The Politics of Consensus:

An Exploration of the Cloughjordan Ecovillage, Ireland

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Abstract

Ecovillages have grown in number around the world since the early 1990s. This growth appears to be largely due to the contested nature of post/modernity and the desire to establish a more simple, meaningful and sustainable lifestyle that is centered on community. The end of the 1990s represented the high tide of neo-liberalism in most advance liberal democracies. Ten years later, and the global economy still demonstrates signs that modes of capitalism have intensified and spread under the influence of global and state orchestrated markets, giving rise to a search for alternatives that might provide other mechanisms for organizing our lives. Cloughjordan Ecovillage is used to examine how governance through a consensus-based decision-making approach works as an alternative in this circumstance. Generally, intentional communities are organized around egalitarian principles and therefore commonly embrace the ideology of consensus. The primary research question guiding this study was – Does consensus work in the governance of alternative lifestyles? The preliminary findings of this case study suggest that in spite of the impressive nature of the built infrastructure at this site, the community continues to struggle with consensus-based decision-making as a form of self-organization and governance.

Introduction

This article outlines the evolution of the Cloughjordan Ecovillage with a focus on the consensus-based approach to decision-making adopted by this community. The development of this aspect of governance is examined based on the narratives drawn from both former members (FMs) and current members (CMs) of the ecovillage (hereafter referred to as 'the village'), all of whom play(ed) varying influential roles in the ongoing development of this community. The village is situated within an alternative lifestyles model, which suggests that meaningful representations of culture, social valuing, sense of place, identity and belonging are concomitant within the community. The village is located in the town of Cloughjordan in County Tipperary, The

Republic of Ireland (hereafter referred to as Ireland). The discursive narratives that emerge are based on the voices of FMs and CMs of the Sustainable Ireland Project, Ltd (SPIL), the organization in charge developing the village, as practiced within this community. The critique that emerges provides the opportunity to explore the contested narratives on governance, especially as related to the consensus-based approach to decision-making adopted by the intentional community under study.

Models of alternative lifestyles depend upon a considerable shift in power from globalized values to those internalized in local community autonomy. The 'Interplay between the local and the global is at the heart of the battle for a compatible modernity, and the desire to determine destiny' (Curry, Koczberski & Connell 2012, p. 122). An important component in this shift is the social valuing of place, as it allows communities to move beyond oppressive or detached interactions to more self-enhancing and engaging ones. This shift also involves a focus on the experiential micro-politics and ethics of governance, and the development of critical community awareness and the prioritization of social and ecological costs over purely profit-orientated decision-making. Such a shift usually involves explicit ethical and social agendas for change that value place and belonging in local communities. To a large extent, this shift will depend on the historical and political context of the community involved, and its approach to governance. Examining the way in which a community organizes and governs itself, provides an indication of how much it has moved away from the challenges of neoliberal dominance – and developed a governing process that truly embraces the ideals of the community (Erikson 2007, Fraser 2010). Social justice, as both the recognition of cultural identity and the redistribution of resources for local communities, cannot take place without these important elements (Fraser 2010).

Intentional Communities

Intentional communities have been defined in various ways, but they are generally considered to be communities formed by like-minded people who create a community in which they can share, sustain and promote their beliefs and values. According to the Intentional Communities website (http://www.ic.org/), an intentional community is an inclusive term for: ecovillages, cohousing communities, residential land trusts, communes, student co-ops, urban housing cooperatives, intentional living, alternative communities, cooperative living, and other projects where people

strive together with a common vision. Ergas (2010) describes such a community as one that has established a 'collective vision by agreeing on common values, establishing goals, and converting them into action' (p. 33).

Intentional communities can also be viewed as social movements (Schehr 1997) because they attempt to reinterpret the social order of property and labor relationships in a way that is more collaborative and collective. In the same light, ecovillages can be seen as part of this social movement, given their common stance against organizational and cultural authority (Snow, Soule, & Kriesi 2004) and their contested view of dominant culture as it embraces material possession and resource extraction (Foster & York 2004; Watson & Zakri 2001). Kirby (2004 p. 1) adds: The rise of a protest movement to challenge the forces that promote the globalization of a non-sustainable capitalist/industrial system has been paralleled by the rise of the ecovillage movement as a national and international enterprise.

Globalization, environmental degradation and information technology development have played a role in the precipitation of socio-cultural-environmental changes that have radically altered our perception of space and place. At the same time, there is a growing perception that family and community ties have grown weaker and modern life more fragmented, isolated and disconnected (Macnaghten & Urry 1998; Putnam 2000).

A number of authors have criticized neoliberal dominance, arguing in favor of recentralizing nature and ecology in our lives and the lifestyles we choose. McCarthy and Prudham (2004), for example, refer to neoliberal nature as 'the politics of transforming and governing nature under neoliberalism' (p. 279). Heynen and Robbins (2005) refer to the acceleration of 'the ongoing commodification of natural things' (p. 6). While Heynen, et al. (2007) refer to neoliberal environments as 'the ways that attempts to 'stretch' and 'deepen'… the reach of commodity circulation relying on the re-working of environmental governance and on entrenching the commodification of nature, and vice versa' (p. 3).

