

The Importance of Ecovillage Communities in Romania

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Abstract. *This paper aims to analyze and propagate the concept of eco-village as much as possible within the majority of Romanian communities. A sustainable ecovillage or village is a traditional or intentional community created to become socially, culturally, economically and ecologically sustainable. The ecovillage community hosts an alternative way of organizing people's lives, so as to create sustainable relationships between people and the environment, without altering it. This study incorporates a model of successful eco-village, corroborated with the necessary factors and strategies that determine the formation of social and civic capital. There are numerous claims from researchers and community members, in the academic and grey literature, that intentional communities are making significant improvements towards sustainability goals, particularly in terms of environmental impact. However, actual measures of progress, with evidence supporting these claims, are relatively scarce*

Keywords: *ecovillage, environment, Romania, sustainable development*

Introduction

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 geobiophysical system (Burlacu, et al., 2023). Nevertheless, to speak only of continuity is limited since the ideas of sustainability also clearly involve the quality of such permanence (Burlacu, Georgescu et al., 2022). This is evident, for example, in concerns related to social justice (Burlacu et al., 2021). 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 society (Rădulescu, Mănescu et al., 2023). 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 (Rădulescu, Angheluta et al., 2022).

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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 (Ciobanu et al., 2019).

The purpose of the present study is to evaluate the specialized literature regarding the concept of ecovillage community, to define a successful model of such a community, as well as to adapt the model to the characteristics of rural communities in Romania.

In the context of increasing the quality of life at the national level, as a result of a trend that has appeared in some developed countries such as Great Britain, Norway or the United States of America, ecovillage communities have the potential to orient the purpose of government towards combining economic and non-economic elements in such a way so that public policies can create a balance between the individual and the collective good. Based on extensive studies on sustainability, increasing the quality of life and innovation in the field of the environment, the model proposed by the authors can become the main theoretical basis in a relatively new field of study and research for Romania (Dawson, 2006).

Adapting this model to the political, administrative and cultural characteristics of rural communities, actors interested in community development, governance and public policies, sustainable development and environmental protection can have a reference point in the practical implementation of this model for a better governance, increasing civic participation, creating and maintaining democratic practices oriented towards the development of social capital (Balu et al., 2019). Combining qualitative and quantitative research methods, the study evaluates the potential of applying the theoretical dimensions of an ecovillage community in various communes of Romania.

Literature review

As part of environmental sociology, the ecological paradigm advocates the interdependence of humans and ecosystems in the development of an ecological design that meets all the challenges of climate change, diminishing biodiversity, and reduced access to resources (Barbu, Buzoianu & Margina, 2017). Finding and implementing sustainable development methods become part of a general effort of the new ecosate community to create a collective identity that interacts with the social and cultural structures and norms of the old community (Barnett, Ronald & Norman, 2020). The United Nations has defined the concept of sustainability as a process that "seeks to meet the needs of society without compromising the ability of future generations to serve their own needs" (Buzoianu, 2017).

In this context, we can see a high interest of some countries in developing sustainable practices and increasing the quality of life, including through the use of strategies at the national level that have this goal (Evans, 2020).

Countries such as Norway, Malaysia, the United States of America, Great Britain or Japan, have agreed to rethink the societal structure by directing resources and public policy objectives towards increasing the quality of life. Thus, the World Health Organization defined quality of life as "a person's perception of his position in life, in the context of a culture and a value system in which he lives, and in close correlation with his goals, expectations, standards and concerns". (Bang, 2005). In this context, a network called the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) has been developed worldwide. The aim of this network is to develop links between policy makers, governments, the non-governmental sector, academics, entrepreneurs as well as other interested actors to develop a strategy for a global transition towards resilient communities and cultures. GEN aims to build a world with a sustainable future, with strong people and communities by educating people and providing real and concrete examples, by promoting human rights, by protecting the

environment, but also by the participation of community members in global decision-making (Forrest & Wiek, 2015).

As previously mentioned, the ecovillage community is a type of intentional community that does not seek refuge and isolation, but aims to mobilize itself to change existing structures (Veteto, & Lockyer, 2013). Ecovillage communities are considered social movements that are formed with the aim of reducing the negative influence of humans on the environment and maximizing the efficiency of consumption and recycling processes (Hall, 2015). Moreover, these communities support subsistence gardening and use building techniques and materials that prevent overuse of resources. What distinguishes an ecovillage community from the rest of the intentional communities is the emphasis on ecology, which thus becomes a principle to be followed both in the design of the community and in its social organization.

A broader definition of the concept claims that an ecovillage community is: "a settlement on a human scale (usually between 50-500 members, although there are exceptions), having multiple endowments- providing food, production, rest, social opportunities and commerce, the purpose of which is the harmless integration of human activities into the environment in a way that supports healthy human development physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually, and which is capable of continuing into the indefinite future" (Buzoianu, Diaconu, Mitriță, Dima, 2019).

From this definition emerges the integrated nature of an ecovillage community, by connecting multiple activities, but also its purpose and vision, which is focused on both the collective and the individual good, promoting sustainable practices.

