

Intermediate Sharing Realities: European Ecovillages

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Abstract. The article examines sharing and collaborative practices within the context of European ecovillages. The research is based on interviews and participant observation in five European ecovillages, located in Spain, Slovenia, Ukraine, Germany and Denmark. In total, 74 interviews¹ were carried out, encompassing the levels of 1) community members, 2) enterprises or organisations located in the ecovillages and 3) the ecovillage. The paper describes the sharing realities in the ecovillages, the sharing methodologies and the enablers of and limitations to sharing practices in the communities. Results show that, in contrast to other social structures that push ‘members’ towards competition, ecovillages offer incentives for collaboration. In these contexts, collaboration and sharing are the main trajectory to ensure sustenance, making ecovillages unique incubators for sharing and collaborative practices. As such, the communities merge collaborative and market-based economies, and so function as intermediate, or transitioning, spaces. Two frameworks are birthed: 1) A framework that outlines the sharing methodologies applied in the ecovillages and 2) a framework that positions the social and institutional enablers of sharing practices in the ecovillages. The research stresses the importance of aligning the mentalities of individuals with the sharing and collaborative values in the communities, and of carefully designing community structures to incentivise desired sharing and collaborative activities, while being flexible to change with the ‘sharing maturation’ of the community or group.

¹ The 74 interviews include 53 interviews with different community members, 16 interviews with enterprises or organisations located in the ecovillages, and 5 interviews with economic representatives of the ecovillages.

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Introduction

This study explores novel developments in collaborative and sharing economies with a specific focus on ecovillages. Ecovillages are defined as intentional and traditional communities that combine environments of high social and cultural quality with low-impact lifestyles (Joubert & Dregger, 2015). They are spatialities where new and diverse economic practices and models are trialled and implemented, and where innovations, in the broadest sense of the term, travel from margin to mainstream and so influence wider societal patterns.

Research took place in five European ecovillages², located in Spain, Slovenia, Ukraine, Germany and Denmark. These cases were selected from their ability to represent a wide spectrum of ecovillage diversity in terms of size, age, economic organisation and range of economic activities. The Spanish, Slovenian and German ecovillages constitute different commune-like realities, while the Danish and Ukrainian ecovillages are separated into family households. Data collection took place over seven months between 2018 and 2019 and combined semi-structured interviews with participant observation. As a main demographic trend, interviewees were highly educated, mainly with completed bachelor or master degrees, in diverse fields. In total, the researcher carried out 74 interviews³. Interviews covered three levels of the ecovillage phenomenon: 1) *the individual level*, 2) *the enterprise/organisation level* and 3) *the community level*.

This paper describes this phenomenon in three main stages. It first outlines the collaborative and sharing practices documented in the case ecovillages. It then elaborates on how these practices are enabled by the structures and cultures of these communities, including a discussion on their limitations. Finally, it considers the relevance of its findings in the context of a wider transition towards a collaborative

² The terms 'ecovillage' and 'community' are applied indifferently within the remainder of the paper.

³ The 74 interviews include 53 interviews with different community members, 16 interviews with enterprises or organisations located in the ecovillages, and 5 interviews with economic representatives of the ecovillages.

economy.

Ecovillage Sharing Practices

This section describes the sharing and collaborative practices performed in the case study ecovillages. Collaborative and sharing practices were evident in all three levels of analysis: the individual, the enterprise/organisational, and the community level. Sharing and collaboration are mainly centred upon providing livelihoods in terms of facilities, goods and services. In pooling several forms of capital⁴, the ecovillages have acquired ownership, or common rental, over spatial means, endorsing a continuum of facilities available to its members.

The commune-like communities⁵ are highly integrated and have a high degree of communal assets (shared facilities, goods and services), while the individual-housing communities lean more towards private ownership. These levels of ‘commoning’ are in alignment with previous research in the field (Mychajluk, 2017; Lockyer, 2017, Ergas, 2015; Moravčíková & Fürjészová, 2018). In the commune-like communities individuals and businesses alike share resources and facilities. Several community members use the metaphor of ‘one big family’ to explain this sharing reality. Examples of shared resources include living and common spaces (leisure rooms and multi-purpose spaces such as dining rooms, bars, meeting rooms, playrooms for kids, and saunas and swimming pools), hardware (kitchen, washing machines, garden tools and tools such as sewing and carpentry workshops), mobility (cars and car-sharing) and shared infrastructure (electricity, heating, water, biogas, internet and roads).

