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Social Innovations for Communal and Ecological Living: Lessons from Sustainability Research and Observations in Intentional Communities

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> At its best [the intentional community movement] has the potential for nothing less than helping save the human race, which is drowning in its own material and cultural excesses. Communities, in their seeking to overcome our fundamental disconnectedness from each other and from nature, have an enormous message for an alienated world.[1]

Is the above quotation exaggerated enthusiasm or a message of undiscovered potential? What can intentional communities contribute to overcoming contemporary ecological, economic, and social problems of modern societies? Searching for answers, I started with the realization that intentional communities—as a minor movement in society—contribute qualitatively rather than quantitatively to sustainable development. Hence the aim of my seven-year-long research was less to evaluate the sustainability of intentional communities—neither of singular projects nor of generalized concepts—but rather to identify innovative methods employed by distinct communities and analyze their existing, as well as potential, impact on broader fields in society.

To find answers to these questions I conducted my research strategy in two phases. First, I searched previous sustainability studies to

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[1] Timothy Miller, "Out to Save the World: Why Communal Studies Matter for the Twenty-First Century," presented at the International Communal Studies Association Conference, ZEGG, Belzig, Germany, June 26, 2001.

develop criteria for sustainable living, organization, and infrastructures. Studies using various theories and scientific approaches, from ecological building to urban planning, to discuss how social systems work effectively and liberally were sampled to develop criteria for sustainable community management. In the second step, existing intentional communities were selected—according to the criteria—to observe their practices of community organizing. The outcomes of the research into the living practice of seven communities provide lessons for sustainable community-building.

In this article, I first show that community has relevance for sustainability. Second, I discuss classical sociological approaches to the history of community in modern society. My response will be that a reinvention of community is innovative and already happening since community is the basis for all societal structures. In the next section I argue that intentional communities offer something new; namely, they are social experiments in a sustainable future. I follow this discussion with remarks derived from my field research about key principles of sustainable community management in the areas of membership, decision making, and communication. I conclude by revisiting the discussion on the modern "loss of community" in light of these examinations of intentional communities. Finally, I highlight derived lessons for sustainable community management.

I. Sustainability: The Social Dimension and Intentional Communities

The concept of sustainable development was officially inaugurated with the "Agenda 21" at the United Nations' Earth Summit in 1992. Signed by nearly every nation, the document declares the relation between growing environmental, social, and economic problems and their globalized impact. The document offers recommendations to national and local political organizations regarding energy saving, urban planning, and support of ecological and regional economy. The aim in Agenda 21 is to shift societies toward long-term maintenance of environmental, economic, and social well-being.[2]

At the outset, it is important to identify obstacles commonly encountered in sustainable development within modern, industrialized societies. At a fundamental level, there is a difference between knowledge and action; despite a high degree of knowledge about, and aware-

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[2] UNEP, Earth Summit Agenda 21, United Nations Program for Action from Rio de Janeiro (1992), http://www.un.org/esa/dsd/agenda21/res_agenda21_00.shtml.

ness of, unsustainable and inequitable forms of development, lifestyle patterns and economic structures remain unchanged.[3] A key to bringing knowledge into action can be found in the social dimension of sustainability. Beyond innovations in ecological technology, the challenge lies in exploring social principles for more appropriate forms of living. According to sociologist Robert Bellah, "we cannot repair the damaged environment unless we also repair our damaged social ecology."[4]

In concrete words, the solution of current social problems like the difficulties of balancing families and jobs, demographic changes, multicultural relations, criminality, and injustice need to be included in discussions about sustainable development. A key to exploring solutions at a fundamental level is to examine the process of creating and constructing social structures and values that lead to sustainability. Intentional communities present a worthwhile field within which to observe these processes.

II. The Modern Loss of, and Postmodern Yearning for, Community

I will start with a brief sociological analysis of the concept of community and an account of the historical development social organization from the Middle Ages to the contemporary state. I argue that in relation to modern society, communality creates special qualities. Humans have always lived in some kind of communal networks. The question is, therefore, What is innovative about intentional communal living? The short answer is that older forms of community were "lost" in modernity and today new forms are being reinvented. In today's modern, industrialized societies, clubs, families, and neighborhoods carry on the principles of communality. Yet in modern societies community-building processes have changed fundamentally. A brief sociological recapitulation of the modern loss of community and the emergence of new postmodern communities will help to understand the reason why this reinvention is happening today.

