

THE MEANING AND RELEVANCE OF ECOVILLAGES FOR THE CONSTRUCTION OF SUSTAINABLE SOCIETAL ALTERNATIVES

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Introduction

In the face of severe ecological and social crises associated with capitalism, questions related to sustainability have become ubiquitous within public and personal discourses. However, current practices are still quite incipient. A truly sustainable way of life is far from common nor consensual. It can be thought of from different perspectives and can be considered unviable. One key problem in this context is that the notion of “sustainability” itself has largely been appropriated by capitalist models— for example, the term is frequently used as synonymous with “sustainable development” (SARTORI; LATRÔNICO; CAMPOS, 2014), a *doxa* (CARNEIRO, 2005) that, in practice, ends up favoring unquestioned economic growth to the detriment of ecological and social sustainability.

Sustainability is fundamentally related to temporal continuity and, consequently, refers to responsibility of action. It not only looks towards future generations, but also to the present, and not only towards humanity as a single species in isolation, but also as part of a complex geo-biophysical system. Nevertheless, to speak only of continuity is limited since the ideas of sustainability also clearly involve the quality of such permanence. This is evident, for example, in concerns related to social justice. What occurs, though, is that the practical implications of the search for sustainability have not yet been sufficiently acknowledged. Other avenues are necessary for thinking – and practicing – sustainability in a more holistic form, which leads to questioning the founding principles of capitalist

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society. In this context, concrete practices aiming at sustainable alternatives for society, which can articulate effective experiences to clear theories and worldviews, have proven to be increasingly relevant.

Ecovillages are communities devoted to various practices aimed at sustainability and have become especially visible since their articulation as a social movement in 1995 with the creation of the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN). Despite sparse scholarship, especially in Brazil, academic interest in this subject has grown in recent years (WAGNER, 2012). The goal of this essay is to analyze the meanings associated with ecovillages and their relevance for debates on sustainability. For this project, we searched the CAPES database for academic articles that include the term “ecovillage” in their title or abstract (including Portuguese, English, and Spanish languages), and among these we selected works with a social as opposed to technological focus and highlighted those that included empirical data. We also used books as secondary sources (including those written by movement insiders). It is important to emphasize that the available studies generally refer to ecovillages in the “Global North.”

What are Ecovillages?

According to Dawson (2015), ecovillages are highly heterogeneous and it is impossible to describe one model that covers all cases. This stems from their diverse origins including the ideals of self-sufficiency and spiritual inquiry of monasteries, ashrams and Gandhian movements; environmental, pacifist, feminist, and alternative education movements of the 1960s and 1970s; the back-to-the-land and cohousing movements in wealthy countries and participatory development and technological appropriation movements in “developing” countries (DAWSON, 2006, cited by LITFIN, 2014). In reality, ecovillages did not simply appear. Widespread use of the term began through a 1991 report by activists Robert and Diane Gilman. They describe settlements around the world that could serve as a source of inspiration for what would be communities in transition towards a sustainable society, which came to be called “ecovillages” (DAWSON, 2015). From then on, some new communities emerged that already fit this profile – mainly in the Global North, but also in expat communities in the Global South (DAWSON, 2015). Parallel to this, other previously existing communities began identifying with and calling themselves ecovillages (WAGNER, 2012). This is the case, for example, with Findhorn in Scotland, commonly known as “the mother of all ecovillages” (LITFIN, 2014), which at first was an intentional community with an identity focused on spiritual development (FORSTER; WILHELMUS 2005).

Since the 1990s, the concept of ecovillage has modified considerably. Today’s definition (June 2017) from the GEN website is the following: “an ecovillage is an intentional, traditional or urban community using local participatory processes to integrate ecological, economic, social, and cultural dimensions of sustainability in order to regenerate social and natural environments” (GEN, 2017). It is important to note that this broad formulation allows the term to cover very diverse phenomena, reflecting the heterogeneity of the movement.