Although the individual-housing communities are separated in individualised

⁴ Including financial-, social-, and human capital.

⁵ Co-housing communities are highly integrated and individuals live in shared housing units. Non-co-housing communities are less integrated and individuals live in private housing units

housing units, they have assimilated certain sharing-solutions. For example, in the Danish community a ‘freezer community’ exists where community members can store food and a consumer group that allows collective bulk purchase of food by members. Additionally, the community owns a communal garden, a fruit orchard, chickens, and other facilities like a sauna, playgrounds, fireplace cabin, a lake, table-tennis, and ‘free shop’ and recycling centre where members can share clothes and items with each other. Community members of all five ecovillages engage in a high degree of sharing and gifting of personal belongings and a variety of homemade products through various sharing pathways (further discussed below).

Collaboration and sharing also takes place through activities or ‘services’. A noteworthy example is common cooking and dinners. This is an important social meeting point that has been institutionalised in several of the ecovillages. Other services are self-organised within the community as a response to a community need or desire (i.e. child care, consumer and production groups, football or board game clubs, movie nights, singing circles and yoga classes). It is also a common practice for members to participate in the courses and events hosted in their communities. In the business and organisational realm, community members will typically cook for visitors who attend courses and events hosted by the ecovillage and be responsible for event logistics and facilitation, and host participants in their private homes.

The most prominent service however is that of ‘human resources’; the immediate or organised availability of help or assistance in the shape of hands or heads for advice, ideas and solutions. Help and assistance is a fluid currency that is constantly in use. During communal dinners requests for help is often heard, such as two or three hands are needed for this or that task, and in most cases help is to be found. Services also extend to the numerous informal learnings that frequently emerge in the ecovillage environment through interpersonal relations.

An essential ‘human resource’ is community work. Mychajluk (2017) defines it as “the unpaid, intra-organizational work that is commonly undertaken by members

in a cooperative” (p. 184). On average, community members in the five ecovillages dedicate 42,6 hours⁶ of work to the community every month. Community work is integrated into a narrative of ‘mutual benefit’, where members ‘transfer’ work that conventionally would ensure personal livelihood to the livelihood of the community. These are mainly household activities that have been expanded to the wider community. Community work is experienced as a part of ‘normal life’; chores that must be dealt with independent of living in an ecovillage or not, but that are often more effectively handled in a community setting.

The ‘human resources’ available in the community are also regularly used by enterprises and associations located in the ecovillage on both a paid and un-paid basis. This includes use of technical assistance and specialised knowledge within the community, such as legal support, translation, IT services or administration. In some cases, human resources have also been translated into financial resources such as investments or informal loans.

Sharing Methodologies

Apart from sharing through common ownership and lending/borrowing, the sharing realities documented is indicative of various other sharing methodologies. Ecovillages apply these methodologies within the community, as well as in their external relations. The lines between methodologies (sharing, gifting, bartering and monetary exchanges) are blurred and are often situationally dependent. To understand the community reality, these levels of sharing methodologies should be imagined as interactive and fluid concepts, illustrated in figure 1.

⁶ The average is based on the monthly estimate of the 53 community members interviewed.

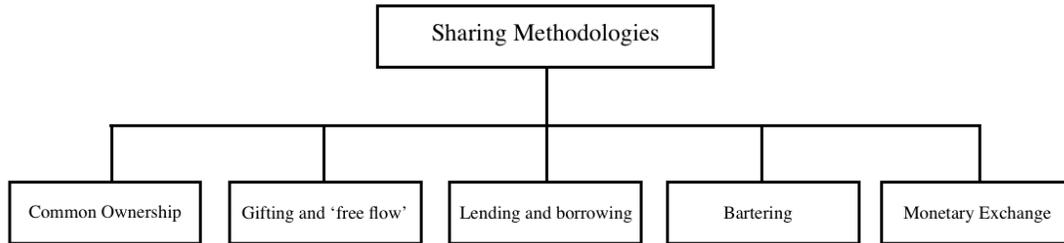


Fig 1: Sharing methodologies applied in ecovillages.