Two major historical changes should be mentioned in the discussion of communality in Western societies. First, during the Middle Ages people started leaving the agricultural communities on European

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[3] Angelika Poferl, "'Umweltbewusstsein' und soziale Praxis: Gesellschaftliche und alltagsweltliche Voraussetzungen, Widersprüche und Konflikte," in *Ökologisches Handeln als sozialer Konflikt. Umwelt im Alltag. Soziologie und Psychologie*, ed. Hellmuth Lange (Opladen: Leske und Budrich, 2000): 35–56.

[4] Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swindler, and Steven Tipton, *The Good Society* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1991), 292.

countrysides. As organized states and cities emerged, so too did large-scale markets, for example, handcrafts. The major social infrastructure changed from small-scale, personal systems of trade to larger, anonymous economic organizations. Historical research on "communalism" during this medieval process of change has suggested that all governmental and institutional structures result from social processes and communal living.[5] Second, agrarian communal life continued to lose its influence with the industrialization of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The traditional community that lived and worked together was substituted on the one side by private nuclear families in reproductive households and on the other side by forms of official employment in commercial enterprises. Since the beginning of the industrial age, cities and states have replaced traditional villages and farm communities with governmental institutions. In a nutshell communality has lost its dominance to societal institutions in the changing process from medieval times to modernity.

In 1887 German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies provided an in-depth theory of community. His Community and Society became one of the foundations for the newly invented discipline of sociology, giving an explanation to comprehend the changes of modernity. Tönnies described Gemeinschaft (community) as a mode of instinctual and mainly unconscious togetherness. His second, and complementary, form of social grouping is Gesellschaft (society), which is formed by the instrumental, purpose-oriented, and intentional agency of individuals. In short, while communities are characterized by personal, direct interactions between their specific members, institutions and societies are characterized by impersonal, formal rules, general constitutions, and laws in which the individual members are replaceable.[6]

In 1922, Max Weber modified Tönnies's theory, adapting it to the modern state, and describing community as a holistic process of interaction. According to Weber, all types of community eventually turn into impersonal societal structures because humans are driven by purpose-oriented agency. As a result, Weber argued that a community is an unsustainable social structure. As a result, the coexistence of social and economic relationships has been differentiated and often fragmented

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[5] Peter Blickle, "Kommunalismus. Begriffbildung in heuristischer Absicht," in *Historische Zeitschrift. Beiheft 13: Lenagemeinde und Stadtgemeinde in Mitteleuropa*, ed. Peter Blickle (München: Oldenbourg, 1991), 5–38.

[6] Ferdinand Tönnies, *Community and Society* (1887; East Lansing: Michigan State University, 1957).

into abstract, impersonal dimensions.[7]

The modern "loss of community" can be seen as liberalization from traditional, oppressive, small-scale communities. In this interpretation, modern societies afford individuals agency to choose their religion, lifestyle, and occupation. Social theorists even oppose communal structures in favor of individual freedom, diversity, and self-realization—which are held to be the attributes of society. Zygmunt Baumann argues that, "community promises security but seems to deprive us of freedom, of the right to be ourselves."[8] After discussing the oppressive and manipulative dangers of community,[9] Baumann concludes that community should be reinvented in a new fashion. In a globalized world of change and insecurity, community needs to be something different than a collective of like-minded people but rather a pluralistic community of mutual sharing and welfare.

The philosophical debate on liberalism[10] and communitarianism[11] addresses whether freedom and communality can be combined. In practice, it can be observed that the modern "loss of community" has produced ambivalent results. On the one hand, individuals have broken away from the narrow-minded and intolerant aspects of some traditional forms of community. Anonymous infrastructures and the separation of work and private life have given space to self-realization free from social control. On the other hand, alienation from the economic structures, disembeddedness from time and space,[12] and a tendency to be guided by an egoistic competition emerged.[13] In modernization processes Jürgen Habermas has observed that institutions formalize and

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[7] Max Weber, *Economy and Society* (1922; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

[8] Zygmunt Baumann, *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 1.