The explicit and recent inclusion of traditional communities in the above definition is especially relevant for our discussion. As intentional communities in the Global North were the main inspiration of the Gilman's at the time of their research (although not the only source) (DAWSON, 2015), ecovillages came to be understood by many, implicitly or not, as exclusively intentional communities (METCALE, 2012; DAWSON 2015). This has created an internal contradiction, considering that some traditional communities were part of the movement from its original formation. When we explicitly account for traditional communities, the ecovillage movement appears even more heterogeneous and difficult to circumscribe. Following Dawson (2013), these two different forms of community in fact represent a distinction between two large "types" of ecovillages (with corresponding global socioeconomic and political divisions). Ecovillages in the Global North are typically small experimental intentional communities, while in the Global South they are typically traditional communities or networks of communities (villas and small villages) whose local leaders seek to retake control over cultural, ecological, and economic resources. Examples of the latter include Sarvodayain Sri Lanka with fifteen thousand rural communities and Colufifa in West Africa with three hundred fifty communities (LITFIN, 2014). However, it is important to note that this distinction does not necessarily reflect geographic location (mainly for ecovillages which are experimental intentional communities). For example, most ecovillages (self-recognized as such) in Brazil are actually very similar to those in the Global North. Apparently, there is no significant link between traditional communities and the ecovillage movement in Brazil; but, it is possible to consider them "entities" that are alike in many respects. In order to simplify, we will sometimes refer to ecovillages which are experimental intentional communities and ecovillages which are traditional communities generically as "ecovillages in the Global North" and "ecovillages in the Global South," respectively.

Despite the large differences between ecovillages of the Global North and South, Dawson (2013) emphasizes that they have some important common causes such as "economic re-localization", poverty alleviation, global justice, respect for cultural and spiritual diversity, and the evolution of a post-consumerist culture. In a world marked by inequality, the inclusion of traditional communities of the Global South in the official definition from GEN carries important sociopolitical significance. Nevertheless, a certain "nebulosity" seems to exist around the issue. On the one hand, some authors still use narrow concepts of ecovillages that exclusively refer to intentional communities. On the other hand, the networks of communities in the Global South are many times "created" by foreign NGOs (DAWSON, 2013), which conflicts with the fact that ecovillages are described as fundamentally a grassroots movement (coming from the social base). A related issue is the question of "auto-recognition." For example, Litfin (2014) explains that in Colufifa the term "ecovillage" does not mean anything to most members; the leaders of this network of villages unite at GEN essentially because of a common commitment to self-sufficiency. In Sarvodaya, only one out of fifteen thousand communities was thought of as an ecovillage (LITFIN, 2014). In reality, these networks often constitute movements in themselves and are perhaps more accurately described as being *linked* to the ecovillage movement than as "ecovillage networks."

Understanding what ecovillages are today is not an easy task, nor is understanding how and with what intensity they intervene in societal dynamics. Even GEN's database reflects this; it works using an open self-registration and includes some "ecovillages" that would be hard to recognize as such (for example, there are some that are clearly eco-resorts). Also, there are undoubtedly many ecovillages that are not connected to GEN (LOCKYER, 2010). Wagner (2012) notes that, since the term "ecovillage" is usually self-assigned, there is a possibility for "false positives" and "false negatives." Furthermore, it should be noted that the movement has been broad and experimental since the beginning and encasing these communities in strict models can be unproductive. Defining ecovillages as intentional communities is already complicated; thus, Dawson (2013) stresses that offering a satisfactory definition encompassing attributes of ecovillages of the Global North and South is extremely difficult. Although the current definition offered by GEN attempts to account for this, it is still fundamentally based on the characteristics of ecovillages in the North – as those in the South do not necessarily utilize participatory processes and frequently focus on immediate questions of survival, which orients them towards one or another more specific dimension of sustainability (generally economic). In this manner, we see that the concept of ecovillage is evolving. We believe it would be better to find a more dynamic and less typological formulation that has greater heuristic value in capturing the reality of these groups.

Ecovillage Activities in Society

Despite conceptual controversies, ecovillages present a relatively strong identity in some respects. One thing that can be said with special relevance for the present discussion is that, beyond seeking to create a sustainable lifestyle, the majority of ecovillages have an explicit goal of outreach aimed at exchanging experiences with the world (KASPER, 2008). In reality, this is especially reflected in a desire to influence society through juxtaposing the mainstream with lifestyles that are more sustainable, acting as "models," "examples," "laboratories of sustainability" or "demonstration sites" (ERGAS, 2010; MEIJERING, 2012; BOYER, 2015; BOSSY, 2014; LITFIN, 2014; LOCKYER, 2010). Thus, it is possible to say that the ecovillage movement ultimately carries an ideal of "transforming the world." While this objective is very ambitious, it is expressed through a series of concrete actions that occur at different scales and deserve our attention.