We maintain that in a broader context, neoliberalism re-intensifies the older liberal projects of individualism, where citizens are seen to be free from government intervention and

marketization. Markets are the best way to enable individual autonomy and efficient economic outcomes, often embracing the views of privatization and free trade. It is important to remember that neoliberal governance provides external controls, managed by powerful stakeholders that embrace this form of governance. We suggest that in order to move away from this dominant worldview, the next step is to migrate towards those values represented by the ecovillage concept of alternative lifestyle, which charts a path to a more just global order.

Intentional communities endeavour to create an alternative that synthesizes social, environmental and spiritual concerns. 'It is the fusion of these elements that forms the core of the ecovillage ideology, and provides a focus for those who see conventional social patterns as unacceptable' (Kirby, 2003 p. 324). Schor (1998) refers to this departure as a voluntary simplicity movement that arose during a period of heightened environmental awareness. Members of such communities typically move away from consumerism and materialism in search of a more spiritual way of life, with a strong emphasis on community.

Following Kirby (2003) and Ergas (2010), we locate ecovillages as part of the environmental movement. This is evident in the emphasis ecovillages place on living a simple, sustainable, community-orientated life in harmony with nature and based on the principles of permaculture. In this article, place is viewed as embodied space (cf. Relph 1976; Tuan 1977), embedded in interactive community practices (cf. deCerteau 1984, 1988; Butz & Eyles 1997). The focus on practice contributes to the production and reproduction of local practices of belonging and identity (cf. Stedman 2002, 2003b). We suggest that consumption appears irrepressible because it is an idealist practice that is no longer based on the satisfaction of needs and realistic consumption. So any desire to 'moderate consumption' or to establish a normalizing network of needs via moralist positions alone is naïve (Baudrillard 1970/1998, pp. 24-25). In order to move forward, we see a need to highlight the practice of face-to-face interactions between and within local communities and assume the existence of a plurality of spaces and places in which to challenge and negotiate the construction of specific discourses pertaining to cultural, social and personal matters.

In our view, the process of governance within these communities requires that encounters be reciprocal. One indicator of this is the degree to which governance resides within the community, and the extent to which the community plays a key role in organizing and managing the environment in which these encounters take place. This paper focuses on the space and place of governance in an effort to uncover the degree to which the governance in question enables significant community encounters that abide by the values of the community at large. Findings drawn from this study have direct implications for advancing our understanding of how intentional communities govern themselves and make decisions within their communities.

This study is designed to identify a range of social issues in order to stimulate discussion, debate and further research in the area of governance and decision-making in ecovillages and other intentional communities. The finding may also be of interest to researchers in the area of community-based tourism (CBT) development and management, where participation in the decision-making process is seen as vital for all stakeholders. Furthermore, this work might be of interest to town and city planners, who are directly involved in developing, managing and progressing communities within their jurisdictions.

Ecovillages

According to the United Nations Charter (1987), sustainability can be defined as 'development that meets the needs of current society without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'. Gillman (1991) notes that ecovillages are based on: 1) limited human scale; 2) full-featured settlement; 3) harmless integration of human activities into the natural world; 4) support for healthy human development; and 5) sustainability (p. 10). The ecovillage movement is 'one example of small communities that are intended to build community and ecological sustainability' (Ergas 2010, p. 32).

Human scale refers to establishing a community whose size enables people to know one another and to have a direct input into the direction of the community. A full-featured settlement is one that includes a favorable balance of residences, organic food production, light industry, commerce, social life and leisure. Harmless integration of human activities into the natural world helps establish equity between the two and encourages the use of renewable energy sources and

recycling. Ensuring healthy human development provides a balanced and integrated approach that includes physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual aspects of life. Finally, an ecovillage should be sustainable and ideally offer itself as a microcosm of the whole of society (Gillman 1991). (See Trainer [1998] for additional information on conceptualizing ecovillages.)

Ecovillages are commonly conceived around four pillars: sustainable building, organic farming, resilient community and alternative energy. Winston (2012) holds that the village illustrates a grassroots sustainability enterprise that brings together social and technological innovation, with a focus on sustainable housing. The author cautions, however, that most sustainable housing initiatives have thus far tended to be isolated experiments in housing construction or design, limited in terms of both impact and scope.

Kirby (2003) identifies three major challenges in the ecovillage in Ithaca (EVI): boundary issues, communication issues, and consensus issues. During the early stages of settlement and planning, the consensus process 'stretched the resolve, patience and creativity of the group'. With many financial obligations and decisions to make, the consensus process 'was pressured by the deadlines imposed by the need to begin construction'. The consensus process was viewed as 'a blessing and a curse, described variously as 'a beautiful process in theory', 'ponderous', and 'the tyranny of the minority'' (p.328).

Commitment and time constraints were not the only barriers to the consensus process. Kirby reports that some members felt resentment and animosity toward other members borne out of the early planning stages. This in turn led to tensions within the community and threatened the viability of the consensus process. Outside facilitators were brought in to help ameliorate communications, which reportedly resulted in 'significant improvement in the ability of ecovillage residents to listen to each other and to respond appropriately' (2003, p. 328).

