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## ■ INTENTIONAL COMMUNITIES AND ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainability is a prominent concept today in political and ecological debate. Although as a concept it dates back more than 300 years, it is only in the last three decades of the twentieth century that it has become a widely known concept. Its defining premise is that humanity should limit use of natural resources to a level that allows both the current generation and future generations' equitable access to resources and environmental space. This is in contrast to the current practice, in which industrialized ("over-developed") countries use the lion's share of resources, while developing countries ("low-developed" or "least-developed") use a relatively small portion. Some calculations show that industrialized countries' resource use exceeds sustainability limits by three to five times. Sustainability

also has economic and social implications, but these have been little explored or developed.

When considering what concrete steps are needed to make sustainability a reality, Joseph Huber, a German political philosopher, outlined three strategies. First, an efficiency strategy can be realized, whereby energy and material demands are reduced, materials are recycled, and dangerous pollutants are minimized. Second, a sufficiency strategy is possible. A major objective would be the setting of new social goals, such as relying to a high degree on seasonal goods, and the reduction of consumer demands in general. This would lead to a much simpler way of life. Third, a consistency strategy might be successful, whereby human activities are organized such that they are in harmony with nature. The use of appropriate technology (for example, shallow rather than deep plowing in certain regions of Africa) is an example of a human activity in harmony with nature.

But what is the contribution of intentional communities to sustainability? For several decades, writers such as Barry Commoner, Murray Bookchin, and Ted Trainer have claimed that Western society must change dramatically in order to guarantee our future survival. Their suggestions are often labeled utopian and unrealistic. Ted Trainer's response is to refer to the many intentional communities currently in existence, some of which have lasted several decades, all over the world in different economic and cultural settings.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF INTENTIONAL COMMUNITIES THAT MAKE SUSTAINABILITY A GOAL

The root of the close connection between intentional communities and sustainability efforts has two elements: the individual attitudes of the members of the community and the community's organization principles or structural essentials.

For example, people who want to live their lives in harmony with nature and therefore decide to minimize their environmental impact may want to find other like-minded people with whom to live. The environmental effect of this decision for a low-impact lifestyle is based completely on personal renunciation and living on a subsistence level. Those who make such a decision are following the sufficiency strategy to sustainability. On the other hand, communities whose technical, organizational, or infrastructural innovations shape the project's profile (as in, for instance, an eco-

## A Case Study in Sustainable Communal Living

Horace Herring, an energy researcher, used a questionnaire to ask members of Redfield Community (in England) about the merits of communal living as a means of reducing environmental impact in society. Their responses were of three types: physical, social, and political. The physical argument was that sharing facilities leads to less environmental impact and lower costs; the social argument was that there is less social competition to consume; the political argument was that it was not feasible to have continued economic growth and reduced environmental impact.

One member who made the physical argument—which might be termed the economies-of-scale argument—said:

It reduces material consumption because we cook together, using very little processed food and saving energy. We share one kitchen, one washing machine, films on video etc. We try to produce as much of our own food as possible. We can share tools and other equipment (lawn mower, chain saw) etc. We circulate unwanted clothing etc. We can skillshare - so we're more likely to "fix" something than go out and buy new. (Herring 1998, p. 6)

The benefits here are clear and straightforward, but the impact on consumption is not clear-cut. Sharing does not necessarily lead to lower consumption. In fact, shared facilities make possible access to expensive (and energy intensive) resources that the individual could not hope to attain, such as swimming pools, saunas, hot tubs, cars, holiday homes, and so forth.

A member who made the social argument said:

Communal living is more satisfying leading to a reduction in the need for "toys" to keep up morale in a conventional nine-to-five situation.

The "keeping up with the Joneses" needs are also reduced as "the Joneses are communards" in the same

situation as me. There is an ethos of negative snobbery—the less my second-hand bargain clothes cost, the more people think that I'm smart (kind of thing!). I can tailor my earnings to meet my lower costs. (Herring 1998, p. 7)

This social influence not to consume and to be content on a lower income does have an important environmental impact. In a materialist society it is socially difficult not to consume unless one is a hermit, but intentional communities can be islands of nonconsumption. As another member remarked:

There is reduced peer pressure to spend money compared to life outside Redfield. Socializing and leisure costs are greatly reduced. The general ethos at Redfield is to reduce our environmental impact as much as possible and this is contagious—we also learn from each other. (Herring 1998, p. 7)

When Redfield members spoke about the educational or political role of communal living, the general public's lack of awareness of the link between consumption and environmental impact came up frequently. As one Redfield member commented:

You mention material consumption = environmental impact as though most people agree with it, but of course they don't. All political parties want increased material consumption and environmental protection, and are trying to fool us into thinking we can have both. (Herring 1998, p. 7)

—Karl-Heinz Simon and Horace Herring

### Further Reading

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village that relies on renewable energy or an agrarian community with a high level of self-sufficiency) are environmentally friendly on the basis of their structure. Their approach has much in common with the efficiency strategy to sustainability.

### Deliberate Decisions

There is some empirical evidence that the decision to live in an intentional community goes along with a desire to live an ecologically acceptable life (Fellowship

for Intentional Communities 2002). Even when the primary goal of the members of the community is social or spiritual achievement, in most cases an environmentally friendly lifestyle is also important.

### Structural Elements

There are at least four structural elements that characterize intentional communities and determine their relationship to sustainability. Some of these elements may also characterize ordinary households, but only in

a rudimentary form, or as a side effect without much societal impetus.