The scholarship on innovations resulting from grassroots projects suggests that there are three paths through which such projects can disseminate their practices to the world: 1) *replication* within the same network of activists (e.g. receiving visitors, recruiting members and supporters, educational activities like lectures and trainings); 2) *scaling up*, which expands activities to other groups, but still within specific niches (e.g. activities in nearby neighborhoods, partnerships with educational institutions and non-profit organizations); and 3) *translation* from niche to regime, which includes the adoption of practices at higher institutional levels (e.g. partnerships with public institutions that can affect mainstream society) (SEYFANG, 2010; SEYFANG; HAXELTINE, 2012 cited by BOYER, 2015). These three forms of action not only point to different scales, but also to different levels of difficulty. Below, we present some empirical examples.

After recognizing certain problems with approaching neighbors, Findhorn ecovillage created a working group specifically aimed at deepening relations and even offered discount rates so local groups could participate in their activities (MATTO, 2015). Before installation, Cloughjordan in Ireland carried out public meetings to inform neighbors about plans and ask for feedback; in this way, it gained the support of local residents and later evolved into a government project for sustainable energy in rural areas, which resulted in the largest “solar farm” in Ireland and was also very important in the market for sustainable housing (CUNNINGHAM; WEARING, 2013). The Los Angeles Ecovillage (LAEV) in the United States established itself in the turbulent urban periphery, aiming to help “revitalization” (BOYER, 2015; LITFIN, 2014), and later co-founded a widespread pro-bicycle movement in the city (BOYER, 2015). Through government partnerships, the Ecovillage at Ithaca (EVI) in the US became involved in projects to create a farmer-training center and models for climate-friendly zoning and building codes (LITFIN, 2014). Auroville in India participates in state conservation and ecological restoration projects, employs thousands of people from poor nearby villages in its cottage industries, and supports cultural, literacy and microcredit programs that target these populations (LITFIN, 2014). Many ecovillages also create and foster local and regional models of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), which distributes the risk involved in agricultural production among consumers in the community (LITFIN, 2014) and create fair trade networks – this is the case in EVI (KIRBY, 2003; LITFIN, 2014), Cloughjordan (CUNNINGHAM; WEARING, 2013), Yarrow in Canada (NEWMAN; NIXON, 2014), as well as Findhorn and Earthaven (LOCKYER, 2010).

Some ecovillages are active at national and transnational levels, which can be achieved through involvement in politics related to conflict resolution, sustainable development and defending human rights (BROMBIN, 2015), as well as peace and international solidarity activism. For example, the Farm in the US helped populations affected by Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans (DAWSON, 2013) and Sarvodaya and Auroville did the same in relation to the tsunami in South Asia. Damanhur in Italy participates in humanitarian operations and Findhorn solidified important partnerships with the United Nations (FORSTER; WILHELMUS, 2005), including hosting a CIFAL (International Training Center for Authorities and Leaders) (LITFIN, 2014).

In relation to ecovillage involvement in projects at the global scale, the most important channel is undoubtedly the GEN. The network emerged in close relation to the UN, having been officially launched at a UN Habitat conference in 1996 (DAWSON, 2015). Today, GEN has consultative status at the UN Economic and Social Council and it is a partner of UNITAR (UN Institution for Training and Research) (GEN, 2017). Many ecovillages have been awarded the UN Habitat prize (LITFIN, 2014). It is worth noting that the institutional path of partnership with the UN has its limitations, considering that the international entity follows a logic that does not seek the structural transformation of society (such as the economic or political-institutional order). Nevertheless, if ecovillages intend to influence society, this will likely be impossible without coordination with mainstream international institutions.

One of GEN's most important investments has been in education, particularly through its partnership with Gaia Education that developed curriculum endorsed by UNITAR and recognized by UNESCO as an official contribution to the UN Decade of Education and Sustainable Development (2005-2014) (DAWSON, 2013). This curriculum involves the four dimensions of sustainability envisioned in GEN's definition of ecovillages and has been applied through EDE Programs (Ecovillage Design Education), which, since 2006, has offered more than 240 programs in 43 countries on 6 continents reaching more than twelve thousand people (GAIA EDUCATION, 2017). It is noteworthy that this curriculum is available at no cost and course organizers frequently raise funds in order to offer scholarships to low-income individuals.

