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Sustainable Communities of Practice and Eco-villages as mediation tool for degrowth process

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Abstract

The most widespread definition of an eco-village seems to be the one of Robert Gilman (1991) who proposes four essential characteristics: “a human-scale and full-featured settlement (food, leisure, social life, education, business, residence), in which human activities are harmlessly integrated into the natural world (principle of ecology) in a way that is supportive of healthy human development and can be successfully continued into the indefinite future”.

Another main concept for understanding the purpose of this paper is the community of practice concept, that Lave & Wenger (1991) describe as “a group of people who share an interest, a craft, and/or a profession”. According to the authors, the group can evolve naturally due to the member's common interest in a particular domain or area, or it can be created specifically with the goal of gaining knowledge related to their field. They affirm that it is through the process of sharing information and experiences with the group that the members learn from each other, and have an opportunity to develop themselves personally and professionally.

Taken as a process, the Degrowth movement seems to require some peculiar mediation tools. In order to analyze the sustainable communities of practice and eco-villages as mediation tools for Degrowth process and its performances towards society, we position this phenomenon as a contesting initiative for the dominant model of development, based on the economics growth and human spoilage.

Constituting a recent collective action strategy, typical of the modern post-industrial society, we assume that this movement isn't an end in itself, but a mean to question and to propose alternatives to the current social and economic development scenario in which we live at the moment. This phenomenon demonstrates a return to the natural necessities of humans – such as the social links, the sharing, the habitation and healthy diets - darkened by the “northern” lifestyle and its contemporary consumption culture highly dependent on petroleum exploitation.

The present paper is a reflection of an empirical and theoretical study (Gustack Delambre, 2009) within four French associations (Brin de Paille - Association Française de Permaculture (89160), Association Passerelle&Co (71190), Coopérative Cravirola / Association Cultures du Maquis (34210), Eco-centre ECOLonie (88260)) working for the mediation of environmental and human friendly techniques, lifestyles and development, based on balanced levels of production and consumption. The objective of this work is also to identify the stakes in the mediation of an alternative model of development through the practices and projects led by these kinds of associations and communities. It is expected to make a rapport between the eco-villages practices and the cognitive paths of social learning; to assess the efficiency of communities of practice in this process; to explore their function as a link-builder between society and the environmentalist values and to identify challenges and possibilities for these mediating structures.

Keywords

Eco-village; Communities of Practice; social learning; mediation; degrowth

1 Introduction

Normally measured by the GDP (Gross Domestic Product), the growth rate of a country or region economy is commonly related to its productive capacity (economic activities) created by investments, for example in industry or in energy generation. The attended result is to create employment that will provide revenues so people can live comfortably (buying food, clothes, paying a house, transport, etc.) and contribute again to this particular cycle.

This is a very simplistic explanation of the dominant economic system we live in and many serious gaps are not shown. Among them:

- production depends on natural resources exploitation and some natural resources are renewable in a human “space-time”. Others are not : mainly metals and minerals like silver, zinc, lithium or lead, and energetic resources like natural gases and specially, petroleum;
- GDP cannot measure human welfare, only the size of the formal market economy; and it occults the real human condition (health, nourishment, leisure, etc.);
- in order to maintain a positive growth rate, it is necessary to maintain increasing production and consumption levels; which in its turn, produces wastes that are not reusable, recyclable or biodegradable.

These are only a few reasons that make us believe it is a system in crisis : a system that cannot be sustainable nor re-designed to last.

Published in 1972, the report “Limits to Growth ” presents a foresight of the consequences of an exponential and unlimited growth in our limited resourced planet. Since then, and even much before it, many discussions and questionings took place about how this contradictory system (doesn't) works and how to improve alternatives and sustainable solutions.

The “degrowth current”, which is one of the main explored idea in this paper, proposes many actions likely to revert the actual ecological and economic impasse. However, and taken as a process, the degrowth movement seems to require some peculiar mediation tools, be it in political, international or personal spheres.

The present paper is a reflection of an empirical and theoretical study (Gustack Delambre, 2009) within four French associations working for the mediation of environmental and human friendly techniques, lifestyles and development, based on balanced levels of production and consumption.

This work's objective is to identify the stakes in the mediation of an alternative model of development through the practices and projects led by these kinds of associations and communities. It is expected to make a rapport between the eco-villages practices and the cognitive paths of social learning; to assess the efficiency of communities of practice in this process; to explore their function as a link-builder between society and the environmentalist values and to identify the challenges and the possibilities for these mediating structures.

In order to analyze the sustainable communities of practice and eco-villages as mediation tools for Degrowth process and its performances towards society, we position this phenomenon as a contesting initiative for the dominant model of development, based on the economics growth and human and environment spoilage.

2 Eco-villages

The most widespread definition of an eco-village seems to be the one of Robert Gilman (1991) who proposes four essential characteristics : “a human-scale and full-featured settlement (food, leisure, social life, education, business, residence), in which human activities are harmlessly integrated into the natural world (principle of ecology) in a way that is supportive of healthy human development and can be successfully continued into the indefinite future”.