The sustainable lifestyle emphasizes four major dimensions, namely social, cultural, economic and ecological sustainability (Hall, 2015).

Hong and Vicdan (2016) add another element to this definition, namely the negotiation of space, a process that often creates problems. Negotiation is at the heart of the implementation of the ecovillage community vision, as structural problems will not be long in coming, and one of the community's challenges is the creation of social capital. In addition, negotiation is also necessary regarding the connection between the community and the political and administrative environment.

Having an interactive relationship with the dominant culture, the inhabitants of the ecovillage community must negotiate including the formal economy, certain laws and rules, the attitudes of the neighbors, as well as the location of the community, all these in order to develop sustainably (Ergas, 2010). Being considered a model community, residents know they have to negotiate with the authorities to restructure the way the community looks and functions. Also, some studies show that the inhabitants of ecovillage communities are the living agents of change, and their vision is reflected in their daily activities (Ergas, 2010). Furthermore, the ecological aspects of community life are considered to be balanced when the inhabitants are connected and live in harmony with each other within the ecosystem of which they are a part. For this reason, social capital becomes a key factor in determining the sustainable use of resources and livelihoods.

Social capital is defined by Stone (2001) in line with Robert Putnam's (1993) approach: "the process by which people learn to work with each other, practice reciprocity and develop trust" (Stone, 2001, p. 613). Although social capital is a process that provides detailed information about human behavior, Stone believes that it is useful in finding informal methods of mutual aid (Stone, 2001). To this end, Stone (2001) discusses another concept closely related to social capital, namely civic capacity. "Civic capacity involves the degree to which various sectors of a community-business, parents, educators, public and nongovernmental institutions-act in concert around an issue of community importance" (Stone, 2001, p.596).

The difference between the two concepts is subtle, but very relevant. While social capital focuses on benefits and is a long process and seen as rather informal, civic capacity can be considered to be social capital in action, being focused on solving community problems, requiring an institutional framework and constant interaction between actors community.

Methodology

In order to identify the perception of the residents of rural environments on the community in which they live, but also what are the advantages and disadvantages of the development of the new ecovillage type community on the territory of the commune in Romania and how is the connection of the new community with the current one valued, a focus group was held in May many municipalities around Bucharest. The general description of the created focus group starts from the group, made up of 15 people from the local public administration, local farmers, farmers and entrepreneurs, coming from the villages belonging to the commune, recruited on a voluntary basis, according to a criterion that gives the group a certain homogeneity, and who usually do not know each other. The participants fall into the category of people with higher education, aged between 25-40 years. The moderator launched the general theme related to the importance of the communities in ecosates and invited the participants to express themselves.

The purpose of the quantitative analysis is to evaluate the social capital and the level of trust among the inhabitants, as well as their perception of the quality of life in the commune.

More specifically, the research focused on identifying the perceptions regarding the quality of life of the villagers, the direction in which the commune is heading, the proximity to the people of the village, how often the respondents meet with other actors in the community, the level of trust and the evolution compared to now three years, but also how often they resort to financial and material aid granted by other inhabitants of the commune.

Table 2. The main conclusions of the focus group

The vision of the community	The competitive advantages of municipalities	The advantages of the ecovillage community
The communes will be developed, organized, animated and attractive communities, with a high standard of living, becoming a model of organization	Good collaboration between citizens and the public administration, the valorization of the natural environment, specific gastronomy	Possible development of educational infrastructure, economic well-being, capitalization of resources, cultural diversification, attractive tourism

Source: author.

Results and discussions

The present article brings added value in this field of sustainable development through the empirical analysis of the situation of ecosats at the level of Romania, but also through the analysis of the perception of people with expertise in the field within the focus group formed.

Studies show that, for the creation of a successful model of the transition and integration of the ecovillage community into the dominant culture, clearly defined objectives and an implementation plan are needed (useful in ensuring the legitimacy of the community, its accountability and credibility), good communication with old community, resident participation, collective goal setting and administrative help (Lichrou & O'Malley, 2020).

The success factors required in the transition of the ecovillage community are classified as follows: contextual factors, intermediate factors and intervention strategies (Wagner, 2012).

The first contextual factor is the socio-demographic situation, being considered an adjacent factor that has power over other factors present. It is obvious that in the case of a larger number of inhabitants there are certain challenges in terms of effective communication, social cohesion and the implementation of objectives, in this case different strategies are needed. The second contextual factor is community governance, specifically how all stakeholders in the community collaborate and implement plans to ensure the fulfillment of the vision and serve the collective interest. A transparent, open and trust-oriented government is clearly a success factor in the community.

Further, the experience and skills of community volunteers influence media relations, research, community development, project implementation and community governance. Funding opportunities, public and/or private, are a contextual factor with a large impact in a successful transition. Social cohesion and having an external support network is very helpful. Providing additional collaboration opportunities as well as pooling resources such as physical spaces or even creating new organizations have the potential to improve the quality of life in the ecovillage community. The management and leadership group of the community has an obvious influence in the community, but that varies according to its characteristics. While in some community's individual leadership is present, in most cases a united team of leaders and managers has been shown to be much more effective in community governance.

