

**The Social Sustainability of
Intentional Communities in Risk
Society,
Cloughjordan Ecovillage, an
Ethnographic Study**

**MSc Cultural Anthropology: A Sustainable
Citizenship**

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1. Introduction

As a planetary ecosystem and global community, we are now living in the Anthropocene (Smith and Zeder 2013), an era during which all aspects of life on earth are impacted by human activity, the consequences of which are interwoven with the hazards and dangers created by risk society. Amidst the socially and environmentally destructive consequences of industrial society and human activity in our interconnected world, ecovillages and other sustainably orientated intentional communities strive to provide an alternate way of living that exists in harmony with the planet's ecosystems (Litfin 2013).

Ecovillages are a living response by groups of individuals who have come together with a shared vision to attempt to mitigate the risk of climate change by providing an example of an alternative way of living. By implementing their vision of a more socially and ecologically sustainable alternative, they hope to reduce their personal and collective impact on the environment, thereby reducing the impact of climate change through their actions (Meijering 2012). Many ecovillages pursue ambitious paths towards meaningful human relationships, local sovereignty, non-hierarchical governance, self-reliance, and ecologically sustainable living (Dawson 2006). In their attempt to realise all four tenets of sustainability – social, cultural, ecological, and economic – the social sustainability of these communities, provide the foundation by which the group can realise this vision (Litfin 2014 ,20).

Additionally, such communities do not occur in a vacuum. While they are created in response to the existing norm and as they attempt to move away from the features of mainstream society, the two groups are inextricably linked. The extent to which dominant institutions pervade and inform intentional communities is usually moderated by the community's ability to remove itself from larger society (Sargisson 2009). Yet, given that many ecovillages embrace the mission to promote and push mainstream society toward a more ecologically sustainable and socially just way of living, this factor is one that must be recognised and accommodated within the community's vision.

Developed in response to a perceived risk, these communities are created and shaped by their members (Brennan and Brown 2008). However, the translation of the group's intentionality into being can become complicated as the group tries to implement new governance structures and social systems which have the potential to challenge the development of a

sustainable social community. Building and maintaining these systems into the future as well as living in line with their principles and vision then become their next and ongoing challenge. Striving for social, ecological, cultural, and economic sustainability, the community must learn how to develop and then balance these structures while simultaneously working cohesively as a group. This is where the development of strong relationships, connections, and an effective and inclusive way of working together is very important.

My research is centrally concerned with social sustainability in the context of risk society. To examine this, I explore the lived experience of life in intentional communities, specifically intentional communities which have been formed as a response to the questions of sustainability in risk society.

This study explores these issues in relation to Cloughjordan Ecovillage, Ireland's only ecovillage, located alongside the rural town of Cloughjordan in the west midlands of the country. As a country Ireland repeatedly exceeds its annual greenhouse gas emissions limits set out by the EU's Effort Sharing Decision (EPA 2020). A society with a large agricultural sector and rural background, it struggles to meet its carbon targets, and thus far has shown reluctance to change.

During the mid-1990's, Ireland's mass spending and consumer boom, when the community was first envisaged; and as the boom drew to a close in 2005-7, as the community's first houses began to be built, the concept, vision and goal by those involved was counter-cultural to the existing culture in Ireland. Now however, some of the values, ideas and responses that drove the development of this community are becoming part of the wider societal debate (Bernard 2010). And thus, as a community that has been implementing and working with new forms of governance collectively, while existing together as a group, it is potentially a community that can be learnt from - in both its successes and shortcomings.

Drawing upon 5 months of field work conducted in Cloughjordan Ecovillage, I analyse and interpret the factors and aspirations which led to the development of the community, and discuss how the diverse aspirations of members, governance structures, social networks and external factors have created, enabled, and strengthened, or complicated and challenged the community's translation of its vision of a socially sustainable community into practice.

As my fieldwork coincided with the onset of the coronavirus pandemic in Ireland, I also examine the ways in which the community's response to Covid-19 highlighted its managing of social risk.

In the first chapter I outline the theoretical framework which provides the basis for the analysis of my findings.

The second chapter outlines how I carried out my research, the methods I used and the range of data I gathered. It also touches on my positionality and my personal ethics in relation to the individuals I interviewed and observed.

My findings and analysis are developed over four chapters. The first outlines influential features in the development of the community, and the following three chapters cover the topics of governance, informal social networks, and the community responses to the pandemic. Throughout these chapters I explore both the formal and informal social structures and systems as well as how the community lives its vision in practice.

I conclude with a reflection on my findings in relation to my research questions and possible further areas of research.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Introduction

My research is primarily concerned with the social sustainability and lived experience of ecovillage members who have formed an intentional community as a response to questions of sustainability. in the context of risk society. The following theoretical framework will explore some of the literature that pertains to these topics.

2.2 Risk Society

In ‘Risk Society’, Beck (1992) discussed the emergence of the new paradigm, risk society; wherein the world is now faced with a set of risks and hazards it has never previously encountered before, as a direct result of industrial society and the modern era. Risks in this society threaten to destruct all life on earth, impacting societies, communities, and individuals.

Risk[s] may be defined as [the] hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernisation itself. Risks, as opposed to older dangers, are consequences which relate to the threatening force of modernisation and to its globalisation of doubt.’
(Beck 1992, 21)

We increasingly live in a risk society, thus both individuals and communities must be resilient if they are to be able to adapt and respond to changes and challenges they may face both now and into the future.

The rise of the neoliberal era and its effects, which have led to mass privatisation and individualisation, have been accompanied by a push to privatise and individualise risks and the responses to them, onto the individual (Sørensen 2018). Thus, although risks such as climate change and greater mobility of diseases, created by risk society are global in the scope and scale of their potential outcomes, the responses to them occur on a smaller societal level. These are reflected in the actions and behaviours of individuals and local communities.

Risks within risk society continuously grow and multiply, alongside the incalculability of their consequences (Sørensen 2018). Therefore, communities and individuals must find ways to manage and mitigate these additional risks and uncertainties in everyday life. Whether that be by recognising and accommodating, or by unacknowledging and ignoring such risks (Alaszewski 2015). Such categorisations and perceptions elicit particular actions in response

to hazards depending on whether risks are perceived as a potential threat or not. People will be living in a risk society for the foreseeable future, thus it is necessary for societies, communities and individuals to be reflexive and resilient in order to decrease the space between winners and losers and reduce the potential for future long term risks.

2.3 Risk Perception

‘Dangers are manifold and omnipresent. Action would be paralysed if individuals attended to all of them; anxiety has to be selective’ (Douglas 2002, xix)

The factor that motivates an individual to respond to a particular risk derives from the value they place on the object at risk. In other words, risk becomes ‘a situation or event where something of human value (including humans themselves) has been put at stake and where the outcome is uncertain’ (Rosa 1998, 28) However, what different individuals hold as value is not universal, as ‘value has numerous, incongruous, and even contradictory socio-cultural manifestations’ (Boholm 2015, 14). Hence, the phenomenon, that something can ‘simultaneously be regarded as a risk object, as an object at risk or as risk free by different observers operating under different assumptions’ (Boholm 2015, 17).

Consequently, when it comes to different responses and understandings of the risks developed by living in a risk society, societies, communities, and individuals can vary widely in the way they react and respond to such risks (Boholm 1998). This subsequently creates different ways individuals subjectively respond to their objective social context. These variations derive from the different values individuals place on the risk object or object at risk, and help to form and frame their responses to potential hazards (Hansson 2010). It can sometimes be easier for individuals to acknowledge and attend to observable risks. In some cases, this has led to the larger more adverse risks created by risk society falling to the wayside, and not being recognised, or responded to by individuals and societies.

Now however, many of the risks created by risk society are coming to the forefront of societal debate, with various groups and individuals striving to reduce these risks or mitigate the impact for future generations. A primary example of such risks is climate change and its associated risks for humanity and the planet (Beck 1992). Responses to this risk can take a variety of forms, whether they be advocacy, protests, habit, or lifestyle changes.

Yet, in advance of this wider societal recognition, there have been groups of like-minded individuals who have chosen to self-organise; banding together to build green intentional communities, or ecovillages.

2.4 Intentional communities

A community is a group of people who share something in common or live together in a particular area; and are characterised by the interpersonal connections and shared attributes developed between those within it (Brennan and Brown 2008). Tönnies described community as ‘a mode of instinctual and mainly unconscious togetherness’ (quoted in Kunze 2012, 53). Intentional communities are different in that they are spaces where ‘groups of people [] have chosen to live together with a common purpose, working cooperatively to create a lifestyle that reflects their shared core values’ (Kunze 2012).

This desire to establish or seek out green alternative lifestyles dates back to the 17th century (Leonard 2007). Generally, members of such communities share a core set of ideas which inform their way of life as well as similar beliefs surrounding what is wrong with modern society (Sargisson 2007). In their attempt to realise a sustainable and better life in the here and now, these groups are taking an active role in responding to the risks produced by risk society.

Various authors emphasise different aspects of intentional communities.

Kozney’s definition focuses on the empirical, factual nature of intentional communities.

An ‘intentional community’ is a group of people who have chosen to live together with a common purpose, working cooperatively to create a lifestyle that reflects their shared core values. The people may live together on a piece of rural land, in a suburban home, or in an urban neighbourhood, and they may share a single residence or live in a cluster of dwellings. (Kozney, quoted in Miller 2010, 4)

Sargisson’s account explores the subjective intentions within these spaces.

Intentional communities are strange places, full of dreams, hopes, and disappointments as groups of individuals work collectively to realise a better life. In order to pursue their vision of good life, these groups require space (in which to experiment), individual security, and group coherence. (Sargisson 2007, 396)

In contrast Pitzer focuses on the subjective meaning, his definition describing the multi-functional elements that must be brought into balance in such intentional communities.

Communal societies are small, voluntarily social units, partly isolated and insulated from the general society in which their members intentionally share an ideology, an economic union, and a lifestyle and attempt to implement their ideal systems - social,

economic, governmental, religious, philosophical, ecological, and sustainable - often in hopes that their utopian vision will be realized worldwide by divine aid or human effort. (Pitzer 2009, 15)

Although these definitions may vary slightly in the ways they conceptualise intentional communities, there are several key features that consistently arise: *vision and purpose of a better way of life; shared values among members; a level of resource commonality; voluntary withdrawal from wider society; and physical proximity.*

2.5 Intentional communities, Social sustainability, and Resilience

Within intentional communities, members strive to develop social sustainability – social structures and relationships which can be managed and maintained into the future (Sanguinetti 2012). A fundamental tenet for sustainability, social sustainability is reached when the systems, structures and relationships within a community develop modes and methods of understanding, support, engagement, and connectedness between members of the group (Eizenberg and Jabareen 2017).

Sustainable social networks, structures, and relationships evolve alongside the development of a community and are formed and maintained into the future. Such sustainable social structures are an important feature of sustainable development, as while communities develop socially sustainable relationships and systems of organisation, they build community resilience and connectedness (Eizenberg and Jabareen 2017).

Evidently, because such communities are made up of a small group of members, the social structures, relationships and corresponding presence or lack of social sustainability occurs on a smaller more micro scale than in wider society. Therefore, referencing the social sustainability within the group could be more accurately referred to as ‘the social sustainability of the community’ or ‘community sustainability’. However, throughout this dissertation I refer to the social sustainability of the community as ‘social sustainability’.

In intentional communities, where members come together developing new systems of governance, communication, and trust based on a shared set of beliefs, developing a cohesive social structure that is sustainable into the future is vital for their success. With as much as 90% of intentional communities failing to get off the ground, many due to social disagreements or interpersonal issues; cultivating a positive, working social element is essential (Christian and Adams 2003). In order to build social sustainability, intentional communities develop various systems of governance, communication, and support which

enable members to build trust, relationships and work together towards a common goal (Kunze 2012).

‘Ultimately each community must find its own workable methods and refine them again and again, so that they remain alive.’ (Kosha and Dregger, 2015, 24)

As they build these social systems and work through challenges and conflicts together, communities help to build their social resilience as both a community and as individuals. These systems and structures grow in both planned and unplanned ways as these groups of individuals explore and reconfigure new ways of living and understanding social life.

‘This is precisely the core competence that ecovillages and intentional communities bring to the table. For all their diversity, they have one thing in common: they have decided to deal with their issues and challenges as a community – and to continue to do so in spite of the conflicts, difficulties and signs of fatigue that inevitably occur.’ (Kosha and Dregger 2015, 23)

The challenges, disagreements and conflicts that occur within and/or between the group test their systems, relationships, and community resilience. Although these issues can be divisive, long lasting, and can in some cases lead to the disillusionment of such groups, when structures function well they can help bring people through issues together. Dealing with these challenges also helps communities to manage the constant force of continuous change in the world (Magis 2010). The way these groups find solutions, work together, and adapt helps to forge stronger connections and resilience.

Community resilience is described by Magis as ‘the existence, development, and engagement of community resources by community members to thrive in an environment characterized by change, uncertainty, unpredictability, and surprise.’ (Magis 2010, 401)

Community resilience is viewed as an indicator of social sustainability as it determines a community’s ability to mobilise successfully and to respond and thrive in an environment characterised by uncertainty, change, stress, and unpredictability.

Related to both individual and organisational responses to discontinuities and instability (Bhamra et al. 2011), members within resilient communities develop both personal and collective capacity to engage with and respond to change. This enables them to sustain and

renew the community, developing new directions for the community's future (Magis, 2010; Walker et. al 2004; Berkes and Ross 2013).

Throughout this process both the individual and the group build and establish resilience in both themselves and their interpersonal relations. The importance of building such resilience is to help communities cope both collectively and individually in times of stress (Berkes and Ross 2013), while discovering new ways of connecting, socialising, and living in a risk society. This resilience will be vital for communities as they face the continuing challenges of maintaining social sustainability.

It is important to note that the actions, behaviours, and responses by individuals within the community and the community at large do not happen independently of one another. Although it is easier to deal with them as separate issues here, both responses are highly interdependent and interwoven within one another. Outlined below are some of the systems and structures implemented that contribute and, in some cases, challenge the resilience and in turn, social sustainability of these communities.