It reminds us to the permaculture's practices that suggest to work the nature and the human economy as the complex system that they are, applying a holistic strategy and according to the following core ethics principles (Holmgren, 2007):

- Care for the earth: recognize Man as a part of Earth, not apart from it (husband soil, forests and water);
- Care for the people: support and help each other to develop healthy societies, look after self, kin and community;
- Fair share: ensure that Earth's limited resources are used equitably and wisely, set limits to consumption and production and redistribute surplus.

3 Communities of Practice

Another main concept for understanding the purpose of this paper is the concept of community of practice that Lave & Wenger (1991) describe as “a group of people who share an interest, a craft, and/or a profession”. According to the authors, the group can evolve naturally due to the member's common interest in a particular domain or area, or it can be created specifically with the goal of gaining knowledge related to their field. They affirm that it is through the process of sharing information and experiences with the group that the members learn from each other, and have an opportunity to develop themselves personally and professionally.

4 Eco-village as mediation tool

Constituting a recent collective action strategy, typical of the modern post-industrial society, we assume that this movement isn't an end in itself, but a mean, a tool, to question and to propose alternatives to the current social and economic development scenario in which we live at the moment.

This phenomenon demonstrates a return to the natural necessities of the man – such as the social link, the sharing, the habitation and healthy diets - darkened by the “northern” lifestyle and its contemporary consumption culture highly dependent on petroleum exploitation.

General objectives of the eco-villages are quite diverse. Nevertheless, the application of the values and the shared ideologies is unanimous. It is also important, and as we will see, a challenge, to undertake at most the alternatives to increase autonomy as the electric energy, the food and water supply, the internal economy, etc.

By intermediary of varied activities illustrated in this article, these associations hope to inspire and to learn the others an environment-friendly lifestyle and to be responsible and active about stakes of development.

The mediation, thus, is identified as one of the "reasons for being" of eco-villages. For that purpose, their whole structure is organized so as to facilitate this approach and related initiatives. We had identify some challenges and possibilities of this structure.

The objective "mediation" is pursued by the ways of education and the raising awareness and sensitization to the ecology, the communication and the scattering of information and knowledge, traditional know-how, as well as new techniques and appropriate ("clean") technologies. Yet, we shall describe the functioning of some activities considered as having good results.

We had consider the eco-villages as communities of practice emphasizing the difference from intentional ones from some 60's and 70's movements which were (and some are yet) spiritual based communities although their ecologist will. For Andrew Jacobs (1998), contrary to popular misconceptions, "most communes of the 90's are not free-love refuges for flower children but well-ordered, financially solvent cooperatives where pragmatics, not psychedelics, rule the day". Further, for Charlier and Peraya (2003), a community of practice is fundamentally defined as a place designed to enhance exchange of ideas, actions, knowledge and to understand the others' points of view: by sharing their education and learning strategies, the "teachers" are brought to expose their daily practices and to learn those of their colleagues.

As example of activities that explores the core ideals of those associations and their link-builder aspect, we can relate the proposition of trainings, internships and instructive events. As well, we can support the idea that the provision of a place for meetings – formally, like in conferences, or informally, like during vacations periods or in fair trade markets – for all those who share the basic ideas and for those who come with other purposes, are punctual and very generally common practices that conducts to the expected results of mediation.

More subtle objectives, that are probably succeed from those described earlier, are also worked:

- rehabilitation of the earth (physic space) with organic agriculture, reforestation, etc. ;
- economic relocation (social economy applications) ;
- social life regeneration of local communities (exchanges, good-neighborhood practices).

5 Stakes, Challenges and Possibilities

During the original study, we had the opportunity to work from a couple of weeks to a month within the related associations. By the time, we could notice some shared court and long-term challenges and the different ways to deal with them.

In order to achieve economic autonomy most strategies that are applied are linked to their goals of bringing people that are not necessarily in the same "ecological" context. For example, it is a very effective practice to offer a hostelling service, as well as camping placements or more sophisticated rooms likely to attract with touristic attributes.

Further, some other paid services can be placed as touristic structure like tracking, guided tours, bike rentals, massages, organic-local meals, etc. As the visitants enjoy their "green", "agro" or "adventure" tourism time, they get in touch to all alternatives practices and activities that are running all around the eco-village. They can either participate in some of them, discuss with the residents or be informed indirectly, through signs, folders, and other informative materials available, like films and books.

Nevertheless, all this touristic offers require a physical structure and maintenance that are very often an economic obstacle to be surpassed. Normally the eco-village starts with the association of every members' resources: time work and efforts, network help, individual economies, and alternative, institutional or

government credits or financing.

It represents a delicate challenge once the eco-villages are long-term projects and has to be a serious investment of each integrant which means commitment, determination, trust-based relationships and confidence.