The service of drawing lessons, for example, is typically given as a gift to one person, exchanged for a good with another and exchanged for money with a third person. The pathway is usually determined by the depth of personal relation and the means and capabilities of the recipient, along with the community norm. **Bartering** is a common practice in the ecovillage settings, where members exchange products for products, services for services or products for services and vice versa. In terms of products, this method is especially used in Ukraine where members grow produce on individual plots, and thus barter to diversify their food supply and attain greater self-sufficiency. The German ecovillage, on the other hand, operates on the basis of shared income, in which context bartering becomes insignificant. **Gifting** is a level of the sharing culture where community members give their private belongings to other community members. This act is especially normative in the income-sharing community, as individuals are increasingly aware of the needs, wants and consumptions of others and try to reduce the total consumption. It is also employed in the Ukrainian ecovillage, where self-sufficiency is highly valued. Gifting can also take the shape of ‘free flow’ economies, where member give what they are able to without a reciprocal expectation, or as part of a generalised reciprocity. This economic attitude is explained by Tobias from the Danish ecovillage:

“When I was about to put on the roof here, I have no idea how to put on this kind of roof, then I asked my neighbour and he said 'oh I'm not that good but I know this other person in the community he is good at it', I had never even met this person, and then the person comes and he is super busy with his own house, and then he spent half a day helping me with the roof. And I'm like 'shouldn't I pay you anything for this?' and he is like 'no no, you will just help some other time’”.

The ‘free flow’ mentality is apparent in all the communities, however it is especially present in the income-sharing setting and in the settings of greater financial individuality (Ukraine and Denmark). On a slightly different level, the communities create stable and beneficial relations to the external world. The ecovillages situate themselves within a wide palette of linkages as to extend their sharing practices beyond community borders and to obtain greater self-sustainability through common sustenance practices, the sharing of advice and experience, funding opportunities and the building of collective social capital. These relations, or linkages, include ecovillage to ecovillage relations, national, European and global networks and associations, collaborations with organisations, businesses and governments, and relations with local villages. The depth of linkage embeddedness varies within the ecovillages, however, all are actively engaging in external relations to expand their sharing practice reach and to provide non-monetary paths for sustenance. The trend of establishing linkages and networks is reflected in the findings of Hall (2015), Wearther (2014), Barani et al. (2018) and Boyer (2014).

Enablers of Sharing

The breadth of collaborative and sharing practices in ecovillages has important social and technological implications. Ecovillages have developed social norms based on, and continually reinforced by, the shared values of the community individuals. The

themes of ‘limiting resource use’ and ‘sustainable alternatives’⁷ guide these values, also supported by previous ecovillage research (Brombin, 2015; Esteves, 2017; Ergas & Clement, 2015; Waerther, 2014). Tension between these values and social norms and the surrounding reality has motivated innovation and experimentation and has led to novel sharing solutions. These solutions, social norms, and the enabling social context reinforce each other and, together, stabilise the sharing reality of the ecovillage. Figure 2 illustrates the enabling social ‘cultures’ (*individual commitment and trust*) and the enabling structures (*institution*).

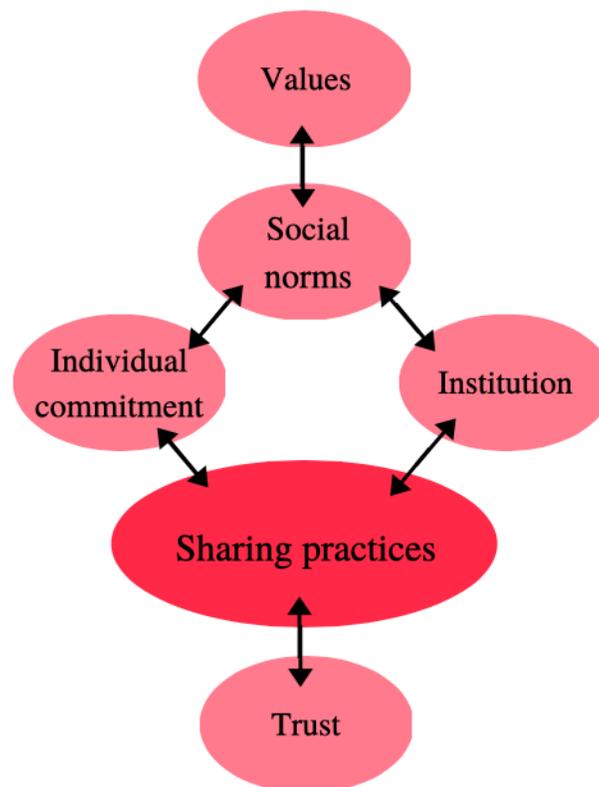


Fig 2: Cultural and institutional enablers of sharing and collaboration in ecovillages.

