

For the session:

A complex but necessary interplay: complementing intrapersonal and systemic sustainability transitions

Best Practice Results of interpersonal Real Life Experiments for an Integral Sustainable Way of Living. Empirical Observations in selected Ecovillages.

Summary

One of the main observations for realizing sustainable development within modern, industrialized societies is the difference between knowledge and action; despite a high degree of knowledge and awareness lifestyle patterns, political and economic structures remain unchanged. Hence it becomes crucial to ask how we can research personal, intrapersonal and systemic options for sustainability transitions. In this contribution I condense research findings from a decade of examining ecovillage experiments in their trials for a more sustainable way of living. The approach of ecovillages has an integral potential of development because it triggers (1) transition of the individual consciousness and (2) behavior as well as (3) of the culture of communication, interaction and governance and (4) finally of the economic, structures with commons and gift economy. In conclusion, best practices of integral transition methods developed in long-term experience of ecovillages will be highlighted.

Extended Abstract

We observe a gap between a high degree of knowledge and a low degree of realization of sustainability plus many examples that show the limits for more sustainable life styles in societal infrastructures or the mutual blockages between personal behavior and system structures (e.g. in the areas of mobility or food). To examine realistic transitions to and practices of sustainability we need to question the underlying structures ruling our economy and governance. Following this raises a more fundamental question: How do sustainable economic and governance structures look like? I felt drawn to experiment on that. More appropriate to capture the complexity of this endeavor I discovered as worthwhile to examine civil society movements that exactly experiment with sustainable ways of living. I found an exciting field of those all-round experiments in the movement of intentional communities and ecovillages.

Researching these real life experiments for about a decade now with partly quantitative but mainly qualitative methods I learn more about their actual value for the sustainability transition research. People living in these communities seem to represent only a tiny little percentage of the society – plus a larger number of visitors that is difficult to estimate. Ecovillages are valuable as social innovations. This is firstly expressed in the experimental

spaces they create. Having a closer look on their activities, multiple kinds of small scale innovative outreach and effects can be discovered. Ecovillage members start small scale businesses, employment, fair trade, gift economy, alternative schools, elderly people care or eco-technologies to abandoned rural areas. Thousands of visitors learn during their work stays in ecovillages hands-on practices for a daily sustainable life style plus specific workshops for clay house building, permaculture, personal development, community building or non-violent communication. An ecovillage starts with the individual intention to lead a more communal and mostly more sustainable life style. Organizing communally with a group of like-minded people the experiment is radical self-organized and is only successful if the community building works. Only five percent survive the first 5 years. In daily living together it extends to all areas of consumption, economic activity, infrastructural planning, organization and governance.

Ecovillages are founded with an ecological and often also socio-political or spiritual intention and experiment with new forms of living that respond to the contemporary ecological, economic and social crises (Kunze 2012). Two main initiators of the Global Ecovillage Network, a Danish eco-activist and an American business man saw a strategic potential of a network of ecovillages as a response to the coming global economic crisis and the limits to growth. In 1987 they surveyed the field and identified the best examples of ecovillages around the world. Their report showed that, although many exciting and vastly different communities existed, the fullscale ideal ecovillage did not yet exist. But together, the existing projects made up a total vision of a different culture and lifestyle that had great potential (Jackson 2004).

To conclude, ecovillages are globally present but niches – a tiny percentage of the society. This seems to be anti-proportional to the intensity of their integral experimental approach. Only a little percentage of people is ready to embark on this adventure. An integral transition works in at least 4 areas (Wilber: (1) the individual consciousness, including belief systems, unconscious concepts etc.; (2) the individual behavior; (3) the collective culture and norms; (4) the collective system, e.g. governance and infrastructures.

With the results of the empirical research in the communities I could find out a tremendous engine of sustainability transition. While the majority of studies examines either the individual behavior or consumption or rather the political and systemic transitions, the potential of the interplay between personal and system transitions is out of the focus.

Observing the practice in the communities I started to apply an integral perspective on the potential of sustainability innovations of ecovillages. I found seemingly unspectacular but groundbreaking aspects of sustainability practice that proof its effectiveness in combining two or more of the four mentioned areas. A few examples are:

- A) Studies show the ecological success of ecovillages as their footprint is only 28- 42 % of the German average (Simon et al., 2003) and 21, 5- 37% of the UK average (Dawson, 2006). Living with less space and individual property per person let us conclude a lower life quality. In contrary it is observed: while significantly reducing energy consumption, examined ecovillages prove increased life quality conditions in

terms of security, choice of lifestyle, co-existence with others, working freedom and combining work and family live (Karl-Heinz Simon et al., 2003; Kunze, 2009).

- B) The living reality and communal organization creates a space of learning by doing. The focus also for school children is not only on mental learning, but hand-on experience. Technical courses like straw bale house building can be experienced on the same day with an emotional social meeting as a learning method for going through individual processes.
- C) A concrete example of the interplay of communal culture, individual consciousness and economic rational behavior and a direct emergence of a new sustainable structure shall be given: The idea of a car sharing pool was not popular in the community of Tempelhof and could not be introduced. Later they started with their culture of economic transparency. In their first meeting when everyone listed their private financial budgets including monthly expenses, it was revealing how much money everyone was spending on their private car. As a spontaneous reaction someone through their car key in the middle of the meeting, announcing to hand it over to a car sharing. Six other car owners followed immediately. The car sharing was born and is lively used since then. Another lively practice of a synergetic interplay of communal culture and ecological mobility in Tempelhof is the morning circle as a space where lift options are exchanged every morning.

The interplay between the four areas can for instance happen as an individual ideal or motivation that can be realized in the small-scale environment of a community. It can be happen as some people in the community behaving more sustainable e.g. eat vegetarian making it easier for others to join or adapt this behavior than in an individual society.

The approach of intentional communities is so innovatively experimental because they follow a process of “transformative utopianism” (Lockyer 2009), which means that they reflect on their theoretical foundations and adapt them to changing conditions. In turn intentional communities provide fields of practical education for social competences, in which members can learn and are socialized as communally competent beings—something which is lacking in the education systems of individualized societies.

“There are conflicts—also in projects like this which aim to solve social problems. The crucial point is to be able to deal with them in a better way.” (interview with a member of a commune in Germany, Kunze 2009: 139, translated from German)

In relation with the societal system those communities can be interpreted as a revitalization movement, “a deliberate, organized, conscious effort by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture”; it is “a special kind of culture change phenomenon” (Brown 2002: 265).

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