Renz (2006) studied the role of consensus decision-making in the context of cohousing. She reports that reaching agreement was complicated by value differences among members as well as discontinuity in their participation. She identifies three characteristics that influenced the consensus process:

the role of structured communication within and between group meetings; a tension between maintaining process openness and reaching decision closure; and the expectation that group members will work within the consensus process. (p. 163)

Renz's analysis highlights the importance of timing in the interpretation of conflict and the role of process change when a group reaches its limit in terms of the members' commitment to the consensus process. Sargission (2004) notes, 'Consensus is an example of procedural justice at its best. However, procedural justice on its own cannot ensure just outcomes' (p. 321). Political projects that seek to deliver social justice for grassroots communities such as ecovillages must challenge the ideology, assumptions and practices of neo-liberalism in various local contexts and economies. The process of consensus offers one such approach, albeit a challenging one.

Consensus seeks agreement. It mirrors the egalitarian intents of ecovillages, thus presenting itself as the most legitimate form of decision-making in this context. This approach aims to enable people to negotiate disagreements and to find collective solutions. It also binds each individual to the decisions made and the ensuing outcomes. Like all democratic forms of governance, consensus is open to manipulation and abuse, and can be misused to legitimize non-consensual decisions made without the full support of the group. On the other hand, a bonafide consensus process can find solutions to apparently unsolvable problems and form strong bonds within the group (Sargisson & Lyman 2004).

The consensus process is built upon the provisions of full access, participation and trust. If faith in the process is compromised, it can lead to an oppressive environment in which people end up nominally supporting decisions they do not agree with. While community empowerment is one way to challenge the ideology of neoliberalism, it does not always ensure equity in practice. Therefore there is a need to establish sustainable practices that influence the efficacy of the consensus process and constrain the disproportionate influence of a persuasive speaker, an articulation of technical talk, or someone empowered by backroom lobbying. Done right, however, consensus is a fully inclusive, cooperative and non-hierarchical process of decision-

making that provides the organizational structure for all voices to be heard and all opinions respected (Sargisson & Lyman 2004).

Cloughjordan Ecovillage

This section draws from Winston (2012), Duncan (2010), Connolly (2007); a content analysis of village related literature, and from numerous communications with former and current members (FMs and CMs). See Winston (2012) for a comprehensive account of the development and evolution of the Cloughjordan Ecovillage.

The idea of creating an ecovillage in Ireland was conceived of in the mid-1990s by Gavin Harte and Gregg Allen, both of whom had a strong commitment to sustainable development. A small group of interested people gathered, which led to the founding SPIL—a not for profit company limited by guarantee and run along co-operative principles. The company established a board of directors (BOD) and an advisory panel comprised of experts with relevant skills to advance the project, including an engineer, an architect, an accountant, a solicitor, a surveyor and the then leader of the Green Party (Winston, 2012).

SPIL was launched in 1999, at which time the public was invited to attend a series of monthly workshops given by Harte. Interested parties were invited to become members, which required a £1,000 investment in the project. Membership was limited to roughly 40 in order to ensure a manageable size and to allow for the realization of the core principles of the organization. An office was rented and Harte and two part-time workers were employed to manage the project. SPIL established a Memorandum & Articles (constitution) for the company as well as a Membership Agreement that outlined the responsibilities of the company and its members. Subsequently, SPIL developed an Ecological Charter, which outlined the core principles of development. This charter includes environmental objectives, building and construction code, and calls for the use of a district heating system (DHS) and sustainable drainage. For example, buildings are expected to be well insulated, to make use of passive solar gain and renewable energy, to minimize potable water consumption, to reduce construction waste, and to use low embodied energy materials (those requiring relatively little energy to produce). SPIL then

applied for charitable status and established the Rules of Operation—with an emphasis on consensus-based decision-making (Winston 2012; Connolly 2007).

In 2001, SPIL began to consider potential building sites within roughly 150 kilometres from Dublin, preferably adjacent to an existing town rather than a greenfield (agricultural) site. Cloughjordan was chosen from among a dozen short-listed sites due to the range of infrastructures it offered—including a train link to Dublin, as well as the enthusiasm shown for the project by a local councilor and historian. SPIL negotiated a one-year option to purchase the 67-acre site while investigating whether or not it could obtain planning permission to develop an ecovillage on what was a greenfield site. The map below, taken from the official village website, shows its location within Ireland.

SPIL held a number of public meetings in Cloughjordan to inform the residents of its plans as well as to solicit feedback from the local community. For example, SPIL invited local school children to make a model of the town and then to join it together with the ecovillage model that SPIL provided. This community-based project was reportedly successful in gaining the support of the town residents by including them in the development process.

Figure 1. Map locating the Cloughjordan Ecovillage. Source: http://thevillage.ie/

SPIL worked with the local planning authority in an effort to integrate the creation of a sustainable settlement within the redrafting of the county development plans. SPIL had a MasterPlan for the construction of an ecovillage drawn up by Solearth Ecological Architecture and Buro Huppold (an engineering firm). By this time, each of the roughly 50 SPIL members had invested €15,000 in the project. This risk investment allowed SPIL to hire consultants to assist them in gaining planning approval. In 2005, SPIL received outline planning permission to build a sustainable community of 130 homes and work units, albeit with over 30 conditions attached. These conditions took more than a year to comply with and significantly increased the cost of the project.

