrialised nations) Summit took place in Evian, a small French town on Lake Geneva, close to the Swiss border. A mobilisation in France and Switzerland involving NGOs (Non-Governmental Organisations), political parties and unions, as well as more radical networks, had spent several months organising resistance to the Summit.

In the last few days of May 2003, thousands of people began arriving at the numerous camps (or 'villages'), which had been set up on both sides of the border by those wanting to resist the Summit. Each village had its own political identity. It was primarily within these camps that the final plans were made as to exactly how the Summit would be resisted. Although numerous actions and demonstrations took place in the preceding week, the mobilisation concentrated primarily upon disrupting the opening day of the Summit.

Although the eight world leaders were being accommodated in hotels in Evian amidst massive security, the majority of the Summit support staff (advisors,

translators, caterers) were spread out around Lake Geneva and needed to travel to Evian in time for the opening events. It was upon hindering their easy passage that resistance focussed.

The various routes by which delegates and staff could travel to Evian (by road, ferry...) were identified. The villages then co-ordinated amongst themselves as to which group would blockade which access route. In the end, the blockades involved a huge range of people, were extremely varied in terms of the tactics employed (from small affinity group actions, to mass blockades and the building of burning barricades) and all were subject to considerable police brutality.

The following text is a translated excerpt from: «Le Vaaag, une expérience libertaire. Village alternatif, anticapitaliste et antiguerres. Textes collectifs et témoignages.» It is a critical reflection upon the process of organising the Vaaag camp in Annemasse by those who were involved. The camp was only one contribution to the mobilisation against the Summit.

In October 2002, the No Pasaran network¹ launched the proposal to build a village during the G8 summit due to be held in Evian, France in the summer

of 2003. It was an uncertain risk which took shape over several months and materialised between the 28th of May and 3rd of June in Annemasse.²

The idea of organising a village during the G8 summit was launched as a result of the observation that during big summit gatherings the political expressions of the libertarian movements³ were becoming difficult to see. For many years mobilisations had grown, reaching their climax in Genoa in July 2001. During these demonstrations, the anti-globalisation

movements, in all their diversity, implemented different strategies to oppose the rulers. From pink bloc to black bloc, from the NGOs' (Non-Governmental Organisations') counter-summits to blockading the delegations, from disobedience to targeted actions against symbols of capitalism, there had been no lack of creativity generating new dynamics for traditional demonstrations, which however big they might be, are often unsatisfactory. Our participation in numerous counter-summits had made us realise the limitations and difficulties of actions of disobedience (mass occupations of trains to go to Nice and Köln, invasion of the 'red zone' in Genoa and Prague, spectacular actions etc.). Moreover the strengthening of police repression which peaked with the murder of Carlo Giuliani in July 2001 in Genoa, had incited us to find a way beyond the spiral of action/violence/repression which carries no hope or alternatives. Furthermore, the No Border camp in Strasbourg in 2002⁴ had proven the vitality of this type of experiment and had suggested that, if one found the means, words could become reality.

On December 8th 2002 a meeting, called by the Rhone Alpes regional branch of the Anarchist Federation, was

held at the *Plume Noire* bookshop. At this meeting, whose aim was to join together diverse libertarian movements (the Anarchist Federation, the Libertarian Communist Organisation, the Swiss Libertarian Socialist Organisation, No Pasaran, Libertarian Alternative, the CNT...) for the summit of the world leaders, the No Pasaran network proposed the organisation of an alternative, anti-capitalist, anti-war Village (*Village alternatif, anti-capitalist et anti-guerres - Vaaag*) and called for an international meeting on January 11th 2003.

On January 11th, in Lyons, the first meeting to network and federate already existing 'village collectives' took place. About a hundred people attended, representing a large number of organisations and individuals who were not yet involved in the collectives and wanted to have more information about the alternative, anti-capitalist, anti-war Village. This meeting was thus an opportunity to explain our hopes and desires for the project and the political ideas behind it, since the objective was to agree upon a project and a collective process. For the attending activists, most of whom were gathered there through their organisations' involvement in the *Claaac G8!*⁵, the idea was to build a space that would break away as much from the capitalist and state order as from traditional forms of social and political representation.