2.6 How do communities develop and maintain social resilience/social sustainability?

2.6.1 Governance structures

Striving to create communities that are socially sustainable, intentional communities endeavour to develop inclusive, cooperative, and representative social structures (Nelson 2018). As such they must build governance structures and systems of organisation which reflect these ambitions. Many develop collaborative, participatory modes of organising in which members have input in shaping and developing the ideas, goals, and futures of their communities (Bernard 2010, 37) (Sargisson and Lyman 2004). This enables members to play a role in the process of visioning, learning, and experimenting, and as they work together the group builds new interpersonal connections and fosters positive trusting relationships among one another.

Many intentional communities opt for a consensus-based model of decision-making; a model through which a decision is reached once a solution has been found which satisfies all members of the group (Butler and Rothstein 1987) (Sargisson and Lyman 2004). As it aims to incorporate the input, needs and perspectives of each member, this process usually tends to foster a more inclusive, representative, and satisfactory process for participants (Sager and Gastil 2006, 2). However, some of the drawbacks that can occur are that it can sometimes

take extensive periods of time to reach a decision, and in some cases, consensus can never be reached (Butler and Rothstein 1987, 31).

However, it is through the effective management of such disagreements, that these communities build social resilience and individuals' understanding for one another.

2.6.2 Sharing

Some of the more organic social networks that can develop take the form of 'gift giving' or 'sharing' among community members.

Mauss (1990) developed the influential theory of gift giving, through which he argued that gifting was used by individuals within communities to maintain social order by developing commitments and social continuity between individuals.

'There are no free gifts; gift cycles engage persons in permanent commitments that articulate the dominant institutions.' (Douglas in Mauss 1990, xii)

Gifting as a system of exchanges and contracts, takes the form of presents, which although they may appear voluntary and free, in reality they are constrained and self-interested as they are given and reciprocated obligatorily (Mauss 1990). Much of his work was centred around archaic societies where he used his observations as examples to demonstrate how gift exchange creates a social bond and relationship ties between individuals' over time.

For an extended period of time, systems of sharing were grouped under the concept of gift giving or reciprocal exchange. However, as Widlock (2017) argues, sharing is not accurately understood when considered as cases of reciprocal gift giving.

'Sharing, defined as enabling others to access what is valued, provides a conceptual and practical alternative to market exchange and to gift-exchange.' (Widlock 2017, 1)

Seeing it as a form of transfer rather than exchange (Woodburn 1998), sharing is 'an important transactional mode in its own right' (Gell, 1999, 77). Unlike gifting, it is not characterised by giving and receiving obligations or about creating long term commitments. Widlock (2017) argues that modes of sharing provide practically and conceptually distinct ways of establishing and maintaining social relatedness, which replaces the scheme of giving, accepting, and returning with one of requesting, responding, and renouncing.

He argues that rather than being reciprocal, there are imbalances in these transactions with some becoming net providers while others become net receivers. As a set of concrete social

practices, sharing creates ‘particular forms of co-presence, relatedness and communication’ between individuals (Widlock 2017, xvii).

Within intentional communities, members can sometimes develop a form of sharing economy through which individuals share resources which can range from the less tangible resources, such as knowledge, to physical goods or services. Sharing in this sense is a ‘collaborative economic strategy, managing resources by borrowing/lending or collectively owning/acting/using’ (Light and Miskelly 2019 592). As coordination and collaboration is required to maintain sharing networks, it is intrinsically social. Over time such local sharing initiatives have been seen to develop social benefits, producing a sense of belonging, helping create bonds and a feeling of commonality. All of these contribute to the social sustainability of these groups.

These enduring informal, interpersonal relations have the potential to create relations based on cooperation, collaboration, mutuality, and reciprocity (Vlachokyriakos et al. 2018, 3). Systems which tend to ‘co-produce, manage, and share resources, time, services, knowledge, information, and support based on solidarity and reciprocity rather than economic profit’ (Katrini 2018 np). These practices help to strengthen interpersonal bonds while building resourcefulness and resilience.

Despite their differences, both gift-giving and sharing play important roles within communities by building stronger and wider interpersonal connections and developing feelings of connectedness and openness between individuals.

2.7 Ecovillages

Ecovillages are a particular form of intentional community that are ‘consciously designed through locally owned participatory processes in all four dimensions of sustainability (social, culture, ecology and economy) to regenerate social and natural environments’ (GEN 2020). Within ecovillages, community members endeavour to create lifestyles that are ‘successfully continuable into the indefinite future’ (Cloughjordan Ecovillage 2020).

Ecovillages, ‘are guided by the desire to contribute to a “better world” by functioning as examples for mainstream society’ (Meijering 2012, 39). ‘They are living responses to feelings of discontent about the modern world; they articulate the desire for better ways of being and explore ways of bringing this to life in the here and now’ (Sargisson 2009, 188). Therefore, not only are ecovillages an active response to a risk, the community and

alternative approach to living also attempts to provide wider society with an example and potentially better way to respond to some of the risks created by risk society.

By developing inclusive, participatory, problem-solving, social structures, such communities are actively trying to build and strengthen relationships of trust, communication, and co-operation (Meijering 2012). In doing so, they not only develop solid interpersonal connections, they also collectively build both community and individual resilience in managing, mitigating, and searching for solutions to risks produced by risk society.

The conception of ecovillages has stemmed from the value similarly minded individuals place on a particular risk object (for example global warming) or object at risk (for example the survival of planet, ecosystems, and humans). The desire to articulate these values has resulted in a group of these individuals deciding to come together and act in response to one of the primary outcomes of risk society, climate change, by choosing to develop new ways of interacting and living in order to prevent, protect against or mitigate the potential risk in a collective way.

Ecovillages are a communal, living response to attempt to mitigate the risk of climate change by creating an alternative way of living (Leonard 2007). Thus, ecovillages can be viewed as products of a highly reflexive response to an objective risk that has been subjectively perceived by the group of individuals who have come together to build these communities.

Such a response has developed in defiance to the neoliberal norm; refusing to accept the individualisation of environmental problems and risks and rejecting the neoliberal push to respond to the risks created by risk society individually (Leonard 2007; Boholm 2015). Instead members see a communal response, with a connected and collective approach, as an alternate, and potentially more effective and appropriate way to mitigate and respond to such hazards (Leonard 2007).

Consequently, this response can be viewed as a direct result of an articulation of an individual's values in response to a global risk. This response builds the narrative of their everyday lives.

In this living response to a perceived risk, the community attempts to build a set of relations with one another based on alternative modes of connection rather than market values (Light and Miskelly). Using participatory processes, they aim to 'holistically integrate ecological, economic, social and cultural dimensions of sustainability, in order to regenerate social and

natural environments' (GEN, 2020). As such, ecovillages, which can be seen as spaces where communal structures are developed and created, become social experiments and offer something new to the idea of social sustainability and/or social change.

'A community's resilience is often understood as the capacity of its social system to come together to work toward a communal objective.' (Berkes and Ross 2012, 6)

Within ecovillages, community members respond to risk on both a collective and individual level. In these active responses, they help to develop personal and interpersonal resilience to these challenges. These enable members to respond and manage these hazards as a group, searching for solutions together and building more durable communities that can develop systems and structures which facilitate them to be more resilient towards future hazards or difficulties.

2.8 Conclusion

Within risk society, as communities and individuals are forced to respond to a growing multiplicity of hazards, there is a wide variety in people's actions, interpretations, perceptions, and responses. Faced with so many potential risks, individuals choose to only respond to the risks they feel may threaten something they hold of value.

Climate change, as a social, environmental, cultural, and economic risk, elicits a wide array of responses on the part of individuals and communities. Some of the responses to this risk are demonstrated in the growth of intentional communities, social sustainability, and community resilience, developed within governance structures, and interpersonal systems of sharing and gifting. Ecovillages are spaces in which community members attempt to embody all of these ideas in their active response to climate change.

As 'living laboratories' (Litfin 2014, 18) trying out new forms of socialising, living, and interacting with one another, ecovillages are spaces that can demonstrate the power and value of communal responses to risks created by risk society. They can also demonstrate the challenges and difficulties associated with these approaches.

As Ireland's only ecovillage, I was interested in the way Cloughjordan Ecovillage has managed to organise and implement these ideals and values in a rural Irish context. In conjunction with this, unlike most intentional communities, Cloughjordan Ecovillage has chosen to develop alongside an existing community. Therefore, I believed that examining

whether this has been beneficial or contradictory in helping the group realise its vision, would be illuminating.

As an active response to one of risk society's hazards, exploring whether the community's social structures, systems and alternative approach to living have been successful in creating a resilient and sustainable way of living is informative; particularly as the world is faced with more and more risks and the potential risks of climate change and its impacts are ever increasing.

2.9 Research Questions

Having reviewed the literature, the questions that emerged focus on the development of Cloughjordan Ecovillage; the social dimensions of the community; and individual and collective responses to risk and risk perceptions. Generally, they may be set out as,

- *What factors have led to the emergence of Cloughjordan Ecovillage, and how has the community managed its development in practice?*
- *Has Cloughjordan Ecovillage developed and maintained community systems of social sustainability in the face of risk society?*

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodological approach I used throughout my fieldwork and the methods I used to gather my findings. I also discuss my reflections surrounding my positionality in the field.

3.2 Methodological approach

Ethnography is ‘a methodology that draws on a family of methods involving direct and sustained social contact with agents, and on richly writing up the encounter, respecting, recording, representing, at least partly in its own terms, the irreducibility of human experiences’ (Willis and Trondman 2000, 5). It is a theoretically informed, interpretive, and subjective methodology that learns about people’s lives within the context of their own lived experience (Boudewijnse 1994).

My ethnographic research has been informed by understanding social life as ‘the outcome of the interaction of structure and agency through the practice of everyday life’ (O’Reilly 2012, 1), and examining, with reflexivity, my own role within the social world of my participants (O’Reilly 2012, 100). I learned about members’ lives ‘from their own perspective and from within the context of their own lived experience’ (O’Reilly 2012, 86) by observing and participating in their daily lives, to gain a deeper understanding of their social life in practice.

As my research was focused on the subjective reality of individuals, by using an interpretive approach, I sought to understand both the objective and subjective reality for Ecovillage members (Denscombe 2007). Additionally, I wished to understand how the lived experience of members was shaped by the community structures and social context.

3.3 Methods

My research was conducted over five months of fieldwork in Cloughjordan Ecovillage, from mid-February to mid-July 2020. Throughout this time, I lived in the Ecovillage. I used a range of research methods throughout my fieldwork to help make sense of the everyday lives of my participants within the context of their own lived experience (Willis and Trondman 2000). The primary method I relied on was participant observation, which involved gaining access, living amongst the group, building rapport, taking notes, and participating in and observing the daily lives of participants (O’Reilly 2012). I complemented this approach with informal conversations, semi-structured and open interviews, and, analysis of online

resources and communication networks of the Ecovillage and the wider local Cloughjordan community.

Through my observation and participation within the Ecovillage, I was able to gain a deeper understanding of the community, how it was organised and the relationships and connections between various members (Denscombe 2007). My interviews then allowed me to delve deeper into the feelings, understandings, and lived experiences of members.

From the beginning, the community of Cloughjordan and the Ecovillage community were extremely welcoming, friendly, and helpful. Initially, there was a constant flurry of things happening, events on and people socialising. I engaged with as many of the ongoing activities as I could, attending organised talks, volunteering in the café, joining the all-female Mellow Tones choir, and going to the 'monthly members' meetings'. In doing so I got to know people, build relationships, and get a sense of everyday life.

I documented my findings in the format of descriptive, detailed, and reflexive notes (Rock 2001). Throughout the day when I came across something of importance, or spoke with someone about a particular topic, I kept short notes of the encounters on my phone, which I later wrote up in further detail, along with other observations in a journal style word document. I also included personal reflections which helped me to better understand how I was feeling at particular times when I went back over my field notes. Keeping track of all my interactions has enabled me to review and analyse my findings in a chronological order. I always endeavoured to remain aware and reflective to avoid personal bias or assumptions.

I had originally planned to study the everyday living of ecovillage members to gain a deeper understanding of the daily interactions, connections, organisation, communication, life and lived experiences of members. However, almost immediately following my arrival in the village, the coronavirus pandemic, COVID-19, reached Ireland. Consequently, almost all social gatherings, meetings, socialising, and normal day to day life came to a halt as events were cancelled, and people began to practice the State-recommended 2-metre social distancing and retreated into their homes and family units. Previously unremarkable actions and routines became regarded as dangerous and unsafe, while other actions such as cleanliness and sanitisation, became highlighted and essential. Unsurprisingly, this resulted in the fabric of everyday life being disrupted and normal behaviours were replaced by new ones, behaviours which over time gradually developed into new habits and routines.

Thus, the way I made connections, built rapport, and carried out interviews changed to accommodate these new social rules and guidelines. As the situation evolved, I was able to see how people, businesses, public and private places were modified, envisioned differently, and used in new ways. Various services, objects, and spaces were used more, becoming features that held a new value and importance in enabling people to connect with one another. Many of these new social interactions took place outside in the open or relied on technology to socialise with others. These solutions had mixed results in either enabling, preventing, or making it more difficult for me to participate in the new ways of interacting and socialising between individuals. Being here during this time did, however, allow me the chance to observe how the community's systems of organisation and socialisation were reimagined, changed, and adapted to accommodate to new restrictions.

3.3.1 Participant observation

Through participant observation “a researcher takes part in the daily activities, rituals, interactions, and events of a group of people as one of the means of learning the explicit and tacit aspects of their life routines and their culture” (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011, 1). However, because of Covid-19, there were fundamental changes to the types of interpersonal interactions possible between individuals. Many changes began to happen in much of the everyday activities, transforming both the social and personal lives of everyone in society¹.