The first structural element is optimization and resource sharing. Intentional communities are more likely than individual households to assess the environmental impacts of equipment, such as power plants, cars, refrigerators, and so on. It is important to count the impacts from both the product's manufacturing and use phases. The environmental impact of its production may be significant, and the less the product is actually used (as, for instance, when a car spends most of its time in a parking lot at the driver's place of employment or home), the higher the proportion of the total impact from production. When an intentional community organizes an optimized use of equipment (for example, by shared access to a commonly used carpool), then benefits can be achieved with respect to the overall balance of production and use impact. However, to a certain extent this optimized usage necessitates more investment in spare parts and maintenance. Hence, only a detailed analysis of the particular situation will show whether there are some benefits or negative overall effects. The end aim is to reduce the overall environmental impact per service unit.

The second structural element is closing cycles. Most of the radical sustainability conceptualizations take it for granted that a sustainable future can be achieved only if society is reorganized in small, decentralized units. The assumption is that those small units will be more or less self-sufficient. A good example is food production. When most of the food needed in a community is produced by that community itself, the consumers have the opportunity to set their own quality standards, to obey environmental principles, and to reuse wastes from the system (for example, manure) in agriculture and gardening. The aim is to create production systems that are to a high degree independent from external resources, for example, by applying fertilizers produced on the farm itself, by minimizing wastes, and by giving the consumer population control over production.

The third structural element, a reliance on regional products rather than products from farther afield, grows naturally out of the second. As Ted Trainer pointed out with respect to more sustainable solutions, "We must develop settlements in which most of the goods and services we use are produced from the land, labor, talent and capital of the local region" (Trainer 1998, p. 80). With reliance on regional products, transport expenses are lowered or avoided, and more transparency can be achieved, because the participants in the production

consumption systems know each other and can coordinate their concerns face to face.

The fourth structural element is responsibility. Holding property in common demands that people be more responsible with regard to everyday resource use, waste disposal, the environmental conditions in the community, and so forth, than they would have to be otherwise. Some (but surely not all) communities make use of a common economy; that is, they pool all earned money in a common purse and take as much money as they need for their personal expenditures, while the community as a whole takes care of large costs, such as heating and rent or mortgage. One result of a common economy is that people consciously reduce their wants, so as not to burden the group.

### THE CHALLENGE INTENTIONAL COMMUNITIES POSE

It is clear that intentional communities have some advantages when it comes to pursuing a sustainable way of life, even granting that in some cases there may also be drawbacks (as when, for instance, a community's isolated location necessitates getting around by car). Part of their advantage comes from the attitudes of their members, who tend to be modest in their demands; part of their advantage comes from their organization and structural elements.

Thus, although living in community may not be a necessary condition for sustainability, the relative success of intentional communities is a challenge to the rest of the society. When communal living promotes a culture of conservation, it is showing the rest of society how the good life should look. To do this effectively, intentional communities must be united by morals, not economics. Sharing facilities is not enough: That just makes one's consumption more efficient. Although cohousing based on environmental and energy-efficient design is desirable and increasingly popular, it is not sufficient. Furthermore, projects exist that counteract the goals mentioned—for example, retirement communities and gated communities that act as islands of luxury and wealth isolated against the poorer outside world. To overcome attitudes that favor high consumption, it is necessary for people in a community to have a moral vision that advocates for a voluntarily chosen low-consumption lifestyle—a philosophy known as "voluntary simplicity." In addition, the practical advantages of such alternatives to mainstream modes of living need to be demonstrated.

This goal of voluntary simplicity has been the teaching of all religious leaders, but is hard to sustain in a materialistic society. As with monastic communities in past ages, communal living in the twenty-first century offers a refuge from competitive consumption. As Bill Metcalf, a scholar in the field of intentional communities, remarks, "For any community to be sustainable it must endure as a social unit while dramatically reducing its environmental impact. Unfortunately, those communal groups on the increase are the very ones with the least potential for environmental saving" (Metcalf 2000, p. 20). That is the dilemma facing sustainable communities in the twenty-first century.

—*Karl-Heinz Simon and Horace Herring*

**See also** ECOVILLAGES

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## ■ INTENTIONAL COMMUNITIES AND GOVERNANCE

Most contemporary intentional communities govern themselves through some form of participatory democracy, such as majority-rule voting or consensus decision making. Some have or have had a single leader and a hierarchical system of governance.

### ONE LEADER, HIERARCHICAL GOVERNANCE

In most spiritual or religious communities formed before the 1990s, including most Christian communities and Eastern ashrams and meditation centers, the spiritual leader (such as a minister, guru, swami, *roshi*, lama, or meditation teacher) makes the decisions. Communities with this form of leadership include the Anabaptist Hutterite communes in Canada and the United States; the Bruderhof communities in the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia; various fundamentalist Christian sects worldwide; Catholic monasteries and convents; the 1970s Shiloh Youth Revival Centers in the United States; and the Ananda World Brotherhood communities in California.

Prior to the 1990s, this form of governance was also frequently chosen by spiritually oriented communities that were not tied to a particular religious group and by New Age or metaphysical communities and specifically therapeutic communities or ones that emphasized personal growth. In these communities, religious, spiritual, psychological, or therapeutic authority was tied to the authority figure who governed the community. The Yamagishi communities of Japan still use this form of governance, as did the Findhorn Foundation in Scotland through the mid-1970s, The Farm in Tennessee through 1983, the worldwide Emissaries of Divine Light communities through the late 1980s, and the Ganas community in New York City through 2001. All of these communities still survive today.

In communities with one leader, the teacher or founder usually chooses a small group of spiritually or otherwise worthy members to manage various areas of community functioning (food service, housekeeping logistics and building maintenance, clerical and administrative functions, and so on). These managers are answerable to the leader. When the community is one of a network of related communities of the same faith or spiritual practice, the supreme spiritual leader often appoints more junior spiritual leaders to run each community. Rank-and-file community members answer to

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