Indeed, for several years, resistance has no longer just been a struggle against the established order - or disorder - but also about seeking alternatives to the different models that are presented to us, even those proposed by some of the alter-globalists⁶ themselves. There was a desire to create new spaces against all forms of domination (patriarchal, economic, social, cultural, national, military...) and it was in this sense that we thought it would be interesting to propose the setting up of a village that would encompass:

- An autonomous space for reflection and action, that allows political expression but above all encourages the assertion of our alternative proposals, which would be reflected in the



Demonstrators against the G8 on the streets of Geneva

implementation of concrete models of libertarian practices of direct democracy, self-organisation, disobedience and/or resistance. Beyond the necessary visibility, we wanted this space to be for social and political experimentation, breaking away from capitalism and to be a demonstration of direct democracy. Due to its self-organised nature, it would involve each of the participants in its design, in its logistics and its daily life. In political terms, we wanted the Village to mark a breaking away from the types of representation that exist in counter-summits and to give their voices back to those who are the main actors/actresses of the struggles. In this sense the organisation of debates would not aim at offering platforms for groups to promote themselves and their ideas, but at developing all sorts of opportunities to enable people to meet and come together.

- An autonomous space that could become a real space for the convergence of different forms of resistance to capitalist globalisation, where there would be opportunities for different strategies of struggle to be represented and/or expressed (an opportunity to weave links between different individuals, networks and organisations).

Therefore the Village was not a continuation of what has existed up to now. It should not be seen as the sequel to Porto Alegre (the World Social Forum), or to Florence (the European Social Forum). It was really about breaking away from a system which oppresses and exploits: the capitalist system.

These political statements led to different positions in the assembly which was far from being unanimous. Indeed all libertarian, anti-capitalist and anti-

authoritarian organisations had been invited to the meeting but also many different anti-globalisation groups such as Aarrgh, some groups closer to Trotskyist tendencies such as Vamos, Socialism from Below, the Young Revolutionary Communists... even groups linked to the 'trash left'⁷ such as the Young Greens, who had gathered in a collective entitled *Illegal G8*. Important divergences thus emerged. They were to worsen in the following weeks before leading to a real split during the second general preparatory meeting of the Vaaag.

During the meeting of February 8th and 9th in Lyons, the debates between the advocates of a 'soft line', for whom it was crucial to avoid saying clearly that the 'plural left' [see note 7], amongst others, were responsible for the current state of our society and who wanted an open call to all 'progressive' forces, and the anti-capitalists who wanted to clearly assert that there is no possible accommodation with this system, led to a division. A clarification of positions became necessary in a call-out that would also serve as the political declaration of the Vaaag, which led to a number of the participants in the first meeting abandoning the project. Indeed it turned out that it was better to have two spaces where everyone could find his/her own expression, with on the one side the Vaaag and the Claaac, and on the other the Vig (Intergalactic Village) with the organisations that constituted *Illegal G8*.

This separation was not without consequences, because foreign groups who were not aware of the French debates found it difficult to know where to locate themselves. Thus A-Seed (a radical environmentalist group based in the Netherlands) ended up in the Vig;

which was hilarious as they pitched their tent in the Vig with huge circled 'A's on it!

Four months away from the beginning of the Village, we were starting more or less from scratch; nothing had been done on the technical and practical issues. And the working groups had only just emerged.

On March 1st and 2nd 2003, a meeting of the unitary collective against the G8 (a convergence of all groups involved in the mobilisations) took place in Geneva, including militants from the Claac and the Vaaag. The co-ordinated arrival en masse and presentations of the libertarian activists allowed a real visibility of our initiatives, be they on the level of demonstrations, with proposals for symbolic blockades, or on the level of the Village, insisting on its anti-capitalist identity, and the desire for it to be a space for the construction of alternatives and not just a campsite.

On March 15th and 16th, again in Lyons, during the third general meeting for preparation, a Charter regarding living in the Village [see end of article] was partly drawn up thanks to the work of the relevant working group. Another working group focused on various aspects of communication (propaganda material; IT team; relations with 'mainstream' or 'alternative' media; etc.). Finally, a third working group was concentrating on the logistics related to the construction of the Village. Despite the creation of working groups, the project was having difficulty progressing. Indeed, beyond big words, the construction of concrete alternatives often remained at the stage of questioning or ideological assertion. Actually building alternatives was not part of the usual 'tool box' of the French libertarian activist. Unlike our foreign friends, our experience regarding collective kitchens and the construction of ecological showers and toilets was still at the learning stage. We were hoping to organise a kind of rehearsal of the project during the G8 Environment meetings in Angers [traditionally held before the main G8 summit], but the federal government decided to change the location to Paris.