Figure 2. Map of the Cloughjordan Ecovillage. Source: http://thevillage.ie/

In order to purchase the land, SPIL members borrowed roughly half the money from Clann Credo (a social lending institution) and the rest in loans from SPIL members, making use of a loan stock scheme that offered lower interest rates than commercial banks. In order to finance the costs of putting in the infrastructure, SPIL took another loan from the loan stock scheme as well as one from a commercial bank. This put a financial strain on the membership, at which time a substantial number of members withdrew from the project. The infrastructure was completed in 2008 and building began the following year. At the time of this writing (June 2012), building is

still underway. The map above, as displayed on the official village website, shows the layout of the village and its connection to the town of Cloughjordan at the southern border of the property.

Currently, SPIL has approximately 125 members. About a third of the members have built a home in the ecovillage and reside there. Some members live in the town, awaiting the construction of their home. Others are waiting for approval of a bank loan. Still others have resigned themselves to the fact that they cannot afford to build, but who choose to live in the neighborhood and participate in village activities. As of November 2011, approximately 83 of the 130 plots had been sold, with growing recognition that SPIL may not be able to sell all of their sites.

Consensus

From the beginning, SPIL adopted a consensus-based approach to decision-making, as stated on their website:

> As a community we aim to share out the rights and responsibilities of making this project work successfully. Our evolving decision-making processes are founded on the Consensus Model, with practical structures in place to ensure that we achieve our aims. (SPIL 2011)

Connolly notes, 'There has always been a tension between task and process—the need to get things done within a specific time period and the need to reach consensus on how to do it'. For Connolly, a longtime SPIL member, the greatest strength of the project has been 'how we resolve this tension through our decision-making process'. He claims, 'We've never made a decision without using consensus' (2007, p.5). In 2007, SPIL began to implement the Viable Systems Model (VSM) in an effort improve their consensus-based approach to decision-making.

VSM was designed by Stafford Beer and provides a practical, non-hierarchical decision-making structure based on natural systems. Walker and Espinosa, two VSM experts, have worked with SPIL members in implementing this system. This has reportedly enabled the village to decide on a wider range of issues within a more favorable time frame by distributing the decision-making

process across a series of committees. Espinosa and Walker give a detailed account of the methodology, approach, and staged learning of this ongoing project (Espinosa et al. 2011, ch.5).

VSM is characterized by sharing out work and responsibility in an effort to ensure that decision-making is both efficient and accountable. SPIL members can choose from six 'primary activity' areas (sales & marketing; infrastructure maintenance; land use; developing the local economy; community building; and education, research & training). There are also a number of 'meta-systemic' groups employed to promote 'cohesion and synergy' in the management (Espinosa et al. 2011, p. 542).

Currently SPIL employs one full-time general manager, a part-time sales manager, and a part-time administrator. Members' meetings are held monthly, at which time information is shared, issues discussed and policy approved. A General Meeting is held once a year, at which time 70% of the membership must be in attendance in order to establish a quorum. A village mailing list is employed to enable SPIL members who live on, near or away from the village to communicate and to stay informed of village issues.

Village contributions and challenges

The village has been developed largely in accordance with the principles of permaculture. It established the first local community supported agriculture (CSA) program in Ireland, drawing its membership from the ecovillage and the wider Cloughjordan community. As a partner in the Sustainable Energy for Rural Village Environment (SERVE) project, the village received funding from the EU CONCERTO Program towards the purchase and installation of Ireland's first renewable energy DHS and the establishment of the largest solar farm in Ireland. According to Duncan (2010), this project was seen as 'exemplary' for Ireland, earning SPIL approximately €1,000,000 in government and EU grants (p. 27). Furthermore, the village has made its mark on sustainable housing initiatives in Ireland and has received a lot of positive attention from the Irish media.

The village meets many of the criteria for sustainable housing, including access to public transportation, providing local employment, using energy-efficient housing construction and

making use of renewable building materials. It also provides on-site recycling of construction materials, produces on-site renewable energy, provides access to high quality green space for food, energy, leisure, and to a wide range of social resources within the local area. To date, however, there is limited empirical data available to evaluate the extent of the village's contribution to sustainability. The one exception is the ongoing evaluation of the energy use and efficiency rating of each of the village buildings. Winston (2012) notes that in order for the village to fulfill its aims as a demonstration project, there needs to be more systematic and detailed reporting of the contribution it makes to sustainability. Further investigation into the areas of environmental, economic and social impacts would help to clarify the contributions the village has made.