[9] Particularly in Germany, *Gemeinschaft* was experienced as a social form of suppression because of the political misuse by the national socialist ideology and politics (Stephan Breuer, "'Gemeinschaft' in der 'deutschen Soziologie,'" *Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 31, no. 5 [2002]: 354–72).

[10] See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971).

[11] See Bellah et al., *The Good Society*; and Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001).

[12] Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

[13] For example, Robert Nisbet, *The Quest for Community: A Study in the Ethics of Order and Freedom* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990); Putnam, *Bowling Alone*; and Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (New Delhi: Sage, 1992).

often "colonize the lifeworld." Rationalization for the sake of system logic has the pathological effects of destroying and exploiting emotionally based trustful interactions—motor-of-life processes like raising children and reproducing the basic needs.[14]

Evidence for the "colonialization of the lifeworld" and the loss of community can be found today—at the end of modernity—in the social conditions caused by the separation of "lifeworld" and work world, the differentiation of economic, political, and cultural subsystems leading to significant changes in communality: a divorce rate of more than 50 percent seems to reveal dramatically that the contemporary models of living together—marriage and the nuclear family—cannot fulfill the needs and requirements of an individual in a post-modern society.[15] At the same time, loneliness and psychosomatic illnesses are increasing, and postmodern singles yearn for social contacts, communication and interaction. As a result, diverse forms of communities are emerging, in the forms of self-help groups or internet communities, diverse religious subcultures, in networks of specified lifestyles, and in intentional communities.

An internal conflict between longing for and skepticism about community characterizes individualized societies. In their search for communality, modern individuals face a variety of dilemmas: freedom versus commitment; spontaneity versus consistency; creativity versus consumption; and adventure versus the humdrum of daily life.[16] How can these dilemmas be resolved and transformed to create a kind of social formation that meets the requirements of postmodern individuals? The answer requires a completely new and creative social structure, which would have to be different from pre-modern, traditional forms of community that have subordinated individual freedom and self-realization to communal traditions. A new form of community needs to transcend the contradictions by creating the space that integrates individual freedom, self-realization and responsibility, readiness to share some of the possessions, and a mutual long-term commitment. What makes contemporary intentional communities a worthwhile field of investigation is that many are dealing with precisely these issues in

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[14] Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984).

[15] See, for example, "World Divorce Statistics," *Divorce Magazine* (2002), http://www.divorcemag.com/statistics/statsWorld.shtml.

[16] Manfred Prisching, "Paradoxien der Vergemeinschaftung," in *Posttraditionale Gemeinschaften. Theoretische und ethnografische Bestimmungen*, ed. Ronald Hitzler, Anne Honer, and Michaela Pfadenhauer (Wiesbaden: Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2008), 34–54.

experimental and innovative ways.

Community resists all permanent or universal definitions[17] because every community is shaped by its particular members. Furthermore, the symbolic dimension of community "underlines the fact that community is a normative as well as a descriptive term. A community is defined by what the group aspires to be and not only by what it actually is."[18]Sociologists have concluded that social behavior arises from everyday interaction and living together, subsequently creating communal structures.[19] Hence, community is inclusive and voluntary; it is constituted by meaningful, related, and committed agency characterized by a low degree of formalization and is therefore permanently created by its participants.[20]

The very same processes occur in daily life in newly created intentional communities. From this perspective, intentional communities can be seen as fields where communal structures are created. To address the question about innovative ways of sustainable living, I selected communities with corresponding aims to observe creation processes of sustainable structures. The aim of the research is intended to help understand what a community can become rather than what it is.

III. Intentional Communities: A Postmodern Reinvention of Community?

The development of intentional communities is not a modern or postmodern phenomenon. These types of community have existed throughout history in all types of societies and cultures.[21] However, two characteristics seem to be direct responses to modern individualization and globalization. First, intentional communities started to network beyond their local and national boundaries. In the 1940s they began to connect in North America and they coined the term "intentional communities."[22]

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[17] Anna Peterson, *Seeds of the Kingdom: Utopian Communities in the Americas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

[18] Peterson, *Seeds of the Kingdom*, 102.

[19] James S. Coleman, *Foundations of Social Theory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997).

[20] Matthias Grundmann, Thomas Dierschke, Stephan Drucks, and Iris Kunze, eds.,*Soziale Gemeinschaften: Experimentierfelder für kollektive Lebensformen* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2006).