We had banked on the internet being one of the media through which the project would progress and through which various problems could be resolved. This tool is clearly very efficient when those who use it do so properly. But of the ten lists that were created (Culture, Communication, Media, Legal, Logistics...), the large majority remained silent. Only the global

discussion list and the working list on the Charter regarding life in the Village saw real exchanges and communication on the political questions of the Village.

Two last general meetings, in early April and early May, allowed us to finalise our project and to answer the numerous logistical worries. During that time, it was the duty of the local village collectives to concretely develop the Village project.

THE VILLAGE COLLECTIVES

About ten collectives took on the idea of the Village and worked on it locally: Nantes, Paris, Angers, Lyons, Montpellier, Toulouse (which disappeared before the end), Haute-Savoie, Savoie, Nimes, Marseilles, Aix, Heidelberg and La Rochelle. Even though the Vaaag received support from the Claac and its organisations, most of the collectives were the actual builders of the Village and were used as spaces for discussing the Charter, building the kitchens, finding materials, and developing the campaign (posters, flyers, concerts, debates, etc.). Seeing as the project began just before the outbreak of war in Iraq, one would have thought that, as the day got closer, more and more contributing collectives would have emerged. Despite the great energy shown and the responses met, one must admit that *passivity* has been much more powerful than enthusiasm. Even amongst libertarian organisations, with the exceptions of the Anarchist Federation, No Pasaran and some individuals in the CNT and Libertarian Alternative (Paris), there was a lot of scepticism.

If the inter-orgas [networking of different organisations] system worked relatively well in the Claac framework, it obviously could not be a sufficient solution to the new political practices needed to build this Village. It was therefore the gathering of collectives of individuals that was given priority (even though in some towns the organisations gave us their support). Moreover it seemed incongruous to us that the Village would only be the coming together of libertarian activist groups. On the contrary, it had to be the



opening of a new political space; a melting pot for ideas and practices; a place where all those who wanted to experience self-organisation and direct democracy, and the embodiment of the concept that 'resisting is creating', could come together.

Members of the village collectives, whose efforts underpinned the success of the initiative, thus met about ten days before the official beginning of the Village in order to prepare, but even then, worries persisted. The Village's installation remains one of the strongest moments because the self-construction of kitchens, bars, poles for electricity, compost toilets, ecological showers and marquees cemented relations between people who for months had only elaborated plans, meeting after meeting, or through the internet (some reflection about which is necessary). And beyond our political affiliations, the collective energy enabled us to solve numerous problems which were faced by the 'villagers'.

In a de-humanised world where individualism and selfishness are everywhere, the will to go back to spaces where everyday life is run collectively was one of the priorities of the Vaaag. It seemed to us necessary to create - in this case around the neighbourhood kitchens - a specific collective space for expression (thanks to the general neighbourhood assemblies at 9.30am every morning), where many questions relating to life in the Village were discussed: responsibility for the Reception, Medical, Serenity Group, etc. and for the running of the kitchens. At this level, we can be satisfied with the successful integration of those who came to take part in the collective tasks. At the assemblies, political questions were also discussed (initiatives, demos, etc.). Although not everything was successful, especially the difficulty of integrating the musical groups (sound systems and bands) who came to offer their contribution to the

anti-G8 mobilisation, overall it worked well. The problems of direct democracy, mandates etc. that were highlighted in the Vaaag raised questions, especially about the relations between those who were the designers and those who became the users of the project. Contradictions sometimes emerge and these can become very deep when not enough thought around these issues has preceded the project. On the other hand it is obvious that in such a massive gathering, the Charter which acts as the reference point is not attentively read by many participants. Moreover the Village wanted to be an infrastructure, not a blueprint for political action. For that reason, it was up to the neighbourhoods or the assemblies to raise the issues to be debated; the Vaaag collective refused to take action on any issues outside of those involving solidarity between Villages and towards demonstrators.