Independent of GEN, ecovillages usually emphasize educational activities (LITFIN, 2014). Many promote courses, lectures, workshops, internship programs, and conferences on themes related to their ideas such as permaculture, bioconstruction, techniques for communication and conflict resolution, childhood education, personal growth, among others. (Naturally, this also serves as a source of revenue, but does not delegitimize its educational value). For example, Findhorn promotes a variety of conferences and workshops on ecological and spiritual themes; its most popular course called "Experience Week" has received more than thirty thousand participants over the years. Also, education is central to the mission of UfaFabrik in Germany, which receives nearly two hundred thousand visitors every year (LITFIN, 2014). Almost all ecovillages encourage tourism (KASPER, 2008) and receive regular visitors (LITFIN, 2014), which is associated with informal educational activities since visitors generally look for a "demonstration" of more sustainable living. There are also cases in which visitors and guests participate as apprentices in internal activities on a voluntary basis (BROMBIN, 2015). Thus, it is possible to say that the activities of ecovillages have been generating a "ripple effect" in society (LITFIN, 2014) that is mostly small, but in some cases it reaches a larger scale.

Potential for Social Impact

The degree of isolation in relation to society as a whole is an important question to consider when thinking about the potential social impact of ecovillage activities. Many view rural geographic location as a factor that generates isolation. Most ecovillages are established in rural areas due to reduced economic and legal barriers (KASPER, 2008; ERGAS, 2010, LITFIN, 2014) and to their search for some level of self-sufficiency (principally in the production of food and energy), which requires a greater availability of physical space and natural resources. Some level of isolation could, therefore, have an important function in that it favors radical changes in lifestyle and the emergence of alternative and innovative solutions. It is necessary to consider, however, that geographically isolated communities could have limited potential and reach in terms of their social impact. The projects that are most integrated with the mainstream (particularly urban projects), in turn, could easily propagate their ideas due to high visibility and links to the larger social setting. For example, the ecovillage in the US studied by Ergas (2010) was established in an urban area specifically to facilitate the diffusion of ideas around sustainability.

In urban areas, an interesting “model” that is sometimes adopted by ecovillages is retrofit cohousing, which adapts to preexisting constructions. According to Sanguinetti (2012), such a model would be more compatible with the values of independence, privacy and property, which are easily assimilated into mainstream society and, thus, have greater potential for impact at a large scale. However, for the same reason, this model could end up obscuring the need to achieve more profound changes in the dominant paradigm. In fact, it is necessary to consider that urban communities tend to be more structurally constrained (BOYER, 2015), and cohousing communities are also less economically independent and less ecologically sustainable compared with communities (including ecovillages) that are more withdrawn from mainstream culture (SANGUINETTI, 2012).

Boyer’s (2015) study of three ecovillages in the US provides some insights regarding the effect of geographic location on the quality of external activities. Dancing Rabbit, located in a sparsely populated rural town (and considered by Boyer to be a more radical project), has only diffused its practices by the process of replication. LAEV, established in an urban center (constituting a project that is more integrated into the mainstream), has also spread practices through scaling up. EVI, located in an urban periphery (and considered an “intermediate” project), was the only that was effective in translation. (See the explications for each form of diffusion in the previous section). According to the author, peri-urban areas are historically fertile for innovative forms of development. Thus, ecovillages and other communities that combine agricultural elements in these areas can function as experiments with innovative models for land use, typically favoring the activity of small-scale farming in cost prohibitive areas and helping to reduce tensions between urban and rural zones (NEWMAN; NIXON, 2014). But Boyer emphasizes that the “intermediate” status of EVI is also related to “balanced” *attitudes* – this ecovillage challenged some social conventions, fighting to change them, without categorically rejecting them. Therefore, such projects of an “intermediate” character tend to favor the construction of bridges between “niche” and mainstream society (Smith, 2007 cited by BOYER, 2015). Nevertheless, as we can see, this characteristic does not exclusively depend on geographic location and involves other more complex issues. Furthermore, it is necessary to consider that, in a world where communications are increasingly easy, rural location does not necessarily result in isolation.