[21] Bill Metcalf and Diana Christian, "Intentional Communities," in *Encyclopedia of Community: From the Village to the Virtual World*, vol. 2, ed. Karen Christensen and David Levinson (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 2003), 670–76.

[22] The term was first used during a 1948 conference of different communal groups held

Today there is a worldwide platform where about four thousand communal groups from all over the world come together.[23] Second, they are explicitly diverse in philosophy, spirituality, and lifestyle. Their idea of community is not the creation of a common belief system or lifestyle but rather to create unity in diversity as a creative richness of mutual benefit with a core value of communality. Each community places "a high priority on fostering a sense of community—a feeling of belonging and mutual support that is increasingly hard to find in mainstream Western society." Furthermore, they describe themselves as "groups of people who have chosen to live together with a common purpose, working cooperatively to create a lifestyle that reflects their shared core values. The people may live together on a piece of rural land, in a suburban home, or in an urban neighborhood, and they may share a single residence or live in a cluster of dwellings."[24]

Ecovillages and co-housing projects are types of young intentional communities.[25] Both participants and scientific observers emphasize that they must be distinguished from the early back-to-nature communes of the 1960s and 1970s.[26] The difference is that ecovillages build living alternatives rather than just criticize or "drop out" of society. Striving for more than a simple rural life close to nature, they want to include the best aspects of modern society, such as art, research, education, and the efficiency of technology.[27]

From a sociological point of view, intentional communities have a

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in in Yellow Springs, Ohio, which resulted in the establishment of the Fellowship for Intentional Community (Metcalf and Christian, "Intentional Communities"). For the Fellowship for Intentional Community, see http://www.ic.org.

[23] Intentional community is an inclusive term for, for example, kibbutzim, ecovillages, co-housing projects, and political or spiritual communes. Besides the internationally leading Global Ecovillage Network, there are several umbrella networks (Jonathan Dawson, *Ecovillages: New Frontiers for Sustainability* (White River Junction, Vt.: Green Books, 2006). The Fellowship for Intentional Community consists of 200 umbrella organizations and networks, about 3,750 individual communities, and over 350,000 people living together (http://www.ic.org/). About 400 intentional communities in Europe present themselves in the *Eurotopia* directory: *Eurotopia: Intentional Communities and Ecovillages in Europe* (Poppau: Volker Peters Verl, 1998–2004), http://www.eurotopia.de.

[24] Both quotations as formulated by the Fellowship for Intentional Community, http://wiki.ic.org/wiki/Intentional_Communities (accessed January 15, 2011).

[25] Metcalf and Christian, "Intentional Communities."

[26] Louise Meijering, "Making a Place of Their Own: Rural Intentional Communities in Northwest Europe" (Ph.D. diss., University of Groningen, 2006), 15; and Graham Meltzer, *Sustainable Community: Learning from the Cohousing Model* (Victoria, B.C.: Trafford, 2005), 3.

[27] Corinne McLaughlin and Gordon Davidson, *Builders of the Dawn: Community Lifestyles in a Changing World* (Walpole, N.H.: Stillpoint, 1985).

specific socio-political dimension in that they (1) are founded consciously on the basis of an alternative vision of society, (2) search and explore new ways of living with other people and with nature, (3) develop group-building qualities through common aims, communal living, and a derived lifestyle, and—while "natural" communities (like families) tend to subordinate to society—(4) strive for transformation of society.[28]

An analysis of data produced by a networking organization for European intentional communities reveals that 90 percent of new community attempts remain stagnated in the planning stage in the first five years and never become physically realized.[29] The main difficulties lie in finding affordable land, obtaining planning permissions, and maintaining self-sustaining local economies that often clash with established regulations.[30] Other problems include unresolved conflicts of internal policy and internal social relationships.[31] Despite a high failure rate, the four thousand communities in the introduced networks have managed to move beyond the planning stage; some of them having existed stably for over thirty years and still managing their communal facilities and finances as a non-profit organization decided in consensus by the members. Many of the current successful intentional communities receive more membership requests than they can handle. What are the secrets of this success?