Enabling cultures

⁷ Including social, cultural, environmental and economic sustainability.

The use and development of sharing and collaborative practices are enabled by a high level of commitment on the part of community members to the project/ecovillage and the common intentions. Many express that they do not experience the ecovillage as separate from themselves, but as part of their immediate reality. They perceive it as their own project and take ownership of the continuation and success of it, with the effect that they are willing to devote large quantities of time and energy to its realisation. The majority of members also report that they are willing to do more community work than at present. A large number of the membership is thus willing to 'sacrifice' immediate self-interest for the collective good, if they see a pressing community need, reflecting commitment. Ecovillages can ensure that members are committed, aligned with the common vision and constitute a good social fit via carefully structured phases of social inclusion and membership processes. Membership processes are relatively long and require multiple steps that will normally take more than a year. Common features are initial visits, written or verbal applications, probationary periods and a community decision.

The community setting itself generates other ways for the members to relate to each other. Relations among community members are constantly revitalised as continual interaction and collaborations are necessitated by common activities and simply through living in close physical proximity. Ecovillage members commit themselves to stay in a web of relationships. This commitment entails participating in social processes of all kinds, from sharing personal emotions and states of being, to engaging in, sometimes uncomfortable, conversations and resolving conflicts. Where communities depart most markedly from more conventional social trajectories, is in the commitment from the members to resolve tensions and continually re-evaluate their ways of relating to each other. Ecovillages are thus places where personal spheres increasingly become the property of, or held by, the collective. Such continual and deep sharing requires trust and in return generates trust. It surfaces through normalised and daily practices such as maintaining doors unlocked. This,

however, is not the case in the Ukrainian ecovillage because the community is only partially spatial, and community members are living among residents who are not part of the community. In all five ecovillages children roam around freely within the community perimeter, and parents trust that all community members are observant of their well-being. These practices, considered normal in the eyes of community members, indicate a high level of trust within the community. Individuals in the community setting are generally awarded a deeper level of intimacy, solely based on the fact that they take part in the community as members immediately have a commonality, a shared commitment and common frames of references.

The high level of trust spills over into the businesses and organisations located in the communities. The businesses and organisations in the ecovillages actively attempt to change the competitive status quo of business environments, and accordingly, sharing, trust and openness are valued principles. Multiple enterprises and organisations are even willing to share their ideas and information freely, making no distinction between businesses outside or inside of the community. Trust and collaborative practices are observed to reinforce each other in the ecovillages, and accordingly trust among community members is essential for the deepening of sharing practices.

Enabling structures

The technological implications mainly comprise of the formal and informal institutions that the communities have devised through legal set-ups, community constitutions and community rules. Central to this, the ecovillages constitute various degrees of common ownership. The wider the extend of co-owned livelihood (financial means/housing/productions/facilities...), the greater the incentive for the community members to collaborate and engage in sharing practices. Common ownership entails common responsibility and legitimises the right for community members to request or demand cooperation from the others. Waerther (2014) also

emphasises that through common ownership members share economic risk. Furthermore, the institutionalisation of sharing activities is a practical and symbolic tool for the ecovillages to ensure the continuation of key values, standards and activities. One example of these enabling structures is community work and working groups, which are structured spaces for continued collaborations. The Spanish and Slovenian ecovillages have written agreements establishing the minimum hours of community work expected from members, whereas other communities have institutionalised working groups. In these models, community members volunteer in different groups, such as a kitchen, cleaning, mobility or communications. These groups have responsibility and decision-making authority within their working field, and distribute these responsibilities to the individual community members. Meetings for emotional sharing have also become structured practices for the ecovillages and are used to facilitate social cohesion through conflict resolution, deepening relations and inducing trust. Emotional support is institutionalised in three of the ecovillages, through weekly or monthly meetings that facilitate emotional sharing and processing.