The village boasts a number of firsts, but it has also encountered some disappointments. The original well field (with a dug well) was paved over due to concerns about traces of nitrates found in the water. The village is now connected to the public water main. Plans for a reed bed sewage disposal system were approved and the infrastructure built, however, this has been put on hold due to increasingly stringent EU water quality directives and the projected cost of maintenance and management. According to Duncan (2010, p.28), the village is currently being served by 'a package plant discharging to the public sewer'. The DHS provides heat to the village via hot water but is not running at full efficiency since it was designed to heat 130 homes. This has required some tweaking of the system, though it continues to send hot water through some 2.5 kilometers of pipes, including those leading up to vacant lots. Finally, the state-of-the-art solar farm reportedly has a design flaw, which has rendered it limited in use until a solution can be found.

Finally, the village was not immune to the demise of the Celtic Tiger, the banking crisis, the collapse of the housing market, the ongoing recession and limitations imposed by the EU bailout in 2010. The unexpected cost of putting in the village infrastructure significantly increased the price of sites, making them more difficult to sell. Within the current economic climate, it is exceedingly difficult to obtain a housing loan, leaving many SPIL members unable to build on their site.

There is now a renewed interest in diversifying the sites for sale to include more cohousing, co-operative housing, equity partnerships, investment packages and rent-to-buy options. It remains uncertain, however, whether SPIL will be able to reach its goal of selling all 130 sites. One current member suggested that selling 70 sites or so would enable SPIL to get the 'banks off their back' and enable the village to put in external lighting, pathways and do some landscaping work. Plans for developing a central market square, children's play areas and two community buildings remain on hold pending funding.

Methodology

This case study employs a qualitative approach (cf. Denzin 2005). The epistemology of the approach is interpretive, informed by hermeneutics and phenomenology (cf. Ragin 1987). Grounded theory (Glaser 1967; Glaser 1978; Strauss 1990; Glaser 1992) guided and informed both the collection and analysis of the data. This approach seeks to incorporate different types of knowledge from a range of stakeholders in an effort to unmask new ways forward between individuals and organizations—and in their relations with wider society (Alvesson & Ashcraft, 2009).

One of the researchers visited and lodged at the village during a five-day period in July 2011. The primary purpose of this visit was for the researcher to introduce himself to the village community and to discuss the research proposal with the Village Education, Research and Training (VERT) committee, one of the six 'primary activity areas' established under the VSM system. The visit also served to inform the development of interview questions.

Data collection and interpretation

A total of eight participants were interviewed based on theoretical and snowball sampling (cf. Barbour 2001). Interviews were conducted over a five-month period and took place in the village, in Dublin and (one) by Skype. Materials informing the interview questions were drawn from participant observation, personal communications, content analysis and a literature review. Four semi-structured interviews were conducted with former members and four with current members, comprised of six males and two females ranging in age from their 30s to 60s. Each interview was

made up of ten core questions and ran roughly 60~90 minutes. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed in full.

Transcripts were examined in detail and data grouped according to emergent themes. A process of 'open' coding (Strauss & Corbin 1990 [2007]) was employed to name and categorize these data in a way that was both fitting and true to these data. The reduction of themes and categories presents a potential weakness but one that is accepted and rationalized by grounded theorists. According to Glaser (1992), interpreting patterns that emerge within the data is more important than any bias caused by such reduction. The goal is to build working categories that represent the data fairly (Glaser 1992; Strauss & Corbin 1990 (2007). The preliminary interview data are limited in scope but provide what is considered to be a balanced account, given that all those interviewed play(ed) influential roles in the development of the village.

Emerging narratives on governance and decision-making

Due to the relatively critical nature of former members' comments, it is believed that aggregating these data into a single narrative would present an overly negative view of the village. In an effort to avoid this, the voice of the FMs will be presented first followed by that of the current members. Out of respect for the privacy of the interview participants, all data have been anonymized and will be referred to simply as "FM" or "CM" data. The emerging narratives drawn from FMs and CMs are predictably different given that their experiences are based on different time frames and circumstances. This section explores these discursive narratives in an effort to better understand the strengths and shortcomings of the consensus-based decision-making process as practiced in the village.

Responses that emerged as significant across the interviews were grouped together under a set of general categories. These categories were subsequently aggregated under more general categories, creating a coding hierarchy that identified commonalities within the narratives. The table below provides a consolidated view of the core categories that emerged from the FM interview data as well as a brief description of each as drawn from the data. Due to space limitations, responses have been truncated to keywords or phrases. Great attention has been paid to preserve the original wording as much as possible.

Table 1. Core categories: Former members (FM) group

Categories	Descriptors
I. Governance	Difficult to balance efficiency, consensus and status quo; command and control mindset; emergency meetings; high alert; crucial decisions—have to make a decision right now; imposing emergency law; heightened circumstances; red alert; last minute votes; vote coaching; suspended all of the nice discussion; rubber stamp meetings; discussion topics pre-determined; leadership of zealots with moral authority; leadership knew what they are doing; had greater vision; walked the walk, talked the talk, environmental activists locked up together—there were bonds; forceful people—anything they said went; we'll do the thinking for you; hidden agendas; counter proposals required but viewed negatively; with us or against us; lacked scope to address problems; forfeited deposits by departing members not addressed. Secrecy; lack of accountability; the finance committee was less than open in keeping the BOD informed; control of information; didn't satisfy need to understand; jobs for the boys; private mailing lists inadvertently reinforced the lack of openness; ineffective communication; there was a lot of secrecy in the upper levels of the project; there was a lot of secrecy around the financial side of the project.
II. Decision-making	Site selection—paid three times over the odds for agricultural land without planning permission; certainly no sense of ever admitting or acknowledging that they made a bad choice; did a really extraordinarily poor job dealing with landowners; centralized decision-making; undue influence of three or four members; rifling through decisions; marginalizing people who wanted to be more inclusive; design link to town put houses down in the hollow.
A. Consensus	Consensus wasn't possible; consensus lacked structure; takes time—often decisions had to be made quickly; consensus works best on large issues, with small picture stuff, decision have to be made quickly to keep the project on track; workload needed to be broken down—spreading the load but weakened the whole involvement of everyone—each person involved only in their own little bit; felt like we were crying in the wilderness in trying to ensure consensus.

