

Eco-communities are specifically planned and set up for people to come and live together with the goal of living and working according to ecological principles by promoting a degree of sharing and pursuing well-being through more sustainable life-styles, direct democracy and a degree of autonomy.

Eco-communities include eco-villages, which according to Gilman (1991) are characterized by “human-scale, full-featured settlement, in which human activities are harmlessly integrated into the natural world in a way that is supportive of healthy human development and can be successfully continued into the indefinite future.” Although eco-villages represent the most common form, eco-communities can also be established in isolated buildings or within cities (some of them in forms of co-housing).

Eco-communities are generally characterized by their relatively small size— below or around one hundred people. There are both urban and “rurban” projects, yet the majority of eco-communities are located in rural areas where access to natural means of production is easier and rent and property cheaper. Participants practice small-scale organic agriculture and permaculture, craft and workshop production, self-construction or DIY practices and favour renewable energies or energy-conserving means of production and transport, such as bicycles. Materials and production processes tend to be low-impact and often items are recycled from waste or re-used or repaired. The conjunct of these types of agricultural, material and service provisioning expresses the idea of convivial places where the means of production are held in common (Illich 1973).

Eco-communities can be considered as both material and immaterial commons because they manage land and physical resources communally while, at the same time, set norms, beliefs, institutions and processes that empower a common identity which in turn contributes to the preservation and reproduction of the community.

Willing to set-up places where to live and cultivate their own utopian ideals, their participants form part often of a back-to-the-land wave inspired in magazines such as *In Context* or *Integral* (in Spanish). The movement originated in the 1960s, and in 1994 the Global Ecovillage Network was constituted.

Some remarkable examples, which also constitute different typologies of eco-communities, are: The Farm, in Tennessee, on a property communally bought by vegan Californian hippies; Twin Oaks, an egalitarian rural community in Virginia based on a structured labour-credit system (Kinkaid, 1994); Lakabe, a squatted village in the Basque Region with a communally-managed commercial bakery; and Longomai, a pragmatic out-spring of the May '68 movement, with a main property in South France and several satellite communities bought elsewhere in France, Switzerland and Germany.

Utopian values are manifest in the creation of a group identity, in the sharing of certain cultural and political ideals (also spiritual ideals sometimes), and in the establishment of organizational practices that might include anything from simple residential living to developing a common life project.

An eco-community constitutes a particular entity that exists between the individual and the larger society. They are characterized by their environmental (eco-) and social dimensions (community), which, in combination, are considered by eco-commoners to be largely missing from living arrangements in (post-) industrial societies.

There is a lot of variation among communities with respect to the relevance of the individual sphere within the community and degrees of autonomy from the rest of society. These constitute challenging issues in the development of every eco-community project.

Bridging the individual/family scale and the large societal scale, eco-communities are internally constituted by self-organized decision-making processes that, among other things, determine the nature and ecological dimension of the project and the integration between individual and communal economies. Normally, horizontal decision-making and deliberative non-representative processes characterize eco-communities, while some adopt consensus rather than majority decision rules.

Eco-communities are in a sense Aristotelian *oikonomies* (referring to the art of the good life and, literally, to “managing the house”): money does not play a primary role. It is simply a means to satisfy necessities. Eco-communities prevent accumulation because the community guarantees the maintenance of a certain level of welfare to all its members. The type of economic model varies a lot among communities. Some share all money among members, others maintain a strong individual economic sphere. A study of rural squats, which can be considered a particular case of an eco-community, postulates the existence of a correlation between a community’s degree of isolation and its degree of communalism. Eco-communities closer to large cities are more likely to maintain a higher degree of personal (monetary) economies (Cattaneo 2013).

The sources of monetary income vary a lot. In general, principles of cooperative self-management prevail and the eco-community collectively produces commodities that can be sold in place or off-site, for instance at market-fairs. Larger communities such as Logomai in France depend on fundraising and, increasingly, crowd-funding. Eco-communities with a high degree of financial integration among their members function as “integral cooperatives”, where workers, producers and consumers are embedded within the same organization.

Eco-communities provide insights as to how a degrowth society might look like. Any realization of utopian intentions depends on a strong willingness and a pragmatism that might clash with original ideals. In the start-up phases (relevant for the beginning of a societal transition) getting things done is the priority: in such difficult circumstances self-imposed austerity and self-exploitation of members often occur. Through self-organized processes, an eco-community chooses to live independent from society at large. As Marcuse has observed in “One-Dimensional Man”, a society freed from external control and manipulation will be able to self-determine its need satisfiers; participants choose to become protagonists of their lives and foment a degrowth imaginary by conferring to the community the source of economic and socio-political authority normally found in capitalist markets and in the state apparatus.

If the community survives this initial phase, then a degrowth practice made of sound ecological performance and social conviviality is likely to emerge. There is no empirical data for eco-communities on the trends in material and energy consumption over time. A plausible hypothesis is that most eco-communities start with a drastic fall in personal material and energy consumption but as they enter into a mature phase more comfortable, though not more sustainable, living conditions replace more precarious ones (although the former still conserve more resources when compared to society on average).

Eco-communities develop practices of voluntary simplicity. Although this forms part of the degrowth imaginary, some simplifiers can be criticized because they avoid engagement with societal problems and political actions. Generally, eco-communities cannot be characterized

as political or a-political. At one extreme, some can be considered as “lifeboats”, with a clear limit and “closed borders”, while in others, particularly those characterized by radical left-wing political ideals, members are more aware of the need to cooperate beyond boundaries and promote universal societal change. Most eco-communities are aware of their limited power and endorse a philosophy similar to that of Holloway about “changing the world without taking power”. This can occur through the constitution and consolidation of bottom-bottom networks -rather than bottom-up processes- that contribute to strategically leaving the system (Carlsson and Manning 2010) in increasingly larger numbers and to the consequent shrinkage in the role, size and power played by the establishment. The enlargement of these practices to larger sectors of society other than those inhabited by ecologically attentive persons has not occurred yet. The enduring economic and ecological crisis might be an opportunity to foment more eco-communities and create a social phenomenon that will go beyond the counter-cultural movement that preceded it.

References

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