Limitations to Sharing Practices

An underlying challenge to sharing practices is the need for individuals to change mindsets that are otherwise reflective of the surrounding culture. The ecovillages have clearly set the intention to engage in sharing practices and shift from a competitive to a cooperative culture. However, for this intention to be realised, each community member needs to shift their own mentality in a similar direction. Many community members express that such mental and emotional change is the greatest barrier to the further entrenchment and development of sharing practices in their communities. This challenge is hinted to in the work of Wearther (2014) and Mychajluk (2017), although lacking further elaboration. The mental barriers to the deepening of collaboration and sharing activities surface with the context of

community work. All the ecovillages report conflicts concerned with reaching a common definition, and the controlling of and tracking the amount of community work contributed by each member. Tension arises from comparisons between individual contributions to community work and perceived inequality in this. These social and personal barriers are limiting the further collaboration between members as it generates growing distrust.

Furthermore, the current state of sharing practices of the communities do not stretch wider than their immediate reality, evidenced by the fact that none of the communities have institutionalised any comprehensive social security systems⁸. This is challenged by von Lüpke's (2012) testimony to social securities in other ecovillages. Certain social security elements are, however, incorporated in the ecovillage structures. By sharing income, the German ecovillage is able to support each other economically in case members are temporarily out of employment. Pensions and elderly care have been the centre of discussion in several of the ecovillages. It has been a specifically pressing topic in the income-sharing community, as members are officially not allowed to save money outside of the community account and simultaneously community members are not obliged to share savings. The Danish ecovillage hosts discussion about whether to impose an internal insurance scheme, where community members would insure each other instead of holding household insurances with external companies. At the time of writing, the proposal has not yet been approved. As such, social security functions of the communities are currently limited to case-by-case scenarios, and emphasises the limits of ecovillage sharing practices.

Various other factors limit the deepening of sharing practices in the ecovillages. None of the sample communities have developed a way to sustain themselves economically without being dependent on the external financial incomes

⁸ It should be noted that the ecovillages are embedded within the social security systems installed in their national contexts, and that these offers varies.

of its members. As such, the majority of the community members must travel outside of the ecovillage to work. The daily commute and economic pressure grant the members less opportunity to create daily sharing practices. For example, the Spanish ecovillage share a daily lunch, however, it is only 'common' for the individuals who work within the community perimeter and thus excludes community members who work elsewhere. This is partially due to the fact that the communities have not installed a common income source able to sustain the entire community (or achieved self-sustainability), but also results from the accounting systems that separate personal and collective incomes. Accounts to sustain the ecovillages and accounts designated income-generating activities are typically separated and do not 'spill-over' into each other. As such the common incomes arise through limited avenues such as individual incomes and investments. This dilemma can also be traced back to the lack of property ownership or the holding of loans in multiple communities.

Conclusion

Ecovillages have features of both collaborative and market-based economies, and so function as intermediate, or transitioning, spaces. Ecovillages facilitate sharing practices through a range of elements that can be transferred to other fragments of the sharing and collaborative economy movement. However, the unique combination of a place-based intentional community and sustainability-oriented values allows for emergence of beneficial social norms and institutions, and the creation of a fertile experimental space. The diverse and intricate economic structures/institutions simultaneously enable and restrict the sharing and collaboration practices in the community. Sharing and collaborative structures should thus be carefully designed to incentivise desired sharing and collaborative activities, while being flexible to change with the 'sharing maturation' of the community or group.

Apart from working with enabling institutionalisations, this research stresses

that the main limitation, and/or opportunity, for developing sharing and collaborative practices is the *mentalities* of the individuals or community members. To shift mentalities, the importance of exposure to cooperative and sharing cultures and mentalities and practices is indicated in the research. Furthermore, being engaged in a community of shared values, members reinforce the legitimacy of these practices and assist each other in shifting mentalities from competitive to cooperative. As such, the research emphasises the importance of an intentional community; although its findings are relevant in any setting, the spatial boundedness of ecovillages enables greater interaction, trust and cooperation. Sharing common values, building mutual trust and asserting a certain level of exclusivity through group membership ensures commitment to the shift in mentality, behaviours and structures and allows community members to develop solutions together.

Certain solutions, especially social securities, delimits the current sharing practices in the ecovillages studied. Identifying ways to address this is an area for potential fertile engagement with research in other fields of collaborative economy.

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