Another important aspect of analyzing the social impact potential of the ecovillage movement refers to the quality of the phenomenon itself: ecovillages are largely understood as grassroots phenomena, characterized by bottom-up development. In fact, as we have seen, the initial movement was based on grassroots communities, which is of great importance regarding autonomous activities. However, recently some top-down initiatives have also used the name “ecovillage” (particularly in the Global South). Frequently, these projects (governmental or not) seek to transform traditional rural villages into sustainable communities. This is the case with the government program “Chinese Ecological Agriculture” (SANDERS, 2000), and with the National Agency for Ecovillages in Senegal (LITFIN, 2014; DAWSON, 2013). There are also top-down projects that can be considered intentional communities. These include Lynedoch in South Africa, which was built as an example of an economically sustainable urban ecological area (SWILLING;

ANNECKE, 2006), and others that resemble social assistance projects, such as Nashira in Colombia that is formed by low income single mothers that were victims of violence and forced displacement (BURKE; ARJONA, 2013).

Ecovillages originating from the top down tend to be very different from those that are bottom-up; as we have seen, labeling both with the same designation presents some conceptual difficulties. However, if governments and other entities are beginning to foment communities oriented towards sustainability and associate them with the ecovillage “model,” this could constitute an interesting transgression of the movement’s limits, creating new possibilities in terms of social impact. We should remember that many traditional communities recognized as ecovillages, despite their popular foundations, also have top-down characteristics as they involve the participation of governments or NGOs (as in the case of Sarvodaya and Colufifa). In the Global South, considering the prevalence of resource scarcity, many times this is the most viable form of developing an ecovillage. Furthermore, even the establishment of bottom-up ecovillages may be determined by governmental factors. EVI (BOYER, 2015) and Cloughjordan (CUNNINGHAM; WEARING, 2013), for example, before their installation, needed to go through extensive negotiations with local authorities to accommodate municipal requirements.

Another relevant question relates to the “replicability” potential of ecovillages. Counter to what was originally expected by the movement, there has been no significant increase in the construction of *new* ecovillages. In fact, this is becoming even more difficult (in the Global North), due to high land prices and government zoning and building regulations (DAWSON, 2013). When possible, establishing new ecovillages occurs in very specific and restricted scenarios: as we have seen, generally it is necessary for there to be a considerable financial investment and the majority are established in rural areas (while urban areas are home to more than half of the global population and will continue to grow). Thus, the idea of ecovillages as “replicable models” that was important for the movement has become anachronistic. The influence of ecovillages mainly seems to be occurring through the diffusion of ideas and alternative practices that can be appropriated in a variety of manners by different social groups.

Litfin (2014) emphasizes that diverse elements of ecovillages and their principles have the potential to be incorporated into the larger society. Indeed, some ecological (and, to a greater extent, economic and socio-political) technologies have been “transposed” or “translated” to other social contexts. The best example of this is perhaps the Transition Towns Movement, founded in 2005 in Totnes (United Kingdom), which was directly inspired by The Transition Handbook written by Rob Hopkins, a former resident of ecovillages and practitioner of permaculture (LITFIN, 2014). Today this movement encompasses hundreds of cities that are preparing for climate change and for a presumed decline in energy related to peak oil. It is also interesting to note that the cohousing movement – one of the inspirations for ecovillages (DAWSON, 2015; CHITWERE, 2010) – was originally based on concerns related to the formation of community ties, but is now orienting itself more in the direction of environmental responsibility (SANGUINETTI, 2012). Thus, it seems that contemporary movements aimed at sustainability are converging, which is evidenced by the fact that GEN and FIC (Fellowship for Intentional

Communities) websites include a registry of diverse types of sustainable projects beyond ecovillages. In a globalized context of highly interconnected systems, the links between such movements in networks tends to increase their reach and the potential for social impact.

Challenges and Limitations of the Ecovillage Movement

Ecovillages face a series of difficulties in achieving sustainability (both internally as much as in their attempt to influence society). Some challenges emerge within the movement's own process of legitimization. For example, Inclusive Democracy – a theory and political project that emerged through the work of philosopher and activist Takis Fotopoulos – presents some important criticism of ecovillages, by associating them with forms of utopianism, apoliticism, escapism/isolationism, elitism, or even individualism associated with escapism), which brings into question their status as a social movement and validity as a source of social transformation. Although this may be a case of some misguided generalizations and interpretations, such criticism possesses a certain level of truth and provides grounds to further investigate the discussion around the societal role of ecovillages.