Nevertheless, over time people searched for new ways to come together and socialise at a safe distance, and I began to take part in the new routines and everyday activities created by the community during the pandemic. Individuals were very creative in finding ways to be able to socialise with one another and connect through new modes and mediums. I also observed how people used technology and social media to connect with each other and carry on some of the routines/activities that previously took place face-to-face. In order to protect my participants and adhere with State guidelines, my circle of contacts remained small. My primary contact was Aoife who I lived with. I also had a wider circle of around 15 people who I mixed with on a regular basis, subject to social distancing. However, as the community and country began to re-open, and guidelines and attitudes relaxed my circle was able to expand to more members of the community.

Although social distancing and nationwide lockdown resulted in a more solitary focus on the self and private sphere, with people working at home or in the garden more than previously,

¹ See Appendix 2 for COVID-19 timeline in Ireland

people did search for, and create solutions to not remain completely isolated. Just before the lockdown, for its duration and as the country and community began to open up more, there were a number of different activities, routines and ways of meeting with people, interacting and connecting that were developed within the Ecovillage community. Group activities included Tai Chi and Chi Gung outdoors, walking meditation, outdoor music jamming sessions at the community farm/amphitheatre and working in the sensory garden. Smaller group/one-on-one interactions occurred through regular gatherings; socially distant dinner/tea/coffee in the garden or polytunnel; dropping off dinners/deserts/surprises on people's doorsteps; or socially distant walks. These enabled individuals and small groups to be together while remaining at a safe distance. This engagement was significant in helping me understand the different attitudes and ways of coping developed by various individuals and the mindset behind some of their behaviours and actions.

Sjöberg (2011, 166) asserts "in ethnographic research closeness to the studied people is a prerogative." As everyone experienced these new procedures, fears, and changes together, it allowed me to build relationships of trust and understanding with those close to me, sharing how we were feeling, reassuring, and supporting one another. I believe that my participation in new forms of socialisation, combined with the fact that I was experiencing these radical changes alongside everyone else, facilitated the blending-in process between myself and the community. From the perspective of fieldwork, this blending-in was desirable as it helped me develop relationships of trust and rapport between myself and members.

Although in some ways it was more challenging arriving in the community at a point of change, as people were not meeting and connecting, particularly in groups, as much as before, in other ways I believe it helped me gain access. As there were so many changes happening at the time, my presence became one more difference on top of many, and thus I was less conspicuous. Furthermore, arriving at the beginning of this time meant that I was part of the making of a new everyday, and was as involved in it as everybody else.

Over time I was able to observe normal, seemingly inconspicuous/unremarkable modes of sharing, understanding, and engaging between members. Acts such as cooking, baking, giving, and helping created connections between individuals, acts which I too was able to participate in. I was also able to give my time to help those working outside, in gardens or on the farm.

3.3.2 Interviews

Throughout my research, I took advantage of opportunistic conversations to ask relevant questions which arose at the spur of the moment (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). Initially I took a more passive approach in everyday conversations, opting to listen to exchanges taking place as I built rapport. However, over time once I had developed relationships and trust with individuals, I became more engaged.

More casual informal conversations allowed my exchanges with people to flow in a relaxed, open manner as members shared their experiences, feelings, and reflections on current and past events. These informal conversations were hugely important in helping me build an understanding of the dynamics, experiences, and organisation of the Ecovillage community (Brinkmann 2013). They also helped me to understand some of the backstory, history, and prior interactions the community had experienced, managed, and worked through together.

As I took a more active approach to interviewing, I adopted guided conversations and informal interviews with individuals within the community (O'Reilly 2012). This involved taking the time to discuss and explore particular issues in depth with people. When asking questions, I sought to complement my observations and participation within the community.

During the lockdown, individuals were not allowed to meet in groups, they had to stay within their family unit. Many members ceased inviting people into their homes and were fearful/hesitant of potential dangers/risks to themselves and others. Such factors made it impossible to carry out interviews as I would have liked. Accordingly, I carried out informal interview-style guided conversations while working in the allotments, outdoors, or over coffee in people's gardens with a range of individuals, some of whom were involved in the Ecovillage's conception, and others who joined later in the project's development.

I conducted 8 in-depth guided conversations with members from different positions and levels of involvement in the Ecovillage community. I opted for an unstructured interview style, with open-ended questions, allowing our conversations to be collaborative exploring topics together in a free-flowing exchange. These conversations usually ran up to three hours, but in some cases spanned just over an hour, I also had follow-up conversations with some of these members. The cleaning, sanitising, and social distancing that had to be maintained by both myself and my interviewee certainly added another element to the interview.

As I wished to discover what decisions and pathways had attracted members to this way of living and guided them towards the Ecovillage; as well as tracing their experiences from the

beginning of their entry into the community, up until now (Atkinson 1998), I carried out several one-to-one life story interviews. During these interviews, I opted for a semi-structured, open interview², enabling me to cover specific topics while also having a freer more conversationalist interview with individuals (Brinkmann 2013). It also gave me the flexibility to detour from the interview schedule, re-shaping and adapting the interview should the interviewee bring up a relevant thread or point I wanted to explore further.

Throughout my interviews, I endeavoured to remain aware and reflexive at every stage as well as being flexible to the desires, needs and choices of the individual/s I was speaking with (Elliot 2005). In doing so I aimed to acknowledge and observe the subjective and interpretive elements of the interactions I had as well as the conversation itself. Following my conversations and interviews with various members I wrote detailed accounts of everything we had spoken about, as well as smaller details of where and when the conversation took place.

3.3.3 Digital Ethnography

Digital platforms and technology have become an important feature of people's lived experience. Alongside their formal functions as digital networks of communication and connection the pre-existing networks of the Cloughjordan community email group and the Ecovillage residents' group were spaces where exchanges took place, and systems of sharing were organised, as people both requested and offered help, support, items and information.

These digital spaces took on new importance during the lockdown as people used technology in new ways to connect and communicate with one another. Some examples included online games of cards, choir on zoom, crosswords over the phone and weekly video call chats and catch-ups. As I was included in some of the online methods of communication, I was able to observe how such resources facilitated residents, smaller groups, and the wider community to communicate, connect and share with one another.

These platforms offered an alternative way to observe human connection, sharing and communication (Murthy 2008). During my analysis, I treated data such as emails as textual information, through which I could analyse shared concerns, interactions, and relationships.

² See Appendix 3 for interview guide

3.4 Ethics and Reflexivity

Maintaining my responsibility to my participants, I sought to be honest, avoid harm and gain informed consent for my research as well as letting individuals know their rights as participants (O'Reilly 2012, 70).

As a community trying to educate wider society, members are open to researchers, so it was easier for me to explain my role and the kind of research I was carrying out. This enabled me to gain consent from interviewees and to make sure they knew they could opt out at any time. In doing so I hoped to ensure that my participants felt comfortable and in control.

As this is a small close-knit group, I have chosen to use pseudonyms when referencing interviews, conversations, or experiences throughout this paper to help maintain people's confidentiality (Brinkmann 2013).

Throughout I attempted to remain reflexive and aware of my responsibilities, actions, and perspectives (O'Reilly 2012, 62). There is academic debate that argues the potential advantages and disadvantages of doing 'anthropology at home' (Boudewijnse 1994; Mugal 2015; Wiederhold 2015; van Ginkel 1994). As an Irish person in Ireland, my positionality helped me to understand many of community's mannerisms, history, and culture. This may have meant that I missed certain details, behaviours, and attitudes that I take for granted in an Irish social context.

However, people's experiences in their social conditions are subjective (Mughal 2015). Never having lived out of an urban context, or as part of an integrated community, the social conditions and experiences I have been exposed to did not make this field site familiar to any I had experienced before. Nevertheless, my research process itself involved many of the same methods of data collection, whether I had been in a field site in my own society or outside it (Mughal 2015).

As I became accustomed to my everyday life, I became almost oblivious of my role as participant observant and I believe this also happened with those around me, as I was seen more as myself rather than as a researcher. Nonetheless, despite the advantages developed from a close relationship between a researcher and his/her subject, there were times during which I was concerned about losing critical distance. However, I found that my written accounts of each day created a space for me to reflect on my opinions and experiences, allowing me to record and explore my thoughts and emotions on various events and situations and to help clear my mind.

Throughout my fieldwork, I continuously navigated and renegotiated my ongoing presence in the field with both myself and my participants, moving between full observation or full participation (Cliffords 1998). However, understanding that participation and observing at a distance had become a new part of the daily life experienced by my participants helped me to realise that my research capabilities and limitations were entwined in the everyday I was living, experiencing, and learning from.

3.5 Conclusion

The methods I employed throughout my field work enabled me to observe, comprehend and delve deeper into the objective experiences, and subjective understandings of members regarding the community, its management and organisation, and interpersonal relations. During my time as part of the community, I developed a number of close relationships with the people around me. These relationships, and the friendliness and kindness expressed by all Ecovillage members and Cloughjordan community were instrumental in making me feel comfortable and safe in a space where I was now sharing in the same risks that were making the new everyday.

Being there during the pandemic gave me an opportunity to witness how the community operated in a time of stress. And thus, it gave me a chance to observe the resilience of the interpersonal relations and social sustainability of the community as both a group and as separate individuals.

The interpretive approach of ethnography enabled me to inform my understandings of Ecovillage life through my observations and participation, and to interpret and discern the experiences and reality within the community through the perspectives of members.

4. Findings

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter I deal with my findings. They are divided into four sections, the influential features in the development of Cloughjordan Ecovillage, its governance structures, informal social networks, and the community responses to the pandemic. In the following chapter I will analyse the findings I have discussed here.

4.2 Influential features in the development of Cloughjordan Ecovillage

f4.2.1 From Vision to Practice

In the 1990's when the idea of Ireland's first ecovillage was being envisioned, those involved were hoping to create a place where they could not only live sustainably, but the lives of themselves, their family, and their community, could become an example and object of learning for wider society. Having observed the harm being created by societies all over the world, the founding members wanted to come together and develop a solution where they could take an active role to mitigate their impact on their natural environment. By demonstrating an alternative way to live they wished to develop a response that lived in accordance with their values and beliefs 'ultimately, how I live outwardly will express who I am inwardly' (Litfin 2014, 30), as opposed to continuously trying to fight against corporations and the unceasing environmental injustices they saw being created by everyday life (Anderson 2007). As Litfin (2014) states 'responsible action entails building a positive alternative from the ground up, and then sharing this example with as many people as possible'. By building and developing an alternative way of living which actively restored and regenerated the community's social and natural environments, from the very beginning 'we always wanted to share what we were doing'³, and the community's goal was to help to educate others in a different way to live with one another and the world⁴.

In the 10 years while they were designing and promoting the concept of Ireland's first ecovillage, the founding members had to plan and decide how the community would be organised, governed, and laid out. They also had to set out their two-fold mission to live sustainably and serve as an educational centre.

³ Guided conversation, Niamh 16/04/2020

⁴ Guided conversation, Blathnaid, 11/04/2020

These members aspired to develop a whole systems approach to living sustainably and harmoniously with the environment around them, and share what they learnt with wider society. As their hope was to try and influence the culture around the ecovillage, they felt this would be harder to achieve if it was a standalone isolated community. Thus, another aspect which reflects the personality, vision, and goal of those involved at the beginning was the decision to locate the ecovillage in a space where it was not separated from mainstream society⁵. Hence, when the group was reached out to by two prominent individuals in the pre-existing rural town of Cloughjordan, letting them know about a piece of land that was currently for sale alongside the rural town, it was the logical choice⁶.

Of the 112 members living in the Ecovillage 11 are couples, 21 are single person households, and there are 32 children across 19 families. These individuals are spread across the 55 homes in the Ecovillage, the majority of whom are members, though there are some individuals who are renting homes from members who no longer live in the Ecovillage. Additionally, there are also several members sharing their homes with other individuals and several of the EVS volunteers who work on the farm⁷.

4.2.2 Individual motivations

In her research and fieldwork carried out in fourteen different ecovillages, Litfin (2014) observed that ecovillages attract two kinds of people, ‘those who feel a sense of urgency to build another world and those who crave a deep sense of community’(Litfin 2014, 120), and Cloughjordan Ecovillage is no different.

Although some intentional communities vet candidates before they can become a member, Cloughjordan Ecovillage instead chose to operate on a first come first served basis. This choice resulted in the project receiving interest from a diverse range of individuals, each with their own motivations, expectations, and reasons for wanting to live in the Ecovillage. Not all of them held the same vision and goals as the founding members, or others within the community; nor did they have the same ideas of what the Ecovillage could become and how it should develop into the future.

Of those currently living in the Ecovillage, many are individuals who although may have grown up in the country, moved to Dublin for various reasons, while others lived in the city

⁵ Guided conversation, Niamh 16/04/2020

⁶ Guided conversation, Niamh 16/04/2020

⁷ Mapping the community, 19/03/2020

all their life⁸. Many felt the absence of a sense of belonging or community where they were living. Several members commented that when they lived in the city, they did not feel as though there was any sense of community, friendliness or relationships between themselves and their neighbours⁹. Others referenced particular moments where they realised how little they knew about those living around them; moments which stood out to them as turning points to decide to move somewhere where they could feel part of a group¹⁰. Although all held values that sought to protect and care for the environment, many individuals who moved to the Ecovillage did so primarily to become part of a community once again¹¹.

As well as having the opportunity to live with other individuals that hold a similar mindset and value system to their own, some members also felt that by living in a community it would be possible to make a more positive environmental difference than if they lived alone¹².

Moving to the Ecovillage they hoped to create lifestyles that ‘regenerate rather than diminish the integrity of the environment’¹³ and become part of a group of people who were looking to connect and build interpersonal relationships and a community together¹⁴. Prospective members were searching for the sense of community they felt was missing in their lives, and they were attracted to the ideas, visions, and promises presented in the ‘glossy brochures’¹⁵ advertising the Ecovillage.

Being located beside a pre-existing and established community has given Ecovillage members the added opportunity to become involved in the community living in the town as well. This has given members the chance to build connections and relationships with others outside the Ecovillage and get involved in many of the community activities that were already established.