Even though the Vaaag fulfilled its 'mission', it would obviously be pretentious to say that there weren't any problems which we will have to collectively think through in order to sort them out for next time. Because, undoubtedly like the No Border camp that was the inspiration for the Vaaag, the Vaaag will be an inspiration for other initiatives.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTES

1. No Pasaran is French-based international network of grassroots anti-authoritarians and anti-fascists. It has a revolutionary perspective. See <http://nopasaran.samizdat.net> (in French)
2. Annemasse is on the border of France and Switzerland, a few kilometres away from Evian, where the G8 were meeting.
3. Libertarian movement: a direct translation of "mouvement libertaire", i.e. grassroots anti-authoritarian anarchists. The term does not carry any right-wing connotation in French.
4. No Border camp: A camp set up in July 2002. At least 2,000 people gathered in Strasbourg, the city which houses the Schengen Information System (SIS), a database for search and control, with tens of thousands of terminals all over Europe. It targets not only migrants, but every 'suspected' individual. Created in 1999, the No Border Network is "a tool for all groups and grassroots organisations who work on the questions of migrants and asylum seekers in order to struggle alongside them for freedom of movement, for the freedom for all to stay in the place which they have chosen, against repression and the many controls which multiply the borders everywhere in all countries." (www.noborder.org).
5. "Convergence of anti-authoritarian and anti-capitalist struggles against the G8", initially composed of Libertarian Alternative, the trade unions from the CNT, the Anarchist Federation, the Libertarian Communist Organisation, the Swiss Libertarian Socialist Organisation and the No Pasaran network.
6. Alter-globalist: in this context, the activists gathered in more reformist organisations such as Attac, a number of NGOs, etc.
7. 'Trash Left': A translation of 'Gauche Poubelle'. A pun based on the left coalition Jospin government which had been referred to as 'Gauche Plurielle' (Plural Left).

VAAAG'S OPERATIONAL CHARTER / ORGANISATIONAL PRINCIPLES

THESE principles were put together collectively in order to provide a basis for working practices that allow efficient daily self-organisation.

GENERAL ORGANISATION OF THE VAAAG

The Vaaag is organised on two main levels: the neighbourhoods and the inter-neighbourhood collective spaces.

The Neighbourhoods

The neighbourhoods are organised around a collective kitchen which is the central space for the life of the neighbourhood. They are constituted on the principle of free association and attempt to privilege exchanges and meetings, especially international ones. Think about this when you set up!

The neighbourhoods are autonomous in their activities, actions and projects within the framework of the Vaaag call-out and its operating Charter. For it to work well collectively it is preferable that a neighbourhood does not host more than 200 people.

The Vaaag is not a place for consumption but an experience of self-organisation, therefore those willing to live in the Village must get involved in its running: by participating in kitchen tasks, cleaning, collective decision making, etc.

The Inter-Neighbourhood Collective Spaces

- reception space
- space for co-ordination of actions and initiatives
- space for activist press and alternative stalls
- medical space
- legal space
- media information space
- video space
- children's space
- debate space: social struggles forum, international solidarity forum, independent media forum, alternative and independent cultures forum...

The associations, political organisations or trade unions involved in the organisation of and preparation for

the Vaaag or those organisations recognising themselves in its call-out, can appear as such in the Village. However, their official presence will happen within a specific space (an identified space for information, press tables or stands). The organisations present within the Vaaag can also organise their own debates.

The overall organisation of the Village is the responsibility of the local village collectives and the anti-G8 collectives who are part of the Vaaag project. Only these entities can benefit from a complete freedom of presence within the Village. They form the co-ordination and organisation collective of the Vaaag.

Generally the Vaaag inhabitants express themselves as participants in the Village, never in the name of the Vaaag. Participants agree with the fact that the Vaaag is not liable for any of their activities.

COLLECTIVE LIFE

Reception

A reception tent is located at the entrance of the Village. Anyone wanting to live in the Village must go through this tent, where they will have explained to them the identity and the organisational principles of the Vaaag, as well as all the useful information that will allow them to settle and participate as quickly as possible in the Village.

Exchanges with the Local Population

The Vaaag would like to develop harmonious relationships with the local population (this therefore involves the behaviour of each Vaaag participant towards external people) and invites them to take part in the Village activities.

Behaviour

Any sexist, racist, anti-Semitic, homophobic, ageist or violent behaviour is prohibited within the Village. Anyone exhibiting such behaviour will have to justify themselves and if they insist in their actions or words, will no longer have a place within the Village.

Vehicles

The use of motorised vehicles is prohibited within the Village, for obvious reasons of safety, pollution and for a

quiet life. The exceptions are emergency vehicles, vehicles needed for organisation, installation and collective structures. Parking space will be available for the Vaaag participants.

Life and 'Consumption' in the Village

All profits and money raised (except for book and publication sales) will be exclusively put into the Village common pot and re-distributed according to the organisational needs of the Village. This money will allow the financing of some of the overall organisation and production costs (electricity, rentals, communication costs...)