IV. Key Experiences of Sustainable Community Management
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As I outlined above, I conducted my research in two phases. First, principles of sustainable community management were derived from the theoretical state of the art[32] and from already existing empirical surveys.[33] The outcome was the following list of criteria to select inten-

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[28] Grundmann et al., *Soziale Gemeinschaften*; and Robert C. Schehr, *Dynamic Utopia: Establishing Intentional Communities as a New Social Movement* (Westport, Conn.: Bergin and Garvey, 1997).

[29] *Eurotopia: Intentional Communities and Ecovillages in Europe* (Poppau: Volker Peters Verl, 1998–2004).

[30] Dawson, *Ecovillages*.

[31] Diana Leafe Christian, *Creating a Life Together: Practical Tools to Grow Ecovillages and Intentional Communities* (Canada: New Society, 2003).

[32] For example, Hartmut Bossel, "Indicators for Sustainable Development: Theory, Method, Applications: A report to the Balaton Group" (Winnipeg: International Institute for Sustainable Development, 1999), http://www.ulb.ac.be/ceese/STAFF/Tom/bossel.pdf.

[33] See, for example, Karl-Heinz Simon and Horace Herring, "Intentional Communities and Environmental Sustainability," in *Encyclopedia of Community: From the Village to*

tional communities for qualitative exploration: not limited to a particular religion or ideology, but rather committed to a pluralistic diversity with the common aim of striving for ecological and social justice (codified in bylaws), a high degree of self-organization, democratic shared ownership of land and communal housing, shared facilities that are organized and financed communally, consensus and decentralized decision method, and transparent and flexible community management. In addition to these principles, the communities needed to be in existance longer than five years and have more than twenty members.[34]

Second, the empirical phase started with exploring Auroville, an intercultural town project in Southern India, and Findhorn, one of the largest and most popular ecovillages, located in Scotland—each in two-month-long restudies. In addition to the observations and interviews, valuable written documents helped to expand and specify the derived criteria. In the next step available data about intentional communities from the above mentioned Eurotopia directory (1998–2004) and a questionnaire survey we conducted about social, organizational, and intentional data of 113 intentional communities in Germany[35] were analyzed to select—finally five—promising communities in Germany for qualitative research. In the five selected intentional communities[36] in Germany, we conducted participant observation in daily life, community meetings, and other events, as well as narrative and experts' interviews during one to three week-long visits.[37] This participatory method was chosen in order to compare the reality of everyday living to community self-portrayals on the internet or in books.

In the following subsections I highlight the key principles of community organizing in the social dimension of sustainability as discovered through my research. I identified effective tools for membership,

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the *Virtual World*, vol. 2, ed. Karen Christensen and David Levinson (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 2003), 690–93.

[34] Iris Kunze, "Soziale Innovationen für zukunftsfähige Lebensweisen. Gemeinschaften und Ökodörfer als experimentierende Lernfelder für sozial-ökologische Nachhaltigkeit" (Ph.D. diss., University of Münster, 2009), 12–52, 137–39.

[35] Thomas Dierschke, Stephan Drucks, and Iris Kunze, "Intentionale Gemeinschaften: Begriffe, Felder, Zugänge," in *Soziale Gemeinschaften*, ed. Grundmann et al., 101–18.

[36] The following communities were visited between 2001 and 2007 in several one to nine week-long and shorter visits: Auroville (India), Findhorn (U.K.), Kommune Niederkaufungen, Ökodorf Sieben Linden, Lebensgut Pommritz, Stamm Füssen and Lebensgarten Steyerberg (Germany). All of the communities provide informative websites, and most also include an English translation; for more details about the research design, see Kunze, "Soziale Innovationen für zukunftsfähige Lebensweisen").

[37] Kunze, "Soziale Innovationen für zukunftsfähige Lebensweisen."

decision making, and property ownership. During the field research, social dynamics were discovered to be relevant. The fairly high failure rate of 90 percent illustrates that, for building and running a community, individuals need special social and organizational skills.[38] The communities under study learned from mistakes about the importance of social skills. These basics for a sustainable community management will be discussed in the third subsection about social competencies.