FMs reported that the legal structure of SPIL as a charity with a BOD and a consensus-based approach to decision-making didn't work.

> You had a legal structure that had a board of directors, a chairman and yet layered on top of that you had this attempt to have this consensus decision-making process… The

conflict of having a hierarchical company structure and a consensus decision-making process were in conflict with each other.

Another FM noted:

> If you have a BOD, you have a chairperson. That chairperson has certain responsibilities… This is a legal thing. And to try to sit that structure on top of an organization that was basically supposed to be consensus-based, it was a bad fit.

FMs noted the inherent difficulties of consensus-based decision-making in terms of executing time-effective decisions while at the same time seeking consensus. As one FM recounted:

> It was very easy to have consensus when you were just kind of meeting in a room somewhere and there was no actual reality—everything was theoretical. There were no pressing time frames, so you had time for consensus.

As things moved on and SPIL got more involved with planning departments and eventually with contractors, consensus was reportedly no longer possible.

> What happened then was that a couple of individuals, who would have been more in the command and control mind set, started to have more and more influence within the group.

This reportedly led to diminished transparency, as one FM reports:

> Things were always presented after decisions had already been made – like who was going to be paid to run the office. Votes were often taken at the last minute – ten to nine, so we needed to take a vote now. So this is the issue, and this is how you should vote on it.

The same respondent continues:

> If there were a big decision to make, they would wait until the last minute. We are going to apply for this grant tomorrow, so we really should vote 'yes' for this. And you are like – this is the first I heard of this. Can I read about this grant? What is it for?

Similarly, another FM reports:

> Every meeting was an emergency meeting – always on high alert. Oh my god, you have to come to the next meeting – we have to make a crucial decision. In five years, every meeting was about making a crucial decision.

The same respondent continues:

> It's a bit like imposing emergency law. You have to make decisions now, so you suspend all of the nice discussion…So under those heightened circumstances, red alert is on all the time.

FMs claim that the decision-making process was centralized around a few members who 'rifled through decisions' with a 'command and control mindset', marginalizing the BOD and membership in the process:

> I didn't see much of a distinction in power in being on the BOD because I was on the BOD and frankly being on it made no difference… It really didn't matter who was on the BOD because you didn't really have power. It was only 3-4 people running around [behind the scenes]—and it wasn't you.

FMs question the transparency of the leadership, citing the finance committee as a prime example. Claims were made that this committee was "less than open in keeping the BOD informed" which made it difficult for the BOD to oversee the development of the project and to know where they stood financially. In turn, secrecy within the leadership raised questions about accountability. One FM notes:

> There was a lot of secrecy in the upper levels of the project… There was a lot of secrecy around the financial side of the project.

One FM contends that the consensus process lacked structure, was time consuming and didn't allow for quick decisions to be made on urgent matters:

> Consensus works best on large issues. With small picture stuff, decisions have to be made quickly to keep the project on track.

The same respondent continues:

> I felt that we were crying in the wilderness in trying to ensure consensus and on trying to ensure issues were brought before the whole group, rather than decisions being largely taken in smaller groups and then just brought to the main group for rubber-stamping.

The workload needed to be broken down and distributed. By doing so, however, people and projects reportedly became isolated—with each person involved only in 'his or her own little bit'. The same respondent offers the following insight on the structure of leadership and the consensus-based approach to decision-making:

> I could see very well when things weren't working. Some of those involved might not have understood the importance of structure and how important it is to make things work. If you don't have a structure for your consensus to work, it is not going to work.

The FMs hold that the leadership and decision-making process divided the membership by 'ostracizing those perceived as trouble makers' and by 'marginalizing people who wanted to be more inclusive'. FMs viewed 'ineffective communication' within the leadership as a contributing factor in their reported lack of transparency and accountability. As one FM recounts:

> We were supposed to have consensus, but as soon as there were any questions things got very antagonistic… You were ostracized or seen as making trouble… This is the process, and if you are against this process you are against the village. That is all fine and dandy, but we need accountability. You are basically centralizing the decision-making power.

One FM reported that there was 'a limited sense of social justice or equality' on the part of some of the most influential members in terms of providing and sustaining equity within the community:

> Those with considerable money to invest had undue interest. It wasn't high on their list of priorities that this would have to be within the means of people who put their inspiration into it. Poorer members were squeezed out of the project.

