

Abstract**Social innovations for sustainable ways of living****Intentional communities and Ecovillages as experimental learning fields for socio-ecological sustainability**

Globalization, tendencies towards individualization and erosions of communities as well as increasing multicultural societies and the demographic change lead to requirements for new forms of employment and communal living. This research project asked about social aspects of and future prospects for sustainable development. It refers to the social dimension of the concept of sustainable development introduced 20 years ago with the “Brundtland-Report”. The concept was translated under “Agenda 21” into political strategies for striving towards sustainable development and signed by nearly every state under the umbrella of the UN. During the research project it became apparent that the common scientific approaches to the social dimension of sustainability consist of discussing models and evaluating present institutions. But these methods cannot evaluate or improve the underlying societal structures like the spatial and organizational differentiation of societal subsystems or the economic system.

As this research intends to go beyond description, the question arose how societal structures are developed in general and how they can be built in a sustainable and humanly appropriate way. Therefore a problem-orientated and “possibility-offering” methodology was derived from the new approach of social-ecological research. Hence the aim of the dissertation project was to generate *transformative knowledge* towards the *social dimension of sustainability*.



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The research was divided in two phases. First, various theories and scientific approaches were discussed and sampled as an initial *set of social-sustainable principles*. They were deduced from theories and surveys about sustainability, basic social and community building processes (“Vergemeinschaftung”) as well as observations about *spatial* formations of social movements and principles in settlement planning. The principles consist of such elements as flexible rules of democratic governance and closely clustered, associated basic elements of living. Empirical research was conducted to observe instances of these *social-sustainable principles* in action. The field was found in the growing international movement of *intentional communities* and *ecovillages*. These communities integrate diverse elements of living and attempt to fashion new approaches of social, political and economic organization. Here those intentional communities are described as social experiments. By observing those communities, potential concepts for a sustainable way of living can be explored in reference to contemporary cultural and societal structures.

First, two of the most known and promising intentional communities – Auroville in India and Findhorn-Ecovillage in Scotland – were chosen for field research studies. Using methods of participant observation, social dynamics such as decision making processes, communication culture and the learning of social competences were seen as important to examine. Second, the *social-sustainable principles* were expanded and employed to select five promising community projects in Germany. The examination of these communities was conducted in several week-long visits by using the “grounded theory” method while asking mainly long-term members about their experiences and practices concerning the research question. The names of the projects were made anonymous here – mainly to emphasize that the aim is less to describe certain community projects but rather to extract constructive experiences in general.

This empirical gained data were used to develop the theoretically-derived principles further and to identify five areas of social-sustainable experiences, practices and learning processes. In a following step, the results were generalized in the form of *transformative knowledge*. In this form, the knowledge is translated to be applied to any kind of social formation:

- 1) The *motivation* to found and build a social and ecological sustainable community is based upon the insight of enhancing the quality of life by creating social spaces of trust and living in a natural surrounding.
- 2) The *reconciliation and synthesis between individual freedom and social cooperation* is based upon egalitarian economic arrangements (within these communities, real estate is mostly owned by cooperative societies or charitable organizations with corresponding intentions). These agreements are often spelled out in membership agreements.
- 3) *Flexible-responsive principles of organization* provide the basis for coordinating different interests. Their capability to cope with changeable situations of the societal and natural environments is high. Therefore a sensible and appropriate mixture of formal and also legally covered structures is applied as well as free, voluntary agreements and contracts arising from communication forums based upon consensus. These forums are created by the concerned members in a highly equal and transparent way.
- 4) The *capability of development* inside the community is mainly constituted and supported by a consensually oriented communication, based upon learning social competences in the daily community building processes. A culture of dialogue and reflection concerning the social atmosphere and dynamics as well as methods to prevent conflicts were seen as important.
- 5) The concrete *social-ecological construction of space and settlement* is the result of planning processes created by the residents themselves. The used planning methods work with the cooperation between men and nature and strive for multifunctional use of facilities. In every observed community, the terrain was definitely socially and ecologically improved in comparison to the former stage. A legal frame for land property and real estate with social and ecological aims covers the sustainable construction of space and settlement.

In the third part of the dissertation the empirical-derived knowledge was used to further develop the existing approaches about sustainability, theories about social and psychological community as well as ecological network thinking. In the observed projects *community building processes* (“Vergemeinschaftung”) occur as learning and developing processes of social competences like constructive conflict resolution, responsible self-realization and reflective behavior in relationships. As an illustrative frame, the author describes the *social-ecological transformation experiment* as an

ideal model. A community can become a socio-sustainable formation by realizing the developed principles (see the five points). Finally the derived and described practices can work as key principles for any kind of community to realize the social dimension of sustainability.

Deduced from these considerations the concept of sustainability, planned to balance the three pillars – ecological, economic and social, was enhanced to two levels: A *general level of sustainability* maintains the constant learning of social competences as well as ecological, systemic perception and thinking. With those earned skills, the *concrete level of sustainability* can be created appropriately for the special situation. It consists of certain ways to organize the living conditions or the forms of economy and working.

Finally the potential of those intentional *social-ecological communities* is discussed. Their offerings in sustainable education – applied also in UN-consultation – show a growing but still only little-displayed potential to multiply the experience-based social and ecological knowledge. Environmental education increasingly emphasizes sustainability and systemic methods. It could foster the learning of community building processes as a concrete frame and method for social competences.

Additionally, important results and new concepts were gained about scientific methods in the areas of normativity, uncertainty and problem-solution-oriented, social-environmental research. The process-oriented, principle-guided course of action between theory and an empirical field could avert the danger to either just describing the intentional communities with their practices or distorting the observations as a consequence of unquestioned, implicit assumptions.