4.2.3 The significance of the Ecovillage Location

Rather than existing as an isolated unit, as many intentional communities are, the decision to build Cloughjordan Ecovillage alongside the rural town of Cloughjordan was made to facilitate the intentional community having an influence on wider society, in a location close

⁸ Guided conversation, Eamonn, 19/03/2020

⁹ Informal conversation, fieldnotes, 10/04/2020

¹⁰ Informal conversations, fieldnotes

¹¹ Informal conversation where member told me they had carried out a survey to find out people’s motivations for moving to the Ecovillage, the results were 36% for the environment and 64% for the community, fieldnotes 26/02/2020

¹² Life story interview, Nora, 26/03/2020

¹³ ‘The ecological aspects of community life are balanced when...’ handout and feedback form previously used during workshops shown to me by a member

¹⁴ Informal conversation, fieldnotes, 13/05/2020

¹⁵ Life story interview, Beibhinn, 15/05/2020, informal conversation, fieldnotes 11/04/2020

to services and infrastructure. This location has provided members with facilities such as the local schools, post office, shops, and amenities such as the train line running to Dublin and Limerick, which enable residents to access their places of work without having to take the car.

On the Cloughjordan Ecovillage website, the community is described as ‘a neighbourhood demonstrating best practice in community development and rural regeneration’ (Cloughjordan Ecovillage 2020). Even though the rural town of Cloughjordan ‘had a great sense of its own identity’ with its historical society, heritage society and past work carried out to preserve nearby Scohaboy Bog and Sopwell House, according to one member it was unfortunately, ‘a town in decline’¹⁶ before the Ecovillage was built. Although several Ecovillage residents acknowledged the fact that while some inevitable animosity exists between some of the locals towards the Ecovillage, many local people have said that ‘this place would be nothing without you’¹⁷, a comment which gives some insight into the impact the Ecovillage has had on the area.

One of the signifiers in the way the town’s population has been regenerated is seen through the town’s distinct population increase¹⁸. Much of this has come about as more people with a similar mentality to environmental living, have moved into the town because they are attracted by the alternative way of living that has been developed in Cloughjordan Ecovillage. Some of these people are individuals who may not be able to afford to buy a site and build a house in the Ecovillage, yet even while living in the town they can still become involved in the work and ideas being carried out within the community¹⁹. This would not have been possible if the Ecovillage had not been located alongside the existing town.

The influx of new people has brought individuals with different talents and ideas to the area, and several cooperatively owned businesses have been developed over the years. Businesses such as the café and bookshop in the town display and sell crafts and goods made locally by individuals in both the town and the Ecovillage. This has helped to invest life and money into the wider community as the town receives additional income streams as residents and visitors go to the local business’ and heritage centre²⁰.

¹⁶ Life story interview, Nora, 26/03/2020

¹⁷ Guided conversation, Niamh 16/04/2020

¹⁸ Life story interview, Nora, 26/03/2020

¹⁹ Informal conversation, fieldnotes, 22/06/2020

²⁰ Life story interview, Nora, 26/03/2020, Guided conversation, Niamh 16/04/2020

Many of the young families that moved in at the beginning of the project ²¹ now have children who attend the local primary and secondary schools. One member pointed out that for most ecovillages ‘the integration happens after the first generation, because mothers have got to know each other’²². This reflects the way parents, primarily mothers, meet and mix with one another when waiting to pick up their children after school and become friends, and the children also become friends. Even so, integration between the town and the Ecovillage can already be seen in the involvement and mixing of both communities in groups such as the Mellow Tones, an all-female choir, the Methodist Church choir, and the various clubs and activities such as the cinema club and cards nights, as well as the events, talks and activities taken part by ‘eeks’²³, locals and ‘blow-ins’²⁴ alike.

There is community-wide support for local businesses such as the hairdresser, post office, pharmacy, pubs, local shops, and weekly market. On several occasions, when the closure of the local train station and post office was threatened, members of both communities worked together to prevent this from happening. This demonstrated the interest on both sides to protect and support both the new and old businesses and local amenities.

The Ecovillages’ location alongside a pre-existing community has resulted in the two communities building various interrelationships over time. It has also helped make the Ecovillage a more accessible space for those outside to visit and learn from, as well as bringing new visitors, economy, and influx into the rural town of Cloughjordan. Thus, although both communities function independently of one another, interdependent, and mutually beneficial relationships and connections have developed across the two groups²⁵.

Overall, most members view the inter-relationships, crossovers, and interconnections between the two communities positively. They view it as a mutually beneficial and almost symbiotic relationship, in which each group helps and supports one another. One member mused that ‘without the town many of the people would not have stayed, and the same goes for those in the town’²⁶. However, a second resident did point out that they felt that one

²¹ Guided conversation, Niamh 16/04/2020

²² Life story interview, Nora, 26/03/2020

²³ Phrase that refers to Ecovillage members

²⁴ Phrase that refers to individuals who have moved to Cloughjordan

²⁵ Informal conversation, fieldnotes, 05/03/2020

²⁶ Informal conversation, fieldnotes, 05/03/2020

potential disadvantage from being located so close to another community ‘ could be that our vision, philosophy, [and] way of living... could be watered down’²⁷.

4.2.4 Orientation towards natural living environment

Within the Ecovillage pursuing the shared goal to combine green living with a social intention has been done in a multiplicity of ways. This importance, care and focus placed on the environment is observable in the largescale projects and infrastructure within the community as well as the smaller actions, behaviours and choices made by members.

Through their choice’s members attempt to recognise and mitigate the impact they have as both a community and as individuals on the world around them and strive to live in harmony with the natural ecosystem. Not only do members think about the potential impact their daily living may have on the environment, seen in the food they buy and the cleaning products they use; they also consider the potential long-term impact materials and pesticides can have on the environment and choose options that cause as little harm as possible.

In order to keep the ecological aspects of the community in balance structures are designed to blend with and complement the natural environment, using natural, bioregional and ecologically sound materials and methods of construction²⁸. Subsequently, when choosing the building materials for the construction of their homes, members considered ‘how they [were] produced’, ‘the use of them’ and ‘the recycling of them’²⁹. In doing so, individuals think about the past, present and future lifecycles of these materials and reflect on the potential impact they could have on the environment, acknowledging the relationship between themselves, their choices and their way of living on the world around them. This involves looking at life on the planet through a whole systems approach and recognises the inter-relationships and consequences of certain decisions.

The CSA³⁰ community farm is a cross community initiative which is subscribed to by over 70 households both inside and outside the Ecovillage. The farm produces over 80 different varieties of organic and biodynamic³¹ vegetables and takes less traditional approaches to

²⁷ Life story interview, Nora, 26/03/2020

²⁸ ‘The ecological aspects of community life are balanced when...’ handout and feedback form

²⁹ Life story interview, Nora, 26/03/2020

³⁰ See Appendix 1 for glossary

³¹ A method which aims to improve the health and fertility of the land through preparations similar to homeopathy

growing food with some no dig beds³², and recently an agroforestry³³ area has begun to be developed. Growing this food locally, and in diverse ways, the aim is to reduce the environmental impact of food production in both its growth and food miles. And as farm members pick up their vegetables from the coach house, at the pedestrian entrance of the Ecovillage, the distance can be measured in metres rather than miles (Cloughjordan Ecovillage 2020).

The community also has an area with allotments, which are owned and worked in by many of the members. Here individuals grow some of their own fruit, vegetables, flowers and herbs and some members are hopeful that they will be able to produce enough food here to sustain themselves for a year.

The community also has a district heating system, with boilers that run off waste product woodchip created by a nearby factory. This system provides hot water and heats the entire community throughout the year.

In their desire to create a community that lives in harmony with the environment, the initiatives that have been developed help to demonstrate an alternative way to live and coexist with the surrounding land.

4.3 Governance Structures

4.3.1 Governance

As part of developing a model of living that is sustainable and enjoyable, it was necessary for the community to develop functional systems of governing and organising which reflected these values. In order to create sustainable structures with shared responsibilities, the community decided to introduce systems that aimed to be inclusive, representative and collaborative, thereby giving each person a voice and role within the group. These systems would provide members with a structure for making decisions and working together as a group, ‘with communities of trust at its core’ (Kosha and Dregger 2015, 23). The two primary systems they introduced were the Viable Systems Model and decision-making by consensus.

However, as discussed, because ecovillages attract two kinds of people, according to Litfin (2014) they are also magnets to two contrasting characters of thinking, strategic and relational. Strategic thinkers are focused, energetic and goal orientated, while relational

³² This method is used to avoid disruption to soil ecology

³³ A land use management system which integrates trees with crops and animals in order to achieve a more ecologically diverse and socially productive output from the land

people are more process orientated. Hence, operating by consensus, unsurprisingly, creates certain challenges when the community is governed, organised, and managed by those living within it. This is particularly the case when dealing with individuals who may have different ideas and motivations about what concerns they should prioritise as a group.

Yet, as Dregger (2015), states, ‘it is only together, in their diversity, coordinated through the mysterious principle of self-organisation – our greatest evolutionary ally – that [intentional communities] are successful’ (Kosha and Dregger 2015, 23).

Alongside these factors, the age profile of members can influence the expectations, needs, and desires of individuals, in addition to the types of aspirations, hopes and dreams they may have. The Ecovillage is predominantly made up of older members and households with young families, a factor which impacts the capabilities and energy levels of those within the Ecovillage as well³⁴.

In an attempt to manage these different abilities and ways of thinking in a working group dynamic, as well as introducing systems of governance and organisation to a group that had never used or experienced them before, Ecovillage members were required to attend courses and training workshops³⁵. These were aimed at teaching members not only how these systems would work in practice, but also how to think in terms of a whole systems approach and apply these principles to their actions and behaviours. During these courses’ members became accustomed to the appropriate and effective way to communicate and act in governing and decision-making situations.

The governance structure is itself an experiment in participatory democracy (Litfin 2014, 116) and members have had different experiences and responses as to how effective and representative they feel the structure has been.

4.3.2 Viable Systems Model (VSM)

In keeping with the whole systems approach to living with the earth and natural systems, the community has introduced a system of organising that is guided by and operates along these principles. VSM is a form of organisational structure in which each subsection, individual, and group are working together to realise the same purpose or common goal. Hence, although

³⁴ Informal conversation, fieldnotes, 27/06/20

³⁵ Guided conversation, Blathnaid, 05/06/20

different parts and subsections of the system may be carrying out different tasks or roles, as the end purpose is held commonly, the outcome of separate parts should satisfy this goal³⁶.

Within this model, problems are looked at with a global, systemic vision, where the focus shifts from the part to the whole. Although the system is made up of individual elements with assigned roles, activities and tasks, rather than placing the emphasis on these individual properties or parts, it is the relationships between the separate parts, and the events they produce through their interaction, which are viewed as important (Epinosa and Walker 2012).

Within the Ecovillage, the organisational structure can be broken down into boards, groups, members, and residents. These include the SPI Board³⁷; the Service Company³⁸; groups such as the process group, land use, and VERT³⁹; as well as groups responsible for the district heating system, the farm, and sewage treatment.

These sub-groups and different working groups make up different parts of the VSM structure. Within the structure, the decisions and choices made to achieve a particular purpose are influenced by internal and external environmental constraints⁴⁰. Each group focuses on a particular way to achieve the common purpose and identify the essential tasks and processes that must be completed to realise this, working together to accomplish them. People are free to join any and as many groups as they wish⁴¹, with all work being carried out on a voluntary basis. The core idea of the system is that rather than a team of directors making decisions, people are encouraged to do things autonomously, acting together to achieve a common purpose⁴².

Inspired by natural systems, the VSM structure is supposed to create a flat organisation. However, members have mixed feelings about the structure with some saying, 'it has worked in some ways, but not so much in others'⁴³, or it is 'complicated'⁴⁴, and 'obscure'⁴⁵.

³⁶ 'VSM handbook', handout given to me by member, previously used during a workshop that taught members how the VSM system worked

³⁷ See Appendix 1 for glossary

³⁸ This board manages the infrastructure within the Ecovillage, such as the district heating system

³⁹ See Appendix 1 for glossary

⁴⁰ 'VSM handbook', handout

⁴¹ Guided conversation, Diarmuid, 16/04/20

⁴² 'VSM handbook', handout

⁴³ Informal conversation, fieldnotes, 03/07/20

⁴⁴ Informal conversation, fieldnotes, 16/04/20

⁴⁵ Informal conversation, fieldnotes, 07/04/20

Some of these working groups and individuals within them, are in positions with a significant amount of power. However, as any member can join groups freely, there are no set terms, or group decisions, regarding whether or not someone can/should coordinate a group, or how long they can do so for. This has resulted in some members running or leading particular groups for years, and although it is not denied that many of these members are doing a good job, it is felt by some that as a system 'it is not healthy'⁴⁶ and there should be some level of accountability within these working groups. Besides this, leading for such a length of time can mean that a role becomes shaped by the individual running the group, making it difficult for someone else to take it over. Some feel it can appear as though it is an attack on someone's character if another member suggests any kind of change to the current process⁴⁷. This is combined with the fact that some people feel that since this work is being done on a voluntary basis, 'if someone is willing to put their time and energy into this work, who am I to criticise them?'⁴⁸.

4.3.3 Consensus Decision-making

The community has adopted a collaborative, participatory approach to governance, and decision-making. This gives members the opportunity to provide input and play a role in developing and shaping the goals and future of the community (Bernard 2010, 37) (Sargisson and Lyman 2004). The objective of this model of decision-making is to incorporate the input, perspectives and needs of all group members. Decisions are only reached once a solution is found that reasonably satisfies all members of the group (Butler and Rothstein 1987) (Sargisson and Lyman 2004). By reaching an agreement through collective participatory processes, with each individual given the opportunity to have an input, the process aims to help individuals to feel more content and connected with the outcome (Shyyan et al. 2013). Some of the features that create the foundation for consensus decision-making are trust, respect, unity of purpose, non-violent communication and cooperation. The procedure tends to foster a more representative and inclusive process, as well as a more satisfying decision for participants (Sager and Gastil 2006).