In relation to utopianism, ecovillages are in fact frequently understood as “utopian projects” (even by authors that are sympathetic to the movement), in the sense that they are founded on the goal of achieving a vision of how things “should be” (SARGISSON, 2004). However, once in existence, it does not make sense to consider them utopias by understanding them as something “unachievable.” According to Bossy (2014), a utopia can be understood as a form of discourse linked to a set of practices; that is to say beyond a rejection of existing society and the idea that another society is possible and desirable. It should include practices that are aimed at achieving at least some of the elements in its utopian discourse. From this perspective, the utopianism of ecovillages carries a positive meaning.

Regarding isolationism/escapism, which is commonly associated with an apolitical character, certainly there are ecovillages that present such tendencies and function as isolated enclaves (LITFIN, 2014). Many intentional communities oriented towards sustainability (not necessarily ecovillages) do in fact “retreat” to remote locations in search of a “rural idyll” as a form of refusing to participate in society (MEIJERING; HUIGEN; VAN HOVEN, 2007). Moreover, it is possible for an isolationist stance (not to be confused with geographic isolation, as discussed above) or an apolitical posture to be taken by only some members. For example, in Cloughjordan while some people wanted the community to be a model of sustainability, others simply wanted “a quiet house in the country” (CUNNINGHAM; WEARING, 2013). Evidently, not everyone has the same willingness to undertake active roles in alternative projects. In Currumbin in Australia, residents reported that they considered that sustainable living was much easier in an ecovillage due to the technological infrastructure, including social networks and codes of conduct, because they did not have to find solutions for themselves and merely adapted to existing practices (MILLER; BENTLEY, 2012).

In some cases, ecovillages can develop a certain “isolation” from society by virtue of a loss in initial momentum. For example, in Toustrup Mark (Denmark) involvement in politics, the environmental movement, and cultural activities gradually weakened as the intensity of community life diminished (MEIJERING, 2012). In EVI, over time, there was also an observable decline in social participation in meetings and decision making (FRANKE, 2012) – which was likely reflected in their external activities. According to Franke, there is a tendency for enthusiasm and initial energy of movements to lose strength over time and through interaction with other social forces, bringing a shift in orientation and direction to organizational maintenance (“routinization”). Thus, it is important to avoid generalizations and romanticizing: not all ecovillage members are highly idealistic or actively engaged. However, at least in the realm of the global movement, the isolationist/escapist and apolitical tendencies seem to be the exception. Some authors have recognized ecovillages as an alternative and legitimate form of social movement that, instead of focusing on protest against the existing order, is grounded in the building of alternatives. (LITFIN, 2014; MEIJERING, 2012; ERGAS, 2010; BROMBIN, 2015).

Regarding elitism, the criticism from Inclusive Democracy seems pertinent in the context of ecovillages which are intentional community experiments. The situation of ecovillages which are traditional communities in the Global South is quite different as they are essentially focused on fighting poverty (LITFIN, 2014). Colufifa’s name itself, for example, is an acronym that refers to the eradication of hunger (Comité de Lutte pour la Fin de la Faim) (LITFIN, 2014). Nashira focuses on re-appropriating the means of production through female work collectives (BURKE; ARJONA, 2013). In Lynedoch, although different because it is not about poverty, there is a consistent promotion of mixing classes and ethnicities through subsidies that go towards purchasing popular housing (at prices well below the market value). In addition, spatial mixing is observed as the subsidized houses are spread throughout the ecovillage (SWILLING; ANNECKE, 2006).