The table below highlights the core categories that emerged from the CM interview data, including brief description of each as drawn from the data. Given space limitations, responses have been truncated to keywords or phrases. Once again, great attention has been paid in preserving the original wording as much as possible.

Table 2. Core categories Current members (CM) group

Categories	Descriptors
I. Governance	We're an educational charity; what does that mean; we are a fishbowl; we have this remit that we want to show that we are a sustainable community… that is what you are buying into; I think that there is a good honesty and integrity in the people who are in positions of leadership... there is an awareness of proper governance.
II. Decision-making	The membership is supposed to be the primary decision maker; they can come together and decide anything at once; VSM allows for distributed systems and distributed leadership; you can lead in certain areas and follow in others… it moves away from command and control and allows us pursue autonomy and self-organization; it works quite well when you understand it; a lot of people don't fully understand it… but I think it is a fairly good system.
A. Consensus	We took the consensus decision-making procedure from the food coop that a few of us were working at; people can talk at the expense of action; we have consensus—everything has to be done by consensus; but then we allow boards to run just on the consensus of the board; if you disagree, it is not enough to say that you disagree—you have to present an alternative; if people are making decisions on a consensus basis, they have responsibilities too… and if you take that responsibility on yourself to see all parts of the story and then say no, I still can't go along with that, then the community won't go along with it; it can be drawn out, and sometimes we do leave things undecided—and we can come back to them; sometimes maybe a majority decision makes sense; we're supposed to operate on a consensus basis in the boards, but we don't really do it… a lot of our decisions would be basically on a show of hands.

Note: CHP = combined heat & power

One CM reported that he feels there is 'honesty and integrity in the people who are in positions of leadership... [and] an awareness of proper governance'. Another CM notes that the consensus decision-making process 'was taken from the food coop that a few of us were working at and that has been built upon'. The VSM system includes a 'process group' whose job it is to research these sorts of things. The same respondent continues:

> As times goes by, we are better and better at making decisions. VSM allows for
> distributed systems and distributed leadership. You can lead in certain areas and
> follow in others… It moves away from command and control, and allows us to

pursue autonomy and self-organization. It's a system to empower people and allow them to self-organize.

Another CM offers the following account on VSM:

It works quite well when you understand it. A lot of people don't fully understand it… but I think it is a fairly good system.

The same respondent adds:

The membership is supposed to be the primary decision maker. They can come together and can decide anything at once, but that responsibility is given to the groups… The principle is that they are self-organized groups, so they will consider what that group needs to do—whatever it is.

The meaning and scope of consensus appears to vary among CMs. One CM noted, 'Everything has to be done by consensus', but then added, 'We allow boards to run just on the consensus of the board'. Similarly, another CM adds, 'We're supposed to operate on a consensus basis in the boards, but we don't really do it… A lot of our decisions would be basically on a show of hands'. He suggests, 'Sometimes maybe a majority decision makes sense'.

A successful consensus-based process calls for a well-informed membership that stays abreast of pertinent issues and who remains engaged in the project. Yet one CM noted, 'There are some people who just want a quiet house in the country, and… others who want this [community] to be a model of sustainability'.

Regardless of purpose and level of participation, one CM comments:

Part of the remarkable fact about this community is how well we really do work together… We are quite involved.

CMs agree that a consensus-based approach to decision-making requires individual and collective responsibility. One cannot simply disagree without providing an alternative. According to one CM:

> If you take that responsibility on yourself to see all parts of the story and then say no, I still can't go along with that, then the community won't go along with it. It can be drawn out, and sometimes we do leave things undecided, and we can come back to them.

Discussion

Developing a sustainable community may be more challenging than implementing the built infrastructure. Kirby notes:

> Whereas integrating into the built form the technology for living in an environmentally sustainable manner is relatively easy, the task of creating the kind of community that can experience and demonstrate a socially sustainable lifestyle has proven to be a much greater challenge. (2003, p. 327)

The village has installed an impressive infrastructure, replete in green technology, and has built an eclectic array of purpose-built, sustainable houses. However, the findings suggest that it has struggled in terms of governance and in its consensus-based approach to decision-making. Kirby reports that nearly one third of the issues reported at EVI were interpersonal in nature (2003, p. 329). The case of the village would corroborate this finding, where most of the reported tensions revolved around the consensus process and governance.

It is widely understood in the village that when a proposal is contested, members are expected to suggest an alternative proposal. Yet one former member reports, 'Counter proposals were required but were viewed negatively…. There was a 'with us or against us' ethos within the leadership'. That a 'leadership' was consistently identified by FMs suggests the existence of powers that operated outside of the consensus process. One FM asserted that SPIL was run by a 'leadership of zealots with moral authority… [who] walked the walk, talked the talk… [and] were] locked up together'. This sheds some light on why this group of individuals was reportedly so cohesive and influential.

If there were those who were empowered by leadership, there were others who have been described by FMs as 'sheepish followers [who] were dragged along… who didn't want to rock the boat'. Some members 'opted out because they felt like they didn't have a voice'. Others felt 'it would be too much hassle to put time in'. Still others were reportedly 'quite happy to let the

active group make decisions'. There was a sense that 'they know what they are doing because they stand up at meetings and tell us what is going on, what to think and what to do'. This deference (or apathy) amounted to tacit approval: 'You have all the power and moral authority, so you should tell us what to do'.