How to govern membership

Constructive membership rules of sustainable living need to balance three aspects: First, individual liberty; second, communal cooperation and responsibility; and, third, the sustainable embedding of the community in the society and the ecological environment. The following methods were found to be successful in serving these three functions in all seven communities under study:

First, to support the individual liberty of free choice of membership, individual contracts between the member and the community were drawn up, for instance, with regard to renting living space or to working in community units. This extends to the financial support of members who leave the community to start a new life outside—irrespective of their reasons for leaving. The fact that leaving is possible without losing economic security seems to encourage members to join and stay.

Second, in four of the communities, a non-profit unit or foundation with the aim of providing healthy and ecological living space owns the land and the real estate fully; in the other three cases these units are co-owners. As a community provides common accessible wealth, a charter binding the use of the land and the housing to social and ecological aims protects the communal co-operation from getting exploited by irresponsible interests like an orientation toward individual profit. In other words, these institutions aim to prevent the "tragedy of the commons."[39]

Third, in "Stamm der Likatier," a modern "tribe of the old celtic Likatier" in the historic Bavarian city of Füssen, membership rules were introduced to regulate different kinds of individual commitment to the community. The community owns several old multi-family dwellings in the city and runs a publishing house, an internet shop, and some

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[38] Kunze, "Soziale Innovationen für zukunftsfähige Lebensweisen," 179–81.

[39] Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

other units. While some members wish to live closely together and work for the community on a regular basis, others prefer to live separately in the neighborhood and spend a great amount of time outside the community. The members can choose between keeping their private property and renting a house, or completely joining the communitarian economy which gives them a say in decisions and certain duties. During observations the community showed that it gains diversity, and therefore resilience, by providing different kinds of committed membership. A precondition for this kind of system is a core group that provides a minimal structure of community and responsibility. In Stamm Füssen, this process of differentiation came about only after ten or more years of successful, homogenous community life as the children became teenagers rebelling against the dogmas of their parents.

Over the years all observed communities have installed procedures for "testing" and accepting new members that often take half a year or more to give the interested person an opportunity to get to know the community members better and vice versa. This probational period can be seen as insurance for the communities. The ecovillage Sieben Linden, for instance, changed—or had to change—its policy from complete openness to a restrictive process of selection according to applicants' willingness and ability to integrate socially into the community and take care of their livelihood and employment. New communities that are in the building phase often attract active people and accept almost all applicants, while a successfully established and stable project tends to draw applicants looking for a sheltered home. This tendency causes problems for established intentional communities, as they are generally based on self-responsibility and individual sustenance. Working infrastructures depend on active people creating and maintaining them and behaving responsibly toward the community.

Consensus decision fosters activity of the members

Quantitative empirical data from our survey at the University of Münster's Department of Sociology indicates a large amount of democratic and emancipatory practices in intentional communities. In 62 percent of the 113 intentional communities in Germany, the real estate is in the hands of the community unit, and 69 percent are organized as charitable, non-profit, democratic units. In addition, 47 percent use consensus decision making, 36 percent the majority vote, and 21 percent autono-

mous subgroup decisions, while some combine all of these methods.[40]

Communities practiced different strategies of consensus decision-making according to the size of the communities and the degree of shared property. A sophisticated and efficient model—which has worked for over twenty years—was developed in the Kommune Niederkaufungen with seventy members running a dozen units and sharing their entire property. The core of their decision-making system is a highly structured process of self-motivated participation in working groups, transparency of all work steps to the whole commune and decision-making in the general assembly with rotated facilitators. They strive for a constructive decision-making process in which concerned members feel acknowledged rather than overworked. According to their philosophy and experience, consensus decision methods need to be focused on active participation rather than outright rejection of proposals. Kommune Niederkaufungen encourages all members to express their points of view and address their sense of mutual responsibility, which, in turn, motivates members to contribute in a constructive way.

Furthermore, Kommune Niederkaufungen emphasizes that consensus decision-making depends on democratic property structures. Should one or several persons own the community buildings, democratic decision-making processes would be thwarted because the owners' responsibility would create hierarchies that contradict the equality of consensus. The fundamental organization of the observed communities consists of democratic bodies (generally a charitable unit) to which all residents belong.

Social competences and authentic communication are the basics

Members of all communities under study said they had to learn to work on their social competences and communication skills in order to improve community management and to be able to reach consensus decisions. The following quotations from interviews with community members of Kommune Niederkaufungen in 2006 emphasize that communication is essential for communities:

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.