In contrast, ecovillages in the Global North which are intentional community experiments, despite the frequently expressed interest in diversity, have a homogenous profile that is mainly middle or upper middle class (ERGAS, 2010; CUNNINGHAM; WEARING, 2013; CHITWERE, 2010; MEIJERING; HUIGEN; VAN HOVEN, 2007; FIRTH, 2012), ethnically “white” (ERGAS, 2010; CHITWERE, 2010; FIRTH, 2012) with higher education levels (CHITWERE, 2010, FIRTH, 2012; MEIJERING; HUIGEN; VAN HOVEN, 2007). The elitist character of the movement is also reflected in the global distribution of ecovillages, mostly located in the Global North. Although these parameters are generally expected – at least because the emergence of the movement was mainly inspired by Northern intentional communities– the issue still requires reflection. On the one hand, it would be unwise to “demand” that ecovillages commit themselves to ending social inequalities. On the other hand, it is necessary to analyze the ramifications of intentions to transform society expressed in the movement. After all, social justice and inclusion have been recognized as factors essential to sustainability, even if they are not the original or central objectives of ecovillages.

One of the large impediments to socioeconomic diversity in ecovillages is cost of the living. For example, in EVI some members of the original group advanced the goal of offering low cost housing, but this was abandoned (LITFIN, 2014; BOYER, 2015). Later, the ecovillage sought to create some subsidies, though these did not work well (CHITWERE, 2010), and EVI ended up as a middle class alternative to the American suburbs (LITFIN, 2014), without aspirations of social inclusion. Chitwere emphasizes that by restricting themselves to this pattern, ecovillages may be creating new spaces of exclusion and injustice and perpetuating class and ethnic divisions. From an optimistic point of view, the author suggests that many of the practices adopted (such as reducing consumption of non-renewable resources, independence from private transportation, and the production of food and sharing of resources and installations) are compatible with the necessities of low income communities. But impediments are more profound, relating to the social inequality that stems from the process of capitalist accumulation, which precludes the ability of lower classes to afford property. Immersed in capitalism, ecovillages naturally tend to reproduce such patterns. For example, many demonstrate a social structure of owners and renters (LITFIN, 2014). Rarely some ecovillages detract from this and sustain communal models of property and income, as is the case for one of the eight ecovillages studied in the US by Kasper (2008) and for Svanholm in Denmark studied by Litfin (2014). However, in these studies there is no available information as to how these communal practices include people that originally came from lower socioeconomic positions.

Thus, concrete social inclusion still constitutes a huge challenge for most ecovillages. Nevertheless, concerns with social justice and inclusion seem increasingly frequent in the movement (FIRTH, 2012; CHITWERE, 2010). Many of them have developed alternative socioeconomic practices that subvert, to an extent, some aspects of capitalist logic and generate indirect consequences in terms of social justice. One example is the creation and fostering of local networks of economic solidarity, which can considerably transform a region, as we have seen regarding the CSAs created and supported by ecovillages, as well as diverse activities in ecovillages like Auroville that has large social impacts on surrounding poor villages (LITFIN, 2014). Litfin emphasizes, however, that some inevitable tensions persist between Auroville and surrounding villages due to the wide socioeconomic disparity, which are reflected in housing policies, division of labor, and racial and gender relations.

From a broad perspective regarding social justice, insofar as ecovillage members seek to work on issues that align with their ideals and many times voluntarily reduce their income, it is possible to say that they are moving in the direction of diminishing the accumulation of financial capital. According to Litfin (2014), a reduction in the standard of living in ecovillages in the Global North and an increase in those in the Global South are occurring simultaneously, converging at a middle ground. For the author, this reflects “a sense of sufficiency rooted in meeting real human needs,” striving towards long-term viability – which is at the heart of the notion of sustainability and may represent one of the most profound cultural contributions made by ecovillages in the search for building more sustainable societies.

Final Remarks

The real and potential impacts of ecovillage activities on society is something that is difficult to evaluate, but there seem to be some consistent tendencies. Initially the movement tended to be concentrated in intentional communities in the Global North, but traditional communities in the Global South are now widely recognized as ecovillages, which may indicate a broader link to social justice. In addition, previously ecovillages tended to locate themselves “outside” or “in opposition” to the mainstream (DAWSON, 2013), seeking to achieve as much self-sufficiency as possible; but, today they are increasingly involved in alliances with other movements and institutions. For Dawson, this is largely due to the fact that some previously counter-cultural values that were typical in ecovillages (for example, environmental protection, communal life and personal growth), are increasingly being absorbed by diverse groups in society (DAWSON, 2013; MEIJERING 2012). However, to a certain degree, ecovillages also seem to be conforming to some more mainstream ideas (MEIJERING, 2012).