● Meals

All kitchens will use a 'free price' (i.e. donation). The actual cost of the meal will be advertised. Inter-kitchen meetings can take place. Taking into consideration the beliefs of many of the participants around issues of animal welfare, it would be desirable that the kitchens avoid preparing meat in their meals.

● Cafe bars

The distribution of alcohol will only take place in spaces which have been dedicated and authorised by the Vaaag organising collective. A system of drink vouchers has been put in place for both alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks. The sale of vouchers will take place in the stall space. The opening hours of the cafes will be advertised.

Debates

In order to ensure the efficient process of collective discussion, debates and general assemblies will take place with both a male and a female facilitator, who will summarise the proposals and call people to speak. These teams will rotate and will be chosen at the beginning of each meeting. They will favour an alternate call to speak between men and women and those who haven't spoken yet. There will be simultaneous translation in small groups according to needs.

Solidarity in the Face of Repression

The Vaaag will be in solidarity with all protesters taking political actions who face police repression, whether they belong to the Vaaag or not. Solidarity actions will be developed and decided upon collectively through the daily general assemblies.

Journalists and the Media

A space has been installed next to the reception where journalists, photographers, sociologists, anthropologists or others must go to

receive information about the Vaaag and its rules, especially regarding spaces that can be filmed or photographed, in order to respect the privacy of the Vaaag participants. Those speaking to the media etc. do so on their behalf and not in the name of Vaaag. Alternative media will be given priority.

Children's Space

We envisage a permanent space for receiving and proposing activities for children who will be present in the Vaaag. It will be co-ordinated by parents and volunteers. We invite all the participants of the Vaaag to bring play materials for children.

Security

Participation in the Vaaag implies everyone taking responsibility for security, especially relating to children, people without papers and police attacks. The Serenity Team will have a specific responsibility for the defence of the Village, especially at night.

HOW TO BUILD COLLECTIVELY AND MAKE DECISIONS?

Neighbourhood General Assemblies

A daily general assembly will be organised by each neighbourhood bringing together those who live in the neighbourhood and allowing everyone to express themselves. They will be held in the morning between 9.30am and 10am in each neighbourhood. They will make decisions concerning the collective organisation of the neighbourhood: allocating tasks such as cooking, cleaning, projects, workshops, actions, events...

It is during these meetings that people living in the neighbourhood will volunteer for neighbourhood and inter-neighbourhood teams, in which gender balance will be aimed for. A mandate will be given to two delegates who will take the concerns of the neighbourhood which relate to the running of the entire Village, to the Village general assembly.

Village General Assemblies

A Village general assembly will take place every day at around 12 noon, bringing together all the delegates from the neighbourhoods. The decisions taken at the Village general assemblies will be communicated by radio and posters. The decisions will concern:

- Actions, demonstrations and diverse activities led by the Vaaag and questions arising from current events (repression, solidarity actions, resistance...)

- The setting up of inter-neighbourhood teams needed for the daily running of the Vaaag. These teams will rotate.

Which Team to Join?

The teams, whether working at neighbourhood level or in the entire Village (inter-neighbourhood teams), are made up of participants of the Village who will participate on a voluntary basis, which is the essence of self-organisation. Everyone is thus invited to participate at the level of their neighbourhood and in the inter-neighbourhood teams:

- Reception Team
- Medical Team
- Legal Team
- Communications/Media Team
- Debates and Translation Team
- Kids' Space Team
- Communal Living Space Cleaning Team
- Equipment Security Team
- Serenity Team, whose role is to defend the Village
- Videotheque Team

We invite everyone who has specific skills (in translation, law, medicine...) to make themselves known upon their arrival at the Vaaag reception.

(Please note - the translator of this article is not a professional translator.)

RESOURCES AND FURTHER READING

*Check out the original full version of this text at:

<http://perso.wanadoo.fr/libertaire/vaaag.html>

*Check out the Evian G8 archive at: www.indymedia.org.uk

*During the actions against the 2003 G8 Summit, two protesters were almost killed when the police cut through a rope they were hanging from in order to blockade a motorway leading towards the Summit. Those who took part in the action - both the climbers and their supporters - were arrested and, with sick irony, charged with "endangering life". A support campaign was swiftly set up and solidarity actions took place all over the world. A European gathering, which coincided with the court case against the two climbers, took place with the hope of establishing an international anti-repression network, to combat the criminalisation of resistance and to co-ordinate solidarity for those subject to repression. See: www.aubonnebridge.net