The founders thought of "Paradise on Earth" when they created an ideology, rules and structures as a foundation for the community. But, I

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[40] Dierschke, Drucks, and Kunze, "Intentionale Gemeinschaften."

learned that everyone needs to get rid of his patterns of controlling and ego-strategies to be able to live communally. And then, everything can happen![41]

The community members had to learn not only to accept but also to appreciate different opinions, to be moderate and fair, and at the same time dare to express their own wishes. The social forum, a method that helps to reveal and exchange individual perspectives and emotions, was developed in the ZEGG community (near Berlin) and is currently used in many others. Based on the experience that emotional problems block objective decision-making, they started the forum as a separate meeting in addition to the residential assembly on emotional and relational issues. Sitting in a circle, members express their conflicts or their agreeability, while a facilitator mediates. ZEGG's and other communities' application of the forum relaxed residential assemblies, made them more cooperative, and allowed them to focus on objective solutions rather than on such strategies as convincing others.

Methods that are also very common and successfully applied in intentional communities include non-violent communication and community-building processes based on the work of Scott Peck, which are employed to support a communal atmosphere of mutual tolerance, openness, and understanding.[42] The challenge seems to lie in adapting these methods to the specific needs of the community and its members.

V. Conclusion: Lessons from Intentional Communities and Their Societal Impact

Which general lessons about sustainable community-building can be derived from the observations of intentional communities? Weber concluded all kinds of communities will end up as formal institutions and Habermas amended the tragedy of the "colonialization of the lifeworld." The empirical reality and practice of the communities exemplified in their key experiences show another possibility for development.[43]

We can understand the processes in intentional communities as

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[41] Translated from German in Kunze, "Soziale Innovationen für zukunftsfähige Lebensweisen," 139.

[42] M. Scott Peck, *The Different Drum: The Creation of True Community – The First Step to World Peace* (1987; repr., London: Arrow, 2005). For non-violent communication, see Marshall B. Rosenberg, *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life* 2nd ed. (1999; Lancaster: Gazelle, 2003)..

[43] Kunze, "Soziale Innovationen für zukunftsfähige Lebensweisen," 149.

demonstrating how communities can continue as social modes without becoming institutionalized with the help of Scott Peck's work. As Habermas and Peck concluded, social crises occur when institutional and functional (for example, economic) structures exploit and deny the value of community-building processes that underlie institutionalization. In group workshops, Peck found that community members have to let go of expectations, prejudice, ideologies, and the need to control or convert others—in short, to make the transition from "rugged" to "soft" individualism—to become a capable agent in the creation process of a "true" community. This kind of community he calls "a group of all leaders" who are open and in tune with each other, a community which is an integrative, democratic, comprehensive, committed, and responsive system.[44]

Consulting my observations, intentional communities and ecovillages have created a way of (re)claiming or decolonizing the lifeworld.[45] While institutional structures are used to rule and organize daily life, the decisive structures remain the communal and personal communication processes. Their specialty is to keep formalized structures responsive and flexible to individuals and particular needs. The experiences of the community members under study suggest that the central aim of creating sustainable communities was primarily supported by mutual acknowledgement through learning open and constructive forms of communication and corresponding social competences.

One of the challenges that communities face is meeting the requirements of modern lifestyles while simultaneously demonstrating social and environmental resilience.[46] Through long-term experience of community management and communal living, these intentional communities have discovered a variety of innovative ways to balance cooperation and individualism. They integrate individual freedom in a sense that differs fundamentally from traditional communities. My study revealed that individual freedom and self-realization on the one hand, and cooperation, responsibility, a sustainable lifestyle, and social security on the other hand, can be combined and are already successfully combined in many intentional communities—despite other sociologists' assertions to the contrary.[47] Community need not be defined

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[44] Peck, *Different Drum*, 72, 95.

[45] Schehr, *Dynamic Utopia*.

[46] Iris Kunze and Flor Avelino, "Exploring Ecovillages as Alternative Fields of Sustainability and Governance," *Critical Policy Journal* (forthcoming).

[47] Baumann, *Community*.

as being contradictory to freedom and individualism.[48] A specific kind of interaction is decisive for sustainable and innovative community management. This interaction can be achieved by transparent, human-scale, and democratic organizational structures created and controlled by the participants, and by a culture of non-violent communication[49] and cooperation.