As we have seen, the influence of ecovillages in society seems to be primarily the result of diffusing alternative ideas and practices, many of which have educational characteristics. According to Dawson (2013), ecovillages have essentially been functioning as nodes in the networks committed to sustainability, acting as catalysts for bioregional transformations. Especially relevant is the fact that some practices have sought to subvert the capitalist logic of infinite economic growth and profit above all else, in association with a worldview founded in the satisfaction of real human needs. We must note the convergence of such notions with theories of “zero growth” and “degrowth”, which challenge the foundations of capitalist models. This is a fundamental task, considering that the crisis of unsustainability is inextricably linked to capitalism. Thus, considering the heterogeneous, non-confrontational, and for the most part elitist, nature of the movement, and considering the frequent isolation from urban centers, the socially transformative role of ecovillages is a subject of controversy. Nevertheless, we suggest that, in the context of extensive global discussion and little corresponding practice, these communities have gained considerable scientific and social relevance due to their *concrete* experiences with the construction of societal alternatives, contributing considerably to a broader and deeper debate about sustainability.

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THE MEANING AND RELEVANCE OF ECOVILLAGES FOR THE CONSTRUCTION OF SUSTAINABLE SOCIETAL ALTERNATIVES

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Abstract: Despite today's widespread reference to sustainability, initiatives are still quite incipient. Ecovillages are communities that carry out an array of sustainable practices and aim to influence society as models for alternative lifestyles. The goal of this paper is to analyze the meanings associated with these communities in the academic literature and their relevance to sustainability debates. Regardless of the conceptual imprecision of the term 'ecovillage' and important challenges and limitations regarding their social role in society, ecovillage initiatives (many that are educational) have propagated by diffusing alternative ideas and practices throughout society. They are increasingly linked with other movements and social institutions, functioning as key nodes in sustainability-oriented networks. As they promote concrete actions in the construction of societal alternatives, ecovillages significantly contribute to efforts of rethinking sustainability.

Keywords: Ecovillage. Sustainability. Sustainable practices. Societal alternatives.

Resumo: Apesar do amplo discurso atual sobre sustentabilidade, as ações existentes são ainda bastante incipientes. As ecovilas são comunidades que realizam diversas práticas sustentáveis e procuram influenciar a sociedade por meio da demonstração de estilos de vida alternativos. O objetivo deste ensaio é analisar, a partir da literatura, os sentidos associados a essas comunidades e sua relevância para os debates sobre sustentabilidade. Apesar de haver certa imprecisão conceitual acerca das ecovilas e também importantes desafios e limitações relativos ao seu papel social, as ações dessas comunidades vêm gerando certa propagação na sociedade por meio da difusão de ideias e práticas alternativas, muitas de caráter educativo. Elas estão cada vez mais se articulando com outros movimentos e instituições sociais, funcionando como "nós" das redes de engajamento pela sustentabilidade. Na medida em que promovem ações concretas de construção de alternativas societárias, as ecovilas vêm contribuindo significativamente para os esforços de repensar a sustentabilidade.

Palavras-chave: Ecovila. Sustentabilidade. Práticas sustentáveis. Alternativas societárias.

Resumen: A pesar del amplio discurso actual sobre sostenibilidad, las acciones existentes son todavía bastante incipientes. Las ecoaldeas son comunidades que realizan diversas prácticas sostenibles y buscan influir a la sociedad a través de la demostración de estilos de vida alternativos. El objetivo de este ensayo es analizar, a partir de la literatura existente, los significados asociados a esas comunidades y su relevancia en los debates sobre sostenibilidad. Pese haber cierta imprecisión conceptual sobre las ecoaldeas y también importantes desafíos y limitaciones relativos a su papel social, las acciones de esas comunidades vienen generando una propagación en la sociedad a través de la difusión de ideas y prácticas alternativas, muchas de carácter educativo. Cada vez más, ellas se articulan con otros movimientos e instituciones sociales, funcionando como “nudos” de las redes dedicadas a la sostenibilidad. Dado que promueven acciones concretas de construcción de alternativas societarias, las ecoaldeas contribuyen significativamente a los esfuerzos de repensar la sostenibilidad.

Palabras clave: Ecoaldea. Sostenibilidad. Prácticas sostenibles. Alternativas societarias.