In 2007 'almost half the membership of the Cloughjordan membership decided to leave the project' (http://cloughjordan.net/). For those who forfeited their risk investment and left, they have expressed regret and even resentment. The implementation of VSM came on the heels of the 2007 exodus. This suggests that the village was aware of mounting tensions and sought to improve the way in which it governed itself and dealt with conflict resolution. Like EVI, the village resorted to calling in outside experts to facilitate communication within their community. Current members now report that they are basically satisfied with VSM, though its overall effectiveness and sustainability remains to be seen.

In addition to governance and communication issues, questions have been raised about the preparedness and capability of the founding members to manage the village project—one which grew fast and far beyond its original conception. As one FM put it, 'Volunteer environmentalists were not equipped to be commercial property developers'. Their alleged lack of experience and ability may offer some insights into why decisions were reportedly made at the last minute and to the perceived lack of transparency and accountability consistently reported by FMs.

If the leadership were not fully equipped to manage the development of the ecovillage on the scale that emerged, this may have contributed to the shroud of secrecy that has been reported by former members. Keeping a tight rein on the financial committee may have allowed the leadership to present an image of financial solvency and project solidarity at times when the project was in jeopardy.

Since 2007, unsold sites have been marketed in a way that more accurately reflects the costs of putting in the infrastructure. Newcomers attracted to the village now know more clearly what it costs to buy into this community. New members have been reported to be more financially secure than earlier members. As one former member put it, 'Idealists were replaced by eco-

entreneurs'. Indeed, a current member notes, 'A lot of people who look like entrepreneurs are coming around looking to invest'. He adds, 'When all is said and done, this community here is a pretty middle class community'.

Conclusion

From a broader, historical and socio-analytical perspective, there is little doubt that there are individuals seeking alternative lifestyles in the current world, which enables a move from globalized values towards local community autonomy. With this shift comes a need for processes that are sometimes naively assumed to be a easily prescribed, that allow for a different, more equitable approach to governance one that is able to repel the ills of globalized values in favor of inclusive community organization.

We suggest that being removed from the influence of neoliberal-based reference groups and the dominance of consumer culture may encourage the individual to think more for him/herself and to assume a more proactive role in decision-making. In doing so, the individual must assume responsibility for his or her actions, whether they be right or wrong (Heller 1970), divest themselves of neoliberal values and learn to become more independent and community minded.

Beyond establishing an ideology and built infrastructure in which to practice and promote alternative lifestyles, this study demonstrates the need for the village to establish an effective form of government that is commensurate with the values embraced by the community and sustainable over time. The findings reveal, however, that an alternative form of governance that resists the well-known effects of modernist, conventional, industrialized, mechanized and dependent lifestyles is not easily attained.

Counter-cultural governance that promotes a more democratic and organic form of government can encounter a steep learning curve in developing an equitable government in what is often a contentious process. Our research suggests that while there may be clear intentions and strong motivation to establish an alternative form of governance, this objective can be time consuming and difficult to accomplish. When the centrality of monetary exchange is removed from human

encounters to ensure a lifestyle capable of providing deeper connections with community and nature, one challenge is to develop a suitable form of alternative governance.

This issue of alternative governance has been examined in this study as well as the efficacy of its outcomes. It will be interesting to see if the future brings a more prominent move in the direction of alternative governance and the decision-making processes that they adopt—that are more organic than economic in nature.

Part of being a resilient community involves establishing sustainable leadership that embraces the spirit of consensus. The data suggests that reaching consensus improves over time, but at times contested issues have to be left unresolved until some future date. The evidence would suggest that consensus decision-making can be a rocky road, especially during the early stages when time constraints require urgent decisions. Perhaps the consensus approach should be implemented gradually—after urgent building considerations have been settled. As ideologically appealing as consensus may be to egalitarian-minded communities, the findings would suggest that this process is contested and solutions can be elusive.

Given such a steep learning curve, it might be prudent for such communities to consider adopting VSM (or similar system) in order to provide a more objective (and neutral) foundation on which the consensus process can be built. Such a structure might help to diffuse the personalization of issues and prevent the buildup of interpersonal tensions within the community. Adopting an 'expert' system, such as VSM, would allow its structure to become the focus of debate, rather than singling out individual community members or questioning the viability of the consensus process itself.

VSM provides a framework in which consensus can be practiced with greater transparency and accountability. It allows for the differentiation and distribution of tasks in a way that the village BOD or invisible leadership could not. Such a system encourages process openness, facilitates decision closure and embraces the consensus process. By distributing tasks and responsibilities, VSM allows for multiple valuations at different locations within the system. As such, this system

would seem better suited to tolerate value differentiation and discontinuity than a direct consensus approach.

Further research is called for in order to better understand the voices of ecovillage and other intentional community members vis-à-vis governance and a consensus-based approach to decision-making. At the same time, VSM and competing systems need to be further developed and examined, given their potential to enhance and sustain the consensus process.

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