Recalling the introductory quotation by Timothy Miller, intentional communities with explicit corresponding intentions have shown the potential to transform modern societal living conditions to sustainability in at least three areas. First, in terms of their ecological footprint, they proved to be successful models for reducing energy consumption while providing increased quality-of-life conditions.[50]

Second, as political grassroots workers they explicitly respond to boarder societal problems. Several investigations identify the civil society and social movements as the most important initiators of a transformation to a sustainable world culture.[51] Robert Schehr discusses the impact social movements, especially intentional communities, make upon the decolonialization of the lifeworld.[52] Susan Brown characterizes intentional communities as a "cultural critique" in the form of a "revitalization movement." Whether religious or secular, whether based on a revival of traditional culture or an unrealized utopian goal, Brown defines a revitalization movement as "a deliberate, organized, conscious effort by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture" and designates it as "a special kind of culture change phenomenon."[53] Using Brown's analysis, we see intentional communities as neither merely reactions to specific societal conditions nor just reproductions of premodern communal bonds within postmodern societal frameworks.

The third aspect is the potential of intentional communities as living laboratories of communal and ecological living in almost all areas of life. According to their goals, they experiment with commu-

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[48] Kunze, "Soziale Innovationen für zukunftsfähige Lebensweisen."

[49] Rosenberg, *Nonviolent Communication*.

[50] Dawson, *Ecovillages*; and Simon and Herring, "Intentional Communities and Environmental Sustainability."

[51] For example, the scenario "great transition" (Paul Raskin et al., *Great Transition: The Promise and Lure of the Times Ahead*. A Report to the Global Scenario Group [Boston: Stockholm Environmental Institute – Boston, 2002]), Ulrich Beck (*Risk Society*), and the UNEP's Agenda 21.

[52] Schehr, *Dynamic Utopia*.

[53] Susan Love Brown, "Community as Cultural Critique," in *Intentional Community: An Anthropological Perspective*, ed. Susan Love Brown (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 154, 165

nity management, small-scale economies, eco-housing, cultural norms, social relationships, forms of household organization, education, and communication. Therefore, they use and develop diverse methods, from permaculture to conflict resolution, and from community organization to energy efficiency.[54]

The approach of intentional communities is innovatively experimental because they follow a process of "transformative utopianism,"[55] 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.

The growing popularity of intentional communities—expressed in diverse networks and platforms from "family-friendly co-housing" to "plan-B retirement"—is based upon their concrete approach to overcoming aspects of modernity, such as unsustainability, alienation, and forms of social and economic disembeddedness like social isolation and the colonization of the lifeworld. Learning from these living laboratories, I have interpreted and distilled the following lessons for sustainable community management that are applicable to any kind of community or social system including families, neighborhoods, municipalities, and business networks.[56]

Use "unity in diversity" with sustainable communality as basic principles rather than profit.

Keep organization flexible and responsive to the members, for instance, by using consensus decisions and collective ownership.

A culture of dialogue and reflection concerning the social atmosphere and conflict prevention are regarded to be crucial. Methods for communication and conflict resolution can help.

Space, settlement, and facilities should be planned and constructed in communal processes with the residents themselves.

These four lessons also show that the living reality of experimental communities presents a direct response to the questions and problems of social risks, environmental crises, and uncertainty at all

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[54] Kunze, "Soziale Innovationen für zukunftsfähige Lebensweisen"; and Meijering, "Making a Place of Their Own."

[55] Joshua Lockyer, "From Developmental Communalism to Transformative Utopianism: An Imagined Conversation with Donald Pitzer," *Communal Societies* 29, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 1–14.

[56] Kunze, "Soziale Innovationen für zukunftsfähige Lebensweisen."

levels. In industrialized, alienated societies suffering from the pathology of a colonized lifeworld, the highest need lies in the culturally underestimated fostering of social and ecological awareness as well as social competences of communality. Therefore, community-building processes as a holistic experience of cooperative relationships seem to be an essential and hands-on learning experience with the potential for creating experience-based socio-ecological behavior—the basis for putting the knowledge about innovative, sustainable community management into practice.