Another important point to be considered is the location and the available natural and local resources, logistic facilities, neighborhood receptivity and synergy, and further communal politics and network. All those aspects seemed to be decisive to the success or failure in the process of mediating and stimulating degrowth.

Milburn (2002) considers that the mediation arose from an alternative movement, that is not institutional, and that it facilitates the citizens' initiatives. To the author, the mediation became for some years now, a device of the public action.

Besides the mentioned stakes (economy, structure, activities) we understand that there are some risks, even more endanger and certainly more subtle, that must be in the very basis likely to be frequently reviewed (revisited) and reinforced in order to maintain the eco-village essences and values. The following list was formulated based on some residents and visitants testimonials and many texts and declarations from other eco-villages (virtual references):

1. With unclear or unauthentic objectives (in production, innovation or learning) the community seems to exist only for the conviviality ;
2. Refusal of critics and rejection of external "non-corresponding" ideas or the development of a feeling of superiority towards those who work on the same themes and problems can seriously damage the network ;
3. Absence of coordination and planning (activities, schedule, exchanges, information distribution and re-launching) uses to be great causes of failure ;
4. A strong instrumentation of the community can lead to impoverishment of exchanges because of the lack of motivation and implication of the members ;
5. Poor and superficial shares and discussion brings dissatisfaction to the participants so one will probably try to fetch somewhere else its owns alternatives ;
6. The competition between individuals in certain occupations can play a negative role ;
7. The institution of a certain "intellectual imperialism" to those who have no knowledge on the concerned centers of interest can rapidly create circles of antipathy ;
8. Intervention of an hierarchical, institutional or governmental system from outside or inside the community may corrupt the main values on the eco-village.

6 Social Learning: Cognitive and Learning Pathways

Knowledge management is often described as an essential aspect of the successful functioning of groups, organizations and communities through their being able to bring together, deal with, and effectively control the knowledge shared by many individuals.

From knowledge management we understand the core of mediation, that "refers to a knowledge's philosophy [...]. A philosophy of humans complexity phenomena engenders a certain philosophy of their mode of knowledge" (Guillume-Hofnung, 1995: 8). To the eco-village context, the mediation is the way of

dealing with all internalized conceptions and ideals that northern society is habituated, and further, to present things differently, proposing changes. So it is about constructing links of knowledges, virtually, opening the discussion, evolving literature and sciences; and physically, getting a real structure of a new society.

According to Bandura (1976) the social learning consists in reproduce a behavior which is observed. That is, as complement to the trial and the errors method, the observation would be an express and effective average to acquire new know-how. Aiming at a long-lasting and mobilizable image of a behavior model, eco-village appeal to the observation and the experiment of their lifestyles and practices. We imagine the social learning and its cognitive pathways flowing from people's interactions in the eco-villages activities.

We assume that the social learning due by the simple observation and elaboration of hypotheses concerning the most appropriate (re)action, brings a certain level of learning and thus the transmission of knowledge.

"We shall group together under the term of transmission all that concerns the dynamics of the collective memory; under the term of communication, the simple circulation of messages in a given moment " (Debray, 2000: 12). Those specific community of practice hope to be a transmission tool, not an isolated action or manifestation.

A community of practice is defined, according to Lave and Wenger (1991), in a part, as the process of social learning that arise when people having a common interest, collaborate mutually over an extended period of time, and it consist of sharing ideas and strategies, finding solutions and building innovations. We also talk about communities of practice to refer to the people that participate to those interactions.

As we see in the illustration 1, Wenger (1998) admits that social learning is formed by the following components that we put in relation with what we observed during these studies:

1. The meaning: as the ability to experience the world as meaningful. Why we do what we do?
2. The practice: the shared historical and social resources frameworks and perspectives that sustain mutual engagement in action. How we do it?
3. The identity: it is about how learning changes who we are and how we get involved and engaged. What do we want to be doing it?
4. The community: as the social configuration in which our enterprise is defined and our participation is recognized as competence. How to grow and learn together?

7 Conclusion

Within the contemporaneous social movements we have considered the one exposed in this work as a non-violent manifestation, that acts applying an holistic vision of life and society in order to build alternative solutions to the given economical situation of nowadays.

How to interpret financial crisis? How to produce healthy food for everybody? Which way to autonomy of nations? We also have many questions that still not answered about human relations with technologies, spirituality or education. Questions that should be faced as matter of life, without forgetting the next generations.

We talked about the degrowth process as Jackson (2004) talks about the eco-villages movement, a "global phenomenon responding to global causes". Nevertheless, we conclude that it is a case of a local, but not isolated, approach to apply degrowth basis. It is a movement that experiment different lifestyles

structures and organization.

It seems clear now that the education plays a main role in this process and as we consider the communities of practice, the eco-villages, as alternative “schools”, then we recognize the importance of enterprising such actions.

Another point is that, given the complexity of this theme, it isn't obvious which approach is more or less efficient to get the results we're looking for. Meanwhile, it is certain that some tools could be deeply explored.

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