Finally, the successful strategies required for the transition and development of ecovillage communities are presented below. These strategies mostly aim at the process of implementing decisions, designing, and establishing individual projects, as well as ensuring action directions and continuity of work in the community. As can be seen from the table, the strategies are divided into transition strategies and intervention strategies:

Table 1. Successful strategies for ecovillage communities

Transition strategies	Intervention strategies
Formation of a group of involved activists	Delegation of responsibility to work groups
Collaboration with the management and leadership of the community is accessible	Setting collective objectives at community level
Creating a formal organization	Creation of intervention activities in various ways
Collaboration opportunities with the external environment	Delivery of intervention activities over a longer period of time
Development of strategic partnerships for obtaining community resources	Monitoring performance and providing constant feed-back
Defining transition initiatives in ways relevant to the community	Seeking integrated collaboration opportunities
Building community support and maintaining interest	Diversification of income sources and the development of other variable economic means

Source: Adapted after Forrest și Wiek (2015, p.37).

Ecovillage concept in Romania

Data on ecovillage communities in Romania identify the existence of a community that was born in 2013, in the Western Carpathians, more precisely in the Poiana Ruscă Mountains. Called Aurora Community, this intentional grouping supports the surrounding communities to become a space of healing and reconnection with nature, being consistent with the norms of sustainable development. The community aims to become an example for the environment, by encouraging

living in peace and harmony with nature, a social example, by educating community members about sustainability, an economic/community example, through philanthropic activities, but also a cultural example, by preserving the norms of the ancestral culture.

However, the communities in Romania are not completely familiar with what an intentional community and an ecovillage community mean, and there are a number of preconceptions that prevent the implementation of these concepts. In support of these ideas, Metcalf (2012) identified a number of preconceptions that people have about ecovillage communities. The identification of existing preconceptions in traditional communities about ecovillage communities provides an overview of the challenges that can intervene in the moments of integration of the two communities and the transition to an ecovillage community. A first preconception is that the members of an ecovillage community are young.

Metcalf (2012) demystifies the same preconception, based on research from different ecovillage communities in Europe where the residents are between the ages of 20 and 90, demonstrating that the members are adults rather than young people.

Another preconception related to ecovillage communities refers to the fact that these communities have a short life span, with their members abandoning the community after a relatively short time. His study shows, in fact, that these intentional communities become even more stable when they are formed by permanent members and with activities characterized by continuity and stability. The author also discusses the fact that these communities are led by a guru who exploits his members, tending to become a cult.

The integration of ecovillage communities in Romania requires the elimination of existing preconceptions, by informing the inhabitants of traditional communities about the objectives of ecovillage communities, their vision and the way of working.

Eliminating all cultural, political and administrative barriers, by presenting the social, economic and environmental benefits of the integration of ecovillage communities in Romania has the potential to create trust between residents and build the social capital that is needed (Rădulescu et al., 2022).

Facilitation, transparency and openness of local authorities are other mechanisms that lead to transition and adaptation, by creating collaborative community mechanisms, among all interested actors: town halls, private companies, non-governmental organizations (committees, tenant associations, councils, etc.), schools, churches.

These collaborative mechanisms can take the form of formal meetings and negotiations, conferences and workshops, cultural events, even educational events, where participants have the opportunity to express their opinions and make decisions in a formal, institutional way.

The Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) draws attention to the erroneous use of the ecovillage concept. Among the limits of the concept are certain aspects, such as the fact that an ecovillage community should not be seen as a fixed outcome, but as a continuous process of change and learning (Ergas, 2010).

Moreover, such a community is not developed by architects or experts outside the community, but by its members. The vision of the community is flexible and not only ecologically oriented, but all dimensions of sustainability can also be covered by the mission of an ecovillage community (Papadimitropoulos, 2018).

Conclusion

The conduct of the focus group led to the results of the current research. The ecovillage community represents a type of intentional community focused on the orientation of public policies towards the creation of social capital, increasing the standard of living and the use of sustainable work methods to ensure harmony between the inhabitants, but also between the inhabitants and the environment. These communities ensure the creation of the economic means by which residents can access resources harmlessly, ensuring future generations have access to them. Ecovillage communities also create a collective community identity characterized by inclusion, work-life balance, dedication, negotiation, self-development, and a healthy lifestyle. The increased interest of specialist studies for the ecovillage concept indicates the orientation towards the ecological paradigm, a visible orientation both at the European and American level.

The rural environment in Romania faces various economic, administrative, and political challenges, the involvement of citizens in political and administrative processes being relatively low, although the level of trust in the public administration is relatively high.

The development of a new calendar of cultural or environmental events and socialization actions of the commune with the help of the school, the town hall, the ecovillage committee, the church and other interested actors is a dimension that deserves to be considered. Physical spaces with various economic functions, such as farms or commercial spaces are ideal for developing social capital by involving young people in their design, creating summer educational programs where children can learn about farming, local production, caring for environment and agriculture.

Combining formal/institutional elements with informal ones, along with constant access to resources and attracting the necessary knowledge and expertise in the ecovillage community are additional factors and strategies that ensure the success of the implementation of the ecovillage model. This study analyzes all these elements and aims to become an adaptation model for Romania.

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