Monthly SPI members meetings are held by the community, during which decisions are made by consensus. As all individuals must agree to a decision before it can be approved and carried out, this process allows each member to play a role in shaping decisions. At the

⁴⁶ Guided conversation, Diarmuid, 16/04/20

⁴⁷ Informal conversations, fieldnotes

⁴⁸ Informal conversations, fieldnotes

beginning of the meeting the community's vision statement is read out as well as the rules of etiquette, and a timed outline of the meeting agenda⁴⁹. Throughout the discussion members can use hand signals indicating when they wish to speak, make a technical point, a direct response, or a clarification, and are called on to speak by members of the process group, who run the meeting. Within these meetings the working groups (who also operate through consensus) have the opportunity to provide members with an update on what they have successfully completed or are currently doing⁵⁰.

Within this system of consensus, an individual or group must put forward a proposal which can be either accepted or objected to by the rest of the group. 'Everything has to be put forward as a proposal, consensus has to decide'⁵¹. After a decision has been accepted by the meeting group, the proposal is then officially circulated to all individuals on the members' email group, after which it can be accepted fully at the next members' meeting⁵². If someone objects to a proposal, the community formally have a rule that 'if somebody is withholding consensus, they must provide a workable alternative'⁵³. If such issues arise, a process is put in place to try and address the differences in opinion. Depending on the nature of the issue, this may involve only a small group or one or two people from either side of the disagreement to meet and discuss an alternative solution. Within these smaller meetings one individual, who is trained, acts as a mediator between the two sides, and helps guide the group as they search for a solution that both sides are satisfied with. Following this process, the decision is then brought back to the larger group where it is presented as a new proposal⁵⁴.

Several members remarked on instances where they had not believed in the system but to their surprise the process had been successful, with parties moving and adjusting a little here and a little there until they reached a compromise they both agreed to, demonstrating to them how the system worked⁵⁵.

The group chose this form of decision-making to ensure it was representative and to give everyone a voice, however, they acknowledged that one of the downsides is the speed of the process, as change can be very slow. As one member pointed out, there are essentially two

⁴⁹ Fieldnotes from members meeting, 15/02/20, fieldnotes from members meeting on Zoom 18/04/20

⁵⁰ Fieldnotes from members meeting, 15/02/20, fieldnotes from members meeting on Zoom 18/04/20

⁵¹ Life story interview, Beibhinn, 15/05/20

⁵² Fieldnotes from members meeting, 15/02/20

⁵³ Guided conversation, Eamonn, 19/03/2020

⁵⁴ Guided conversation, Eamonn, 19/03/2020, Informal conversation, field notes, 03/04/20

⁵⁵ Informal conversation, field notes, 03/04/20

things in balance within this system, inclusivity, and time⁵⁶. Choosing a speedier process may lead to quicker decisions but could result in people feeling unhappy, not heard or listened to and unrepresented, which could lead to challenges and conflicts within the group.

4.3.4 Challenges

By and large the community reaches consensus on most issues, with a few exceptions, such as membership, an issue which has been going on for years⁵⁷. This can be traced back to events that occurred during the beginning stages of the Ecovillage's development.

Although the plans, ideas and vision for this new community had been in the pipeline for almost 10 years, unfortunately it was only just at the end stage of the Celtic Tiger period and the beginning of the global financial crash that the infrastructure was laid and the first houses started to be built. Prior to this there had been a waiting list of people wanting to buy and build on one of the 130 sites for sale in the Ecovillage. However, the collapse of the housing market resulted in a mass exodus of almost 70% of the signees, as people were left unable to sell their homes elsewhere and thus could not afford to build new homes in the Ecovillage⁵⁸.

The debts accrued with the buying of the land and development of infrastructure were to have been paid off through the sale of each site within the first two years⁵⁹. This plan was supposed to leave the community debt-free and able to focus on building a vibrant community and sustainable way of living. However, as sites have remained unsold and planning permissions have run out, it is the existing community that shoulders the responsibility of the large debt. This has created significant stress for members and has been the reason behind some past divisive arguments and disagreements within the group.

As of now Tipperary County Council⁶⁰ has placed a planning embargo on the Ecovillage, which will stay in place until the Ecovillage can implement infrastructure such as a reed sewage treatment plant and street lighting, or an anticipated time of completion, before this will be lifted⁶¹. However, as their primary source of income comes from the sale of sites, this leaves the community in a difficult place when it comes to funding this infrastructure and development.

⁵⁶ Informal conversation, fieldnotes, 15/04/20

⁵⁷ Guided conversation, Eamonn, 19/03/20

⁵⁸ Guided conversation, Cathal, 24/05/20

⁵⁹ Guided conversation, Blathnaid, 11/04/20

⁶⁰ The administrative governing body and planning authority for the region where the Ecovillage is located

⁶¹ Guided conversation, Eamonn 10/07/20

The planning embargo has resulted in no additional houses being built in the Ecovillage since 2013. These factors have resulted in several aspiring future members giving up and looking elsewhere as they can no longer wait for these issues to be sorted out. This has resulted in the loss of potential valuable new members to the community.

Consequently, these factors have meant that the economic sustainability of the community is not in balance; and as ‘ecology, economics, and social relationships are all unavoidably interconnected’ (Litfin 2014, 30), this has impacted on other aspects of life within the community. That is not to say that there would be no problems if the community was economically stable, but there would be different challenges, and at present the community’s economic difficulties are slowing down and preventing them from realising their vision, building more houses, and gaining new members.

4.3.5 Members’ Thoughts and Experiences of the Governance Structure

The purpose of consensus decision-making and VSM was to move away from hierarchies and to make everything equal and level, ‘a flat organisation’.

However, one member remarked that although they felt that the system has value, ‘I think it’s reactionary. It’s reactionary against what was there before (in wider society), which was a top-heavy decision-making’ and ‘patriarchal’ system⁶². The community was taking nature as an example of a functioning organisational system, but ‘there are hierarchies in nature. They’re mixing up patriarchy, and hierarchy. And because they’re going against patriarchy, they’re going against hierarchy’. This member remarked how hierarchies are created even by people’s different heights and sizes; and quoting Ken Wilber ‘if you have a flat organisation it is grey’⁶³.

Other members stated that in theory the community is supposed to have a flat structure, however, in reality, it is hierarchical⁶⁴. Various members are seen to hold different levels of power within the community, with some being considered more important, or that what they say holds more value than someone else. Individuals have pointed out that all is well when

⁶² Life story interview, Nora, 26/03/20

⁶³ Life story interview, Nora, 26/03/20

⁶⁴ Informal conversations, fieldnotes

people agree on something, but in the past when they have tried to raise particular issues they have found it ‘stressful’⁶⁵ or ‘intimidating’⁶⁶.

Some individuals feel that the system itself can be an inhibitor and a hindrance to members trying to do things, as the process is slow and deciding by consensus can mean that the group is potentially not as effective as it could be⁶⁷. There is also a question as to whether the multiple groups and governance systems have meant that there are too many power systems in place, and not always enough people to fill them.

In the past there have been significant and divisive arguments that have resulted in some members disassociating themselves from the system, others have stopped coming to meetings, and some experience alienation as a result of unresolved issues or confrontations at meetings. Stemming from these past disagreements, some individuals have chosen to stop paying their SPIL membership on principle. Therefore, although they may observe meetings, they cannot object to a proposal. As a result, they are no longer able to take part in decision-making.

Although some actions have been taken to resolve these issues⁶⁸, which have been highly praised⁶⁹, the community does not currently have proper protocols for conflict resolution and several individuals have become alienated or have disengaged from much of the community, with some choosing to move away.

Of course it is almost impossible to create a structure which suits everybody, each individual has their own talents and likes/dislikes, with some individuals having great technical, speaking, or leadership abilities, while others may have greater practical, observational or organisational skills. Finding a system that fits everybody is hard, but members have commented on the fact that there are many individuals who never speak at meetings, and reportedly there are a large number of women who never come to meetings⁷⁰. Even so, in order to help people who may not wish to speak in front of the room, when reflecting on the topic of interest, the group has taken measures to create smaller groups within the meetings

⁶⁵ Informal conversation, fieldnotes, 22/06/20

⁶⁶ Guided conversation, Diarmuid, 16/04/20

⁶⁷ Informal conversations, fieldnotes

⁶⁸ In the past a powwow was organised by two women in a neutral space and members were able to come and speak freely and openly about how they felt about an incident that had given rise to conflict within the group. This event enabled individuals to understand one another better and clear the air.

⁶⁹ Informal conversations, fieldnotes

⁷⁰ Informal conversations, fieldnotes

where individuals may feel more comfortable giving their opinions and ideas in a smaller discussion group of about four people.

That being said, members have remarked that people have evolved over the years and through the handling of issues and disagreements, people have got more used to each other, listening to one another more and thinking more in terms of the group and its needs rather than of themselves. ‘There are huge egos here’, but even these individuals have become subdued over time, adapting more over the years, with members feeling that these changes have happened organically over time⁷¹.

In fact, during the first members’ meeting I attended, people made a joke about how ecovillages are like children, and have the lifespan of a person; and that throughout its infancy stage there were arguments and shouting during meetings but now in its young adolescent stage people are much more civil and good at listening to one another⁷².

The system within the Ecovillage is very complex in its many elements, with some feeling that the current organisation places a lot of pressure and expectations on residents⁷³. As one member pointed out, ‘you can have the perfect system and the imperfect system, but it’s how the people are and how they use it’ that matters.

Another member felt as though the system was failing to take advantage of all the talents and knowledge held by the diverse group of members, remarking ‘at the beginning we managed to tap into everybody’s [skills/talents] and we managed to create something that was bigger than ourselves, or bigger than the sum of the parts, but for some reason that’s not happening now’⁷⁴.

At present the group is reviewing its governance structures, and people feel hopeful that with change they will be able to re-harness the amazing collective experiences and creativity of those living in the community. In doing so, they hope to incorporate some of the very skilled people who they feel are currently under-utilised within the community. They see their inter-connections as ‘something you have to nourish’, and appreciate that there are many creative ideas here, it is just about finding the balance and working together to achieve this goal⁷⁵.

⁷¹ Informal conversation, fieldnotes, 29/04/20

⁷² Fieldnotes from members meeting, 15/02/20

⁷³ Guided conversation, Eamonn, 10/07/20

⁷⁴ Guided conversation, Niamh, 16/04/20

⁷⁵ Informal conversations, fieldnotes

4.4 Informal social networks

4.4.1 Social networks

Alongside the more formal organisational structures, numerous informal social networks and relationships have been built and strengthened throughout the development of the community. The informal social networks that have developed within the community, range across their social relations, systems of sharing, and the interpersonal relationships of communication and support, on an individual and group level.

4.4.2 Social Relations

Within the community some members have very close-knit relationships with one another, while others may not know each other as well. These relationships have developed over time, through community events such as festivals, jamming sessions, community meals, events at the amphitheatre, working together, visiting one another or being invited over for dinner. Experiencing these events together, getting involved, helping one another out and sharing laughs and joys with each other, alongside the more difficult, sad, and challenging times they have experienced together, has helped the community to bond as a group.

‘Ecovillages are by definition [spaces] of work’ (Litfin 2014, 28) and are entirely member run and operated. Thus, in order to maintain the communal area and complete certain tasks, such as cleaning⁷⁶, weeding⁷⁷ or clearing an area⁷⁸, the community usually organises a meitheal⁷⁹. Held regularly, meitheals are used to help members to accomplish a specific task together. Operating on a voluntary basis, an email is usually sent out to residents’ requesting help. This leaves it up to individuals themselves to take the time to drop by and offer their help, and participation. These activities involve a collaboration of individuals in collective work, and are spaces where people converse, and cooperate, while achieving something together.

Alongside the enjoyable, relaxed atmosphere of the more easy-going social gatherings, the activities, events, and experiences that are a normal part of life in the Ecovillage help to build relationships between members. These become encounters in which members connect as a

⁷⁶ Residents email group, 20/06/20

⁷⁷ Residents email group, 27/06/20

⁷⁸ Residents email group, 12/06/20

⁷⁹ Meitheal is an Irish word which describes the old cooperative labour system in Ireland where neighbours acted together as a team and helped each other on their farms. This system helped to develop co-operative relationships and friendships among members.

group, forging deeper bonds, and synergies from these shared experiences and memories. These occasions have all contributed to the community's social relations over time.

Several members have given other individuals a place to stay over the years, while their home was being built or when they were waiting to move into alternative accommodation, for periods ranging from a month or two, to over a year⁸⁰. Unsurprisingly, sharing their home with others has led to the development of a very close set of relations between certain individuals within the community.

4.4.3 Systems of Sharing

The sharing systems within the village range from the more physical goods or services, to the less tangible resources that are shared between people. Physical goods such as plant cuttings⁸¹, paint⁸², couches⁸³ or games⁸⁴ can be given, shared or, requested, being transferred from one individual to another on either a permanent or temporary basis. Less tangible resources such as skills, knowledge⁸⁵, advice⁸⁶, help⁸⁷, and time are also shared between individuals in different ways.

Most individuals refuse to accept any monetary exchange if they have given up some of their time or done a favour for someone else. Consequently, as a way of thanks, members will instead usually offer something in return in the form of a good⁸⁸ or service⁸⁹. However, this will usually only happen in cases where someone has carried out a relatively time-consuming or difficult job, rather than smaller favours.

Nevertheless, sharing within the community does not always take place in the form of a transfer. There are many other cases where members co-own objects, such as lawnmowers and outside bins, or lend items to one another for a short period of time, such as vacuum cleaners or tools.

As well as these internal community systems of sharing, the educational programme run by the Ecovillage acts as an external sharing system, sharing knowledge and experience with

⁸⁰ Informal conversations, fieldnotes

⁸¹ Requested on Cloughjordan community email group 15/06/20

⁸² Offered and requested, residents email group, 02/04/20, 10/04/20

⁸³ Offered, Cloughjordan community email group, 18/04/20, 10/06/20

⁸⁴ Offered residents email group and Cloughjordan email group 08/04/20

⁸⁵ Farm tour, members shared knowledge and advice with visitors 08/03/20

⁸⁶ Advice about how to protect yourself from COVID-19, Cloughjordan community email group, 16/03/20

⁸⁷ Request for help painting the newly renovated café, Cloughjordan community email group, 25/06/20

⁸⁸ Fresh walnut sourdough loaf given as a way of thanks after helping to move timber across to where it could be aged for the woodfire Riot and Rye bakery

⁸⁹ Offer of a Reiki session in exchange for gardening work 08/03/20

visitors, tours, and education days. The programme is centred on place-based learning and uses the Ecovillage as an example of what can be done to address issues such as climate change and biodiversity loss⁹⁰. There are also courses and educational weekends, which bring many visitors to the village and teach people alternative ways to live with the ecosystem.

For the most part, the coordination and collaboration of these sharing systems happen in either a face-to-face context or over the medium of email. There is really no formula/typology for what people share in these systems, but the collaboration and coordination of these connections are intrinsically social and encourage individuals to reach out to one another, creating a sense of commonality and belonging, as well as recognition and gratitude (Widlock 2017).

The social relations of trust, communication and connection that have been developed within the group has resulted in people feel comfortable requesting help, spare items or borrowing something from someone else if they need it. The ‘residents’ and ‘Cloughjordan community’ email groups are frequently used to offer new homes to objects, or give away spare items such as plants⁹¹, belongings⁹², toys⁹³, or kefir grains⁹⁴. As a platform of communication, it has provided a space for individuals to request, offer, borrow, or give with relative ease.

Systems such as these cannot exist without trust becoming part of the community’s interpersonal social relations. Liam has developed the RED gardens project⁹⁵, and grows a substantial amount of vegetables in their allotment and polytunnels. Most of this veg is left in a fridge just outside their house and is available for people to drop by and take, leaving money in the ‘honesty box’, a jam jar sitting on one of the shelves. This is an illustration of the trust that exists within the community and represents how the community operates through these relationships of trust and belief in others.

4.4.4 Communication and support

The communication and support within the community is built into their relationships, norms, and interactions with one another, helping to develop a culture of belonging and mutual understanding within the group. Members who were originally brought together motivated by

⁹⁰ Informal conversations, fieldnotes

⁹¹ Offered, residents email group and Cloughjordan community group 20/03/20

⁹² Offered and requested, residents email group, 19/05/20

⁹³ Offered, residents email group, 08/04/20

⁹⁴ Offered, residents email group

⁹⁵ See glossary

a common cause have developed relationships of support and care which go beyond this, becoming strong, steadfast connections of trust and friendship.

When members spoke about what they felt was working within the community, people felt that the sense of community in the Ecovillage is felt in the way members support, care, and look out for one another. This is done in the way they live as a group, through their behaviour and willingness to help others out, give them lifts, or bring them food, supporting one another when they need it. Moreover, there is a great sense of trust within the group. In this way they feel they are living their shared vision as a community⁹⁶.

4.5 Community responses to the pandemic

4.5.1 Community Responses

As a result of the nationwide lockdown⁹⁷, social distancing guidelines and contamination fears, the community had to adapt some of the modes of interaction they previously used, and develop new ways to connect and socialise with one another, in order to maintain these social networks. These actions and responses have evidenced the community's resilience as a social group, showing their ability to handle, respond and deal with change. The effect of the pandemic even helped to forge new connections with various individuals across the village during some of the new social activities that were taking place, as individuals interacted with members they previously had not known very well. All these factors helped to reinforce and build the community's social resilience.

As the pandemic forced people to stay apart, adapt their behaviour, and change the way they interacted with others, the most fundamental feature that came to the fore, was peoples need, and desire, to socialise and connect with one another. Finding means in which they could manage this as a group, and think of solutions, and ways in which they could come together and be with one another while remaining safe, was crucial in managing to maintain a quality of life while embracing the 'new normal'⁹⁸.

For some individuals working on the farm or outdoors, their normal routines remained relatively unchanged by the lockdown⁹⁹. However, others who could not visit friends/family or enter people's homes, both within and outside the village, who now had children at home

⁹⁶ Fieldnotes from members meeting, 15/03/20

⁹⁷ See Appendix 1 for a glossary of terms related to the pandemic

⁹⁸ Informal conversation, fieldnotes 20/04/20

⁹⁹ Informal conversations, fieldnotes

who needed to be home-schooled, were working from home, or were ‘cocooning’ at home, the lockdown was often difficult, confusing, frightening and isolating. Many experienced feelings of trepidation and disconnection with the world around them and felt at a loss as to how they ‘should’ behave, worried about how they could protect themselves and others.

In order for the wider societal result of ‘flattening the curve’ to be successful, the appropriate actions and behaviours of individuals needed to happen on a community-wide level (Dwyer 2020). However, after government guidelines instructed the country to go into lockdown, and people and families retreated into their homes, the responsibility was once again individualised. Subsequently, the responsibility of maintaining hygiene and cleaning rituals, keeping social circles small and maintaining social distance was placed on the individual and it was ultimately up to them to monitor and control their actions and behaviours.

Among the community some individuals held different opinions about the appropriate way to act. Individuals varied in the strictness of their adherence to government guidelines and regulations, with some instead choosing to live in accordance with their own rules rather than the wider nationally imposed guidelines, rejecting the advice to cocoon¹⁰⁰ or properly socially distance. However, when interacting with others, most people adjusted to the behaviours those around them felt most comfortable with.

As a community, understanding or at the very least accepting these different perspectives, attitudes, and responses, is necessary when living together. Members having the ability to shift, and adjust, to accept counteractive choices to their own, was essential in understanding and recognising the decisions of others within the community.

4.5.2 Social relations

The pandemic forced people to change the way they socialised, came together, and connected, as members of different households were not supposed to mix, and could not make physical contact with one another. Consequently, nonverbal, tactile actions and behaviours were eliminated from social interactions and daily life. Maintaining a smaller social circle meant that activities and events usually carried out in a larger group setting had to change, and unfortunately many of the more communal aspects of living in the ecovillage came to a standstill.

¹⁰⁰ Informal conversation, fieldnotes, 21/04/20

Over a period of 10 weeks most members neither entered nor invited anyone into their homes. This was hard because members usually visited, called over for dinner or socialised with one another on a regular basis. The challenges of these new ways of interacting, combined with the fact that many members had family in other parts of the country whom they were worried about and could now no longer visit, made it extremely difficult for individuals, particularly at the beginning when the future appeared to be very uncertain and frightening.

People were forced to reflect on both themselves and those around them, to examine whether one of them could be considered 'at risk' and if so, become more vigilant around one another as a precaution. As several of the households within the Ecovillage are one person households this time was quite challenging and isolating¹⁰¹.

However, after a short time in which members became more accustomed to the shock and the changes in everyday interactions, they quickly found ways to adapt. Members thought up solutions to ways they could meet and socialise with others while still adhering to the rules. The added benefit of the Ecovillage's 'wide open green spaces'¹⁰², provided members with more space to gather safely outdoors. Consequently, people got used to sitting out in people's gardens when they stopped by for a chat, tea, drinks, or brought their dinner over with them when eating together with members of different households, always ensuring to sit apart from one another. Although many of these solutions were reliant on good weather, Aoife and I had a polytunnel in the back garden where people could come for tea and a chat, and we could sit apart from one another rain, hail, or shine. There were also weekly cards nights, with everyone playing on their phones, which started off over Zoom and later evolved to the polytunnel after the lockdown and then the garden once the weather was a bit better.

Alongside these one-to-one or smaller group meetings, several individuals organised activities that people could take part in while remaining socially distant. These included Chi Gung, walking meditation and outdoor jamming sessions. Originally, members organised these as a way for individuals to meet and connect, to retain a sense of normality and to give people a chance to do something together, since most other activities had been cancelled.

These social practices and connections, which became part of the new everyday for individuals, helped to contribute to the social wellbeing of members.

¹⁰¹ Multiple informal conversations, fieldnotes

¹⁰² Informal conversation, fieldnotes, 18/03/20

Starting on the 14th of March Chi Gung was only supposed to be for two weeks¹⁰³, but it was still running 15 weeks later. The class, taught by Aoife, was open to individuals from both the Ecovillage and town, and evolved from a 20 minute class attended by upwards of 20 people, to an hour class with a smaller more steady group during the lockdown with individuals joining from their balconies and gardens. Over the weeks we learnt and practiced the different moves in Chi Gung and the first form in Tai Chi and followed up each class with a daily chat and catch up session.

This morning session was largely instrumental in helping people maintain a positive mental outlook over the weeks. A number of individuals said that ‘it gets me out of bed in the morning’¹⁰⁴, and gave them a comforting, relaxing start to the day, ‘focusing on the movements and all the details forces me to push the negative thoughts out of my mind’. The session, almost like a form of moving meditation, created a positive, calming, communal atmosphere for individuals, and became an important part of their new routine.

Even members of the town and village who weren’t taking part in the activity remarked that ‘it looked lovely’, ‘I love watching you all in the morning when I’m having my breakfast’, ‘it makes me feel calm just watching you guys do your Tai Chi’, ‘I don’t know what it was, but when I walked past you all earlier it just brought me such a sense of joy’¹⁰⁵.

For those who joined each morning, the daily sessions were ‘a gift’¹⁰⁶, and made a huge difference to their lives during the lockdown, in fact most could not have imagined what they would have done without it over the weeks¹⁰⁷. Therefore, when the group was told that the daily sessions would be finishing up on the 30th the announcement was met with minor horror, as people joked ‘what, are you not doing this forever?’, ‘No, don’t say that! You’ll have to wean us off!’ ‘What are we going to do without you?’¹⁰⁸.

Through their actions, people demonstrated little ways in which they appreciated the time and effort Aoife was giving to themselves and the group, randomly stopping by with presents of flowers¹⁰⁹, wine¹¹⁰ and organising a socially distant group dinner, in one case paying ahead

¹⁰³ Originally the nationwide lockdown was only announced for two weeks, but as cases increased the lockdown was prolonged

¹⁰⁴ Informal conversation, fieldnotes, 27/03/20

¹⁰⁵ Multiple informal conversations, fieldnotes

¹⁰⁶ Informal conversation, fieldnotes, 15/06/20

¹⁰⁷ Informal conversation, fieldnotes, 19/05/20

¹⁰⁸ Multiple informal conversations, fieldnotes

¹⁰⁹ Left as a surprise on doorstep, fieldnotes, 13/04/20

¹¹⁰ Gifted, fieldnotes, 23/06/20

for her dinner, a freshly made sourdough pizza from the community bakery¹¹¹, as a way of showing their appreciation for all her time and dedication.

Throughout this time there was still a disparity in different people's attitudes, responses and fears surrounding the potential risks of the virus, and meeting with people. However, for the most part they accepted and respected the alternative approaches of others. Furthermore, when individuals were in situations where they were mixing with other members who were more nervous or stricter in their adherence to the rules, they respected their choices and tried to act in a way that made the other person feel as comfortable and safe as possible in the situation.

4.5.3 Systems of Sharing

The prior systems of sharing also had to be reimagined as there were fears over the potential risk of spreading the virus unknowingly to another household or individual. In some cases, members took precautions by sanitising items such as jigsaws¹¹², CD cases¹¹³, ice-creams¹¹⁴, and secateurs¹¹⁵, before sharing or giving the object to another person. In other cases, members accepted the element of risk that came in receiving the gifts of dinner or baked goods left on their doorsteps by neighbours.

Alongside this, at the beginning of the lockdown several individuals offered their services by fixing bikes¹¹⁶, or repairing mobile phones and laptops¹¹⁷, items they felt would be necessary or essential to those trying to work for home or as modes of communication, in the coming weeks.

In situations where individuals were working together in a group, such as in the sensory garden numbers were kept small or staggered over the afternoon, with individuals keeping apart from one another while working. Other events such as the 'community seed share', where anyone could come and pick up free seeds at the coach house, provided sanitiser for people before they approached the tables which were spaced two meters apart from one

¹¹¹ Gift, fieldnotes, 18/04/20

¹¹² Observation, field notes, 02/04/20

¹¹³ Informal conversation, fieldnotes, 24/03/20

¹¹⁴ Informal conversation, fieldnotes, 22/04/20

¹¹⁵ Informal conversation, fieldnotes, 28/03/20

¹¹⁶ Offered, residents email group, 19/03/20

¹¹⁷ Offered, residents email group, 17/03/20

another, as well as designating an earlier hour for people cocooning to come by so they could feel safe and included¹¹⁸.

As part of their community vision, sharing what they are doing with the world and showing people how they live is important, however, the pandemic resulted in all tours, visits, and education days being cancelled¹¹⁹. As people could no longer come to visit the community, members created a 360° virtual tour around the Ecovillage which could be watched by anyone at any time. Throughout the 25-minute-long video various members spoke from key spaces within the Ecovillage, about the value and importance the places have in their lives and the lives of the community, ecosystem, and planet (Cloughjordan Ecovillage 2020).

4.5.4 Communication and support

Over the pandemic and lockdown people opened up to one another about the difficulties and struggles they were having. Individuals showed their vulnerability to one another and in doing so were able to support each other by comforting and reassuring them they were not alone, and they too were having ‘bad days’¹²⁰. This was important since many people were not seeing each other as much and so could not necessarily see when people were in difficulty, feeling lonely, or down.

During this time of stress, members checked in, supported, and cared for one another, helping to guide or advise each other what to do, or reassuring them that they were doing the right thing. There were also times when individuals increased their personal risk in order to support somebody else.

The community also did a number of other things to help care for, and support those within the group who were more at risk, or cocooning, offering to pick up items for them in the supermarket or do their weekly shop¹²¹. Additionally people shared information and videos they had found useful on some of the ways you could protect yourself from the virus¹²² or how to give a ‘self-hug’¹²³, for people who were living on their own and might be missing human contact.

¹¹⁸ Fieldnotes, 09/04/20

¹¹⁹ Guided conversation, Eamonn, 19/03/20

¹²⁰ Informal conversations, fieldnotes

¹²¹ Informal conversations, fieldnotes, residents email group 12/03/20

¹²² Residents email group, 16/03/20, 02/04/20

¹²³ Residents email group, 9/04/20

Phones, WhatsApp, Zoom, and email became utilised in new ways to enable people to communicate and connect with one another. Video calling became especially important for those who were cocooning as well as allowing individuals to partake in some of the activities they used to do face-to-face such as choir, or cards.

4.5.5 Collective decision-making and management of opposing risk perceptions

The coronavirus pandemic gave me the opportunity to observe some of these governance systems in action, as well as highlighting the different perceptions and approaches to risk by individuals within the community.

In the middle of March¹²⁴ (March 12th), the schools closed and children had to stay at home full-time. At that time children were considered to be potential vectors of the virus, yet most were hanging out, playing, and mixing freely with members of other households.

Consequently, one parent within the Ecovillage sent out an email to the members, suggesting that parents meet to discuss how they should act as a group.

The group opted to meet at the outdoor amphitheatre¹²⁵, a space where individuals could meet and be heard while also remaining at a safe distance from one another. The meeting was attended by a parent from almost every household, as well as other members of the Ecovillage. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the unfolding situation, and what precautionary safety measures and actions they should take as a group.

While some individuals felt that strict measures should be taken to isolate the children from one another to stop them mixing, others felt that the situation needed to be looked at from a more long-term perspective, and to consider what would be possible to enforce and maintain over a long period of time, believing the pandemic was likely to carry on for up to three months and possibly into the summer. At this time there was no official rule around not entering or mixing with other households; and so the second cohort felt that it would be hard on children to stop them going outside and playing with their friends, and as there was currently nothing stopping them, they saw no need to intervene. Individuals within this group

¹²⁴ When they initially closed on March 12th it was only supposed to be for two weeks, but this was extended as cases increased throughout the country, it was announced that would be officially closed until September on the 28th of March

¹²⁵ The first meeting was held on the 15th of March and was followed by biweekly meetings to allow people to meet and discuss their thoughts and how they were feeling as the situation progressed. When the country went into nation-wide lockdown these meetings had to come to a halt as individuals could not meet in groups of more than for with members outside their household.

also pointed out that neither they nor their children were considered high risk, so they felt they should not have to curtail their behaviours and actions in order to be precautionary.

On the other hand, the first cohort felt that it was not possible to expect children to remember to follow social distancing rules all the time; and that this stage was a key and vital opportunity to take action to try and reduce and slow the spread of the virus. As parents and members of a community with individuals who were older or high risk, they felt that it was their moral duty to take any measures to try and reduce this risk.

Ultimately, people held differing opinions and stances on the situation, and consequently they came to a decision in which they agreed that children would not mix with each other, unless both parents had agreed in advance. Along with this, individuals also brought up the potential option of forming a 'family unit' with another household, provided they each followed the same hygiene and cleaning protocols. As a group they agreed that it was important to respect each other's decisions, and to realise that certain arrangements and preferences would not be the same for everyone, and as individuals they must not judge one another's choices.

These reactions take either a responsibility, or rights' approach, to a personal or familial response to a potential risk; and add a further dimension to the actions and interactions of the community as a group. The seemingly opposite responses can be traced back to people's different modes of thinking and demonstrate the importance of being able to find a balance between diverse or contrasting attitudes and responses to the same problem.

This instance demonstrated the ways in which the community listened, acknowledged, and understood one another and their differences; and rather than being divided by them, they found a solution that both sides could agree to. This situation demonstrated how the community operates as a functioning group and uses the skills they have learnt, such as 'active listening' and 'non-violent communication', in other spheres of their life, applying them in other events where they are searching for a solution to a wider concern or problem as a group.

This instance demonstrates where the formal systems of organising and governance can only go so far, and the social sustainability of the community is truly seen in the informal social relationships and systems that members have developed as a group.

4.6 Conclusion

The initial vision held by members, to develop a socially and environmentally sustainable community, shaped the group's decisions regarding the governance, location and organisation of the community. In the proceeding time since the community has been further shaped by these factors and the ideas, input and personalities of the members themselves.

The community's collaborations and deliberations and regular range of social activities, have created shared memories and experiences which have helped to build, maintain and strengthen the interrelationships of trust, communication, sharing and support within the group.

The coronavirus pandemic challenged the existing systems, forcing members to adjust and change the way they co-existed, bonded, and communicated. The actions and behaviours that developed in response to these challenges, help to demonstrate the resilience and adaptability of the community and show how even when apart, members still found ways to help, care, and support one another.

5. Analysis

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter I analyse the results of my findings and relate them to the literature I discussed within my theoretical framework. Throughout my analysis I explore how the decisions, motivations, actions and experiences of ecovillage members are influenced and shaped by the interactions they have with structure and agency in their lives.

5.2 The Emergence of Cloughjordan Ecovillage

Reflective of other green intentional communities (Sargisson 2009; Nelson 2018), the idea and vision of Cloughjordan Ecovillage was originally derived by a group of individuals who perceived the risks of climate change to have catastrophic potential for themselves, their children, and their planet's ecosystem, and were compelled to take action to try and mitigate this risk. As separate individuals they felt they were limited in what they could do, but believed that by working together and building a community that endeavoured to create a sustainable way of living, they could collectively create larger and more effective responses to such hazards¹²⁶. Akin to other ecovillages, they also hoped that such a community could become a source of inspiration for wider society, demonstrating an alternative way of living, in harmony with the planet (Meijering 2012).

As individuals, members were attracted to Cloughjordan Ecovillage for a variety of reasons, many were drawn to the opportunities, hopes and promises it could make possible; perceiving it to be a space where they could live in accordance with their values, amongst people who were motivated by the same desires and principles¹²⁷. The decision to move here was made in response to the experiences and interactions these individuals encountered in their social world.

Although members may not have described their decision to move to Cloughjordan Ecovillage as a response to risks created by risk society, the motivators they described, whether that be the absence of community or the degradation of their natural environments¹²⁸, directly correlate with consequences of risk society – environmental destruction and individualising processes (Sørensen 2018).

¹²⁶ Informal conversations, fieldnotes

¹²⁷ Informal conversations, fieldnotes

¹²⁸ Informal conversations, and interviews

For instance, the decision made by members who expressed the desire to live within, and become part of a connected, interpersonal, communal social structure (Meijering 2012), was articulated in response to the individualising features of Irish society and the absence of community they experienced in their social world.

In all cases, such motivators pushed these individuals to act to protect or recover something they held of value, which had become endangered, or was absent in their lives. Their actions stem from the values associated by individuals to a risk object, and an object at risk, responses which derived from the different ways each individual subjectively responded to their objective social context (Hansson 2010).

It is evident that societies, communities, and individuals can vary widely in their response to risks (Boholm and Corvellec 2011). Yet, although members may have been responding to different observer dependent risks, their reactions have resulted in the same response. This factor has resulted in the community being made up of a diverse range of individuals, whose desires, motivations and ideas shape the community, and ecovillage that exists today. The community has changed and evolved over time, shaped by these different interests and values (Brennan and Brown 2008), yet at its core it is about sustainability – lifestyle sustainability, both environmentally and socially.

Aside from different personal motivations for joining the community, members hold a similar set of core ideas and beliefs that inform their way of life (Sargisson 2007). Members intentionally share an ideology and lifestyle, and attempt to implement their ideal social, ecological, and governmental systems in the hopes of realising their vision (Pitzer 2009, 15). In order to achieve this vision, the group works cooperatively to create a lifestyle which reflects these shared core values (Miller 2010).

5.3 Proximity to Wider Society

In an Irish social and local context, Cloughjordan Ecovillage is an exceptional example of a response to a hazard created by risk society. In a society which was going through a period of heavy industrialisation of agriculture and the opening up and globalisation of the economy, this collective response deviated from the norm, and opposed the exultation of consumerism in the rest of the country, attempting to demonstrate an alternative. In their desire to live a valuable and value-driven life, the members response has been ethically driven to respond to a macro issue on a micro level (Sargisson 2009).

In order to spread their vision and way of life, the community has chosen to remain as an integrated part of wider society. However, the social context in which the community has developed, has played a fundamental role in challenging the community's ability to create a socially, economically, and environmentally sustainable community, and to realise its vision. The implementation of the group's vision, and the translation of intentionality into being, has been complicated by the dominant culture, as it provides both structural constraints to, and opportunities for their development (Ergas 2010).

The community has been restricted by its obligations to Tipperary County Council and the 2008 global economic crash. As the community was curtailed by the economic constraints of the world they wished to transform, these circumstances placed increased stresses and insecurities on members, and hampered their ability to carry out all the ideas they wished to implement. Such factors demonstrate the importance in recognising that although the community attempts to move away from the features of mainstream society, the Ecovillage does not exist within a void, and the community and its members still must operate within the wider society in which they exist, as they are inextricably connected.

Aside from the constraints and impacts created by wider society however, the decision to build alongside an existing community has been successful. As the site has made the space more accessible to both visitors and members of Cloughjordan, the location has enabled so many more individuals to become involved than would have been possible if the Ecovillage had been built as an isolated community. Rather than being negatively affected by the proximity to another community, the location has in fact strengthened, benefitted, and helped the community to spread its vision.

5.4 Governance

As an intentional community, Cloughjordan Ecovillage set out to develop new systems of governance, communication, and trust based on a shared set of beliefs (Kunze 2012). Some of the core ideas important in the development of these structures were collective, collaborative, participatory ways of organising and decision-making (Bernard 2010) (Sargisson and Lyman 2004). The goal was to create a non-hierarchical, inclusive and egalitarian governance process.

Though the community has been successful in implementing the governance structures they desired, it appears as though some of the ideals, which they sought to develop by implementing VSM and consensus decision-making, have been more difficult to realise in

practice, as some members do not speak up in meetings, or have become disconnected, or alienated from the process¹²⁹.

Consequently, these dynamics have led to a smaller number of individuals being more vocal or becoming primary spokespersons within the group. Thus, the process is not incorporating the needs, input, and perspectives of each member in the way it set out to do (Sager and Gastil 2006).

The community has also experienced some of the more expected drawbacks of the consensus process (Butler and Rothstein 1987, 31), for example taking long periods of time to reach decisions, or being unable to reach consensus to date in regards to particular community issues.

Nevertheless, these governance systems have provided the group with a structure for making decisions and working together as a group. They have also provided a framework for sharing responsibilities and modes of organising and communicating with one another.

Developing social structures that are sustainable and inclusive is challenging and takes time. That said, members have remarked that they have observed people changing and adapting over time, with everyone becoming better at listening, and compromising¹³⁰. Learning from past experiences, over time members have become more accustomed to operating and thinking as a group, rather than as individuals.

These features indicate that the introduction of these governance systems have managed to adjust the way members think and to act, in a more communal and collective manner. Thereby achieving some of the values they sought to realise when they initially implemented these systems.

5.5 The Social Sustainability of the Community

According to Kaplowitz (quoted in Christian and Adams 2003, p. 202), ‘sustainable communit[ies] must be based on sustainable relationships – relationships that give more than they take’. Such relationships require communication, caring, support, trust, and interpersonal bonds. And although the formal social relations have contributed to the existing relations of trust, communication, and connection between ecovillage members; it is not the governance structures and decision-making that fills everyday living. Rather it is the rich tapestry of

¹²⁹ Informal conversations, fieldnotes

¹³⁰ Informal conversations, fieldnotes

human relations, connections, and actions, which shape Ecovillage life, and it has been these more informal social relations that have been instrumental in the development of these sustainable relationships.

It was these sustainable social networks that demonstrated their resilience within the community during the pandemic, as members searched for new ways to connect, support and care for one another. The strong bonds and social relations between community members, which have developed over the years through connections and interactions, were strengthened as people adapted in accordance with the new rules and searched for new ways they could maintain these relationships and support one another.

The numerous ongoing collaborative sharing networks within the community have helped to foster a culture of giving, communicating, and asking within the group which serve to strengthen social relations, as individuals build new connections and appreciation for those that give, share and lend items to them (Widlock 2017). Alongside these, the smaller, more personal caring, sharing/gifting relations that occur between neighbours, with the surprises of food or baked goods left on people's doorsteps and offers of dinner, help to build friendships and contribute to the reciprocal systems of exchange within the community (Widlock 2017).

These relationships of trust, communication, caring and support have developed over time as members have interacted, worked and met with one another. Coming through the shared experiences within the community together and working through conflicts and disagreements has also been crucial in shaping the connections and forms of communication within the community (Litfin 2014). Over time, as they got to know one another better they have also been able to understand and acknowledge one another's differences, and skills, features which all play a role in shaping the social sustainability of the group.

5.6 Managing of social risk

The pandemic also gave me the opportunity to observe how the community operated, communicated and collaborated in the communal management of social risk. The pandemic, a direct outcome of risk society (Wolff 2020) is however, a kind of risk quite unlike the one in which the community had been created in response to. And yet, the structures and social networks that the community has developed, placed them in a better position to respond to the risk as a group.

Over time the formal and informal social structures have helped to develop a culture of trust, support, and communication within the community. These structures have also helped to

instil the norm to deal with problems and issues as a group, to confer and collaborate, choosing to collectively discuss and search for solutions together. At the initial stages of the pandemic, members perceived that as an integrated community, unlike the rest of society, they had an opportunity to make decisions together as to how to handle the potential risk and support one another¹³¹.

This was where the community meetings in the amphitheatre were important, as they provided members with a space to discuss their fears, and how they would like to act as a cohesive group. When members dealt with the issue of their children mixing, they came together collectively, reaching consensus with an agreement all sides could agree to. Within these meetings it became obvious that some members perceived the risks and the appropriate way to act very differently. However, the group used the skills, techniques and methods of communication and collaboration, which they had become accustomed to using at members' meetings, to reach consensus during these informal social gatherings.

However, some came away from the situation disappointed, and shocked by the unwillingness of others to take more stringent measures to protect the community. They felt some members were thinking about the situation from the perspective of their rights as individuals, rather than from their responsibilities as members of the community¹³².

Nevertheless, consensus is not about making everybody happy, it is about coming to a decision that both sides can agree to (Butler and Rothstein 1987; Sargisson and Lyman 2004), and this is what they managed to do. This demonstrates how this form of collective decision-making and collaboration, by developing solutions together, has become part of the community's social culture.

Understanding one another, and employing the decision-making process, enabled the group to manage and balance different opinions. As members had a unity of purpose, to find a collective solution some of the other consensus decision-making features that were observable during these informal discussions were active listening, co-operation and respect. These features demonstrate how the values, skills, and interpersonal relations of trust, that have been developed in the community's formal and informal social systems, have become a normal and accepted part of the community's culture and influence the way the community collectively deal with issues as a group.

¹³¹ Discussion at the amphitheatre, fieldnotes, 15/03/20

¹³² Informal conversation, 27/06/20

5.7 Resilience

The context of Covid-19 demonstrated to me how the formal and informal social structures and systems have become an integrated part of the community's culture and social relations. These features play an important role in the community's continued development towards a resilient and sustainable community.

Berkes and Ross (2012) have demonstrated that when exploring community resilience an emphasis on action, self-organisation and problem solving when dealing with adversity, can be reinforced by identifying and building on existing strengths.

The Ecovillage community's resilience was exhibited in the way members came together to work towards a communal objective. This instance demonstrated the capacity of the community's social system to mobilise successfully, to respond and thrive, in an environment which had become characterised by stress, uncertainty, and change (Bhamra et al. 2011).

Members demonstrated their personal and collective capacity to engage with and respond to change (Berkes and Ross 2013). This resilience was demonstrated in their adaptability, collaboration, communication, and problem-solving skills in response to a potential risk.

Faced with a problem, individual members reflected on how they could contribute and help people during this time of adversity (Magis 2010; Berkes and Ross 2013). They identified and built on their existing strengths by mobilising to act, actions which fostered a feeling of support and connectedness within the group (Luthar 2006). These actions demonstrated the group's ability to sustain and renew the community in the face of hazards to develop new directions for the community's future (Magis, 2010; Walker et. al 2004).

These qualities and actions have been widely recognised as features that enable communities to both withstand and adapt to change and uncertainty (Walker et al. 2004), as well as helping to build both personal and collective resilience within the community (Luthar 2006). In this instance the community's active response to a social risk has helped the community to develop both personal and interpersonal resilience. Their responses and collaborative action were made possible by the pre-existing social structures and interpersonal relationships, which have developed over time within the community's formal and informal social systems. By collectively searching for solutions, and managing hazards as a community, these responses will contribute to the durability and resilience of the community as they encounter future hazards.

5.8 Conclusion

The expression of members values, which has been articulated in their response to their social and ecological environment has led to the development of Cloughjordan Ecovillage. This response was created as an alternative to the damaging lifestyles that exist within mainstream society, lifestyles which contribute to the multiplication of hazards within risk society. By developing an alternate way of living members endeavoured to reduce their harmful impact on the environment and create a community with durable communal social relations.

Remaining as an integrated part of wider society Cloughjordan Ecovillage deviates from the definitions (Miller 2010; Pitzer 2009; Sargisson 2007) that describe intentional communities as partly isolated places. The subsequent interconnections and interrelationships with the community of Cloughjordan, that have occurred as a result of this decision, demonstrate the community's ability to remain part of mainstream society, while still effectively realising the group's vision.

Although the community has implemented governance structures that are prevalent in many other intentional communities, the group has struggled to realise some of the values they sought to achieve through this implementation. However, the social networks that have been developed between members and the local community are strong, trusting, communicative relationships which shape everyday life. Within these networks individuals give one another kindness and support, and share their talents, skills and resources with one another. These actions contribute to the social sustainability of the community.

The pandemic challenged the community's social structures and networks and prevented them from operating as normal. However, using the interpersonal and organisational skills the members have developed overtime, the community adapted and found new ways to manage and interact, while balancing contrasting perceptions of the potential risk caused by the virus. These responses contributed to the development of both community and individual resilience as members worked together and reflected on what they could do to care for and support one another throughout this time. These features in turn have strengthened the resilience of the group.

6. Conclusion

In a world characterised by risk, ecovillages are spaces where people can actively pursue more sustainable lifestyles. In their desire to contribute to a better world, these communities strive to develop a way of living that can be viewed as an alternative and potentially more effective response to the consequences of risk society. By integrating structures, systems and practices that adopt the ideals of social, ecological, cultural, and economic sustainability into all elements of everyday life, members perceive they will be able to mitigate the risk of climate change for themselves, their families, and their surrounding environment.

Consequently, ecovillages are spaces where members articulate their values in an attempt to respond to the risks they perceive in their external environment. As these communities reflect on their lives, choices, actions and behaviours, members attempt to develop socio-environmental responses, which look at their place in the world from a whole systems approach. Developing a strong social structure with supportive interpersonal relationships provides these communities with a foundation on which they can work towards and attempt to realise their vision.

Creating socially sustainable communities, with inclusive, non-hierarchical, and meaningful social relationships, ecovillages become spaces where members can opt into these social structures and networks. This ability, and willingness, to develop inclusive and collaborative social structures, which help the group to manage and balance different opinions and perceptions, are features that help intentional communities stand apart from other communities. These features subsequently help these communities become social spaces where members can escape the individualising features of mainstream society; connecting, and collaborating with one another, and building strong, caring, and supportive interpersonal relations.

Carrying out ethnographic research in Cloughjordan Ecovillage, I was able to explore how the community's social networks, governance structures, and vision influenced the ways in which members lived, interpreted, and experienced the circumstances and world around them. Using the methods characteristic of ethnography, I was able to investigate the subjective understandings and experiences of members and to develop insight into the ways the community's social systems have been shaped overtime, becoming intrinsic elements

within the community's social relations. I was also able to examine what factors prompted the emergence of this intentional community.

The perceptions and values members held as individuals shaped their responses to the features in their external environment, and brought them together with a unified purpose; to create a community that placed the ideals of social and environmental sustainability at the forefront of everyday living. This decision, made by members individually and collectively, was born out of the absence of meaningful social relations they experienced in their original neighbourhoods, and the damage they could see being caused to the environment by the harmful practices of day-to-day living in mainstream society.

Similar to many other intentional communities, this unified purpose was not enough to facilitate the development of meaningful social relations. As the community has attempted to translate its intentionality into being, the group has had to learn how to compromise, balance and manage different viewpoints. In order to aid this process, the community has tried to implement social structures which are representative, inclusive, collaborative and collective.

This willingness and ability to compromise for the benefit of the community, has been strengthened and supported by the relationships of trust, sharing and gift-giving between members. These social networks and interpersonal relations have become an integrated part of the community, strengthening members' connections with one another and enabling them to work through these disagreements and issues together.

Although members recognise flaws and drawbacks within the current system, the successful management of opposing perceptions of risk during the coronavirus pandemic has demonstrated that several of the initial ideals desired by the community, namely collective modes of thinking, and a willingness to search for solutions together, have become an integrated part of the group consciousness.

The community's ability to mobilise successfully, to take action and to thrive in an environment characterised by change, uncertainty, and stress, help to demonstrate its resilience and social sustainability. For it was not the formal structures and processes, that were crucial to the resilience of the community during these times of stress. Instead, it was the personal relations between Ecovillage members, and their individual commitment to the collective values and processes, which were of importance. And it was the determination and dedication of these individuals, as they developed new processes and forms of connecting and

interacting, which maintained the community's sustainability, and strengthened its individual and collective resilience.

As the community faces interpersonal disagreements and hazards in the future, their resilience and ability to handle and manage these issues, will be challenged and tested. Nevertheless, the collective experiences and social relations that have been developed within the community have the potential to help members work through these issues together.

However, just as these spaces are shaped by those within it, these communities are also influenced by the society that surrounds them. In their desire to create an alternative example of living, these communities must be able to function within, and as part of mainstream society. One of the challenges for intentional communities is that by definition, they set themselves apart from wider society. However, for ecovillages, as they endeavour to influence the culture around them, this feature complicates their vision. Consequently, while the community needs to separate itself in order to build its own culture and interpersonal relationships, in order to achieve the group's vision of social change, they must socialise and integrate with the wider community. There is a subsequent tension and balance to be achieved between these two dynamics.

Actively choosing to locate alongside an existing community, Cloughjordan Ecovillage deviates from this norm, to isolate from wider society. The consequences of the interconnected relationships between Ecovillage members and members of Cloughjordan do not occur independently of one another. The surrounding local community frames, enhances and contributes to what the Ecovillage has become. These qualities are reflected in turn by the Ecovillage community, as members support and strengthen their interwoven, interpersonal relationships with individuals in the town. Accordingly, by remaining as an interconnected part of wider society, the community is able to demonstrate a different way to live in the here and now.

In conclusion, given these features, a potential area of further research would be to explore the impact this adjoining location has had on the value systems, and actions, of the original local community within Cloughjordan. This next step would help provide an understanding of the relationship between this example of an Ecovillage and the wider community.

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9. Appendix

Appendix 1: Glossary

At risk

- Individuals who could become seriously ill if they were to contract coronavirus (COVID-19). Individuals within this category include older people, individuals with health conditions and pregnant women.

Cocoon

- Individuals who were considered at risk, or over 70 years old were advised to cocoon. This meant they were to stay at home and avoid physical contact with any other people.

Coronavirus (COVID-19)

- An infectious disease which spread quickly throughout the world and caused a global pandemic.

Flattening the curve

- A public health strategy that attempted to slow down the spread of the virus to avoid overwhelming the hospitals and ICU.

Lockdown

- During this time everyone in Ireland had to self-isolate by staying at home. The only time people could leave the house was for essential journeys, for example to go to the doctor or shops. As well as this people were allowed to have one period of exercise per day, and they could only go 2km from their home.

2-meter Social distancing

- This refers to a form of physical distancing, wherein individuals maintain at least 2 meters apart from any individuals not living in the same household. This was to help prevent the spread of COVID-19 by reducing the amount of times people came in close contact with one another.

CSA

- Community Supported Agriculture

RED gardens

- Research Education Development gardens, these gardens experimental in that each of the six gardens uses a different growing method to grow produce. Some of the reasons this has been developed is to test the success and failures of these different growing systems in the Irish climate.

SPI

- Sustainable Projects Ireland, the project is co-ordinated by SPI and decisions are made by members at monthly meetings

VERT

- Village Education Research Training, this group manages and runs the community's education programme. This includes educational days, tours and facilitates researchers.

VSM

- Viable Systems Model

Appendix 2: Covid-19 Timeline Ireland

28th February - 1st case in Ireland

8th March – Cases were beginning to spread via community transmission

12th March – Shut down of schools, colleges, and childcare facilities

24th March – Everyone was asked to stay home (lockdown) and only venture outside unless absolutely necessary, all non-essential retail outlets were to close, ban on social gatherings of more than 4 people, unless they are all members of the same household

27th March – Mandatory order for everyone to stay home, people can exercise once a day up to 2km from home

May 5th – People can exercise up to 5km from home

8th June – People can travel up to 20km from home

29th June – Travel restrictions lifted

Appendix 3: Snapshot of my timeline of activities throughout my fieldwork

	February	March	April	May	June	July
Participant observation	Commenced February 12 th	Ongoing	Ongoing	Ongoing	Ongoing	Completed July 17 th
Guided conversation		19 th , 26 th	11 th , 16 th , 16 th	15 th	5 th	10 th
Digital ethnography	Commenced February 12 th	Ongoing	Ongoing	Ongoing	Ongoing	Completed July 17 th
Activities		Chi Gung	Chi Gung	Chi Gung	Chi Gung	Chi Gung
	15 th Members meeting	Cancelled due to coronavirus	18 th Members meeting on Zoom	Members meeting on Zoom		
	Working in the café	Working in the café				
		Helping out in the Sensory garden	Helping out in the Sensory garden			
		Dinners, lunches, coffees, drinks at people's houses	Dinners, lunches, coffees, drinks in gardens	Dinners, lunches, coffees, drinks in gardens	Dinners, lunches, coffees, drinks in gardens	Dinners, lunches, coffees, drinks in gardens
One off events and activities	Circle dance	Moved into Aoife's home in the Ecovillage	Seed savers seed swap at the coach house			
	Talk in 'WeCreate' the	Singing and Song writing gig in Maura Grace's,	Temporary food bank drop-off point,			

	community's enterprise centre	one of the local pub's	following the urgent food appeal for the Nenagh food bank (Closest large nearby town)			
		World Women's day service in the Thomas MacDonagh museum				
		Farm Tour – part of 'Feeding ourselves' event				

Appendix 4: Sample Interview Guide

Life Questions

- What primary beliefs guide your life?
- What motivated/attracted you to Cloughjordan ecovillage?
- What expectations did you have before coming to live here?
 - In what ways has Cloughjordan lived up to these expectations?
 - In what ways has it differed?
- What is your favourite memory from living in the Ecovillage?

Governance Questions

- How does the VSM model work?
- Have you been involved in any of the groups/boards?
 - Which ones?
 - What sort of work did this involve?
- How do you feel about the VSM process?
- How does the consensus decision-making process work?
 - Do you find it has been effective? Why/why not?
 - Has there ever been a time where you felt the process has failed? Or is there any time where you feel that the process has been particularly successful?
- What do you have to say about the governance structure and VSM model in general?

Social Questions

- How would you describe the community within the Ecovillage?
- What areas of ecovillage life have you been most involved in?
- How do you feel about living alongside another community?
- Do you feel that your life has improved since living in the Ecovillage?

Risk and the pandemic questions

- How has your life been changed by the pandemic?
 - What has been most difficult/challenging?
- How do you feel about the community's responses to the pandemic?

Appendix 5: Photos

A selection of visual recordings from my time in Cloughjordan Ecovillage.



Figure 1 – Example of one of the houses in the Ecovillage



Figure 2 - Distant photo of other homes in the Ecovillage, cob house on the left and timber framed lime hemp rendered house on the right



Figure 3 – CSA Community Farm and Poly tunnels



Figure 4 - Allotment



Figure 5 - Allotment



Figure 6 - Allotments



Figure 7 - Allotments



Figure 8 – RED gardens project polytunnel



Figure 9 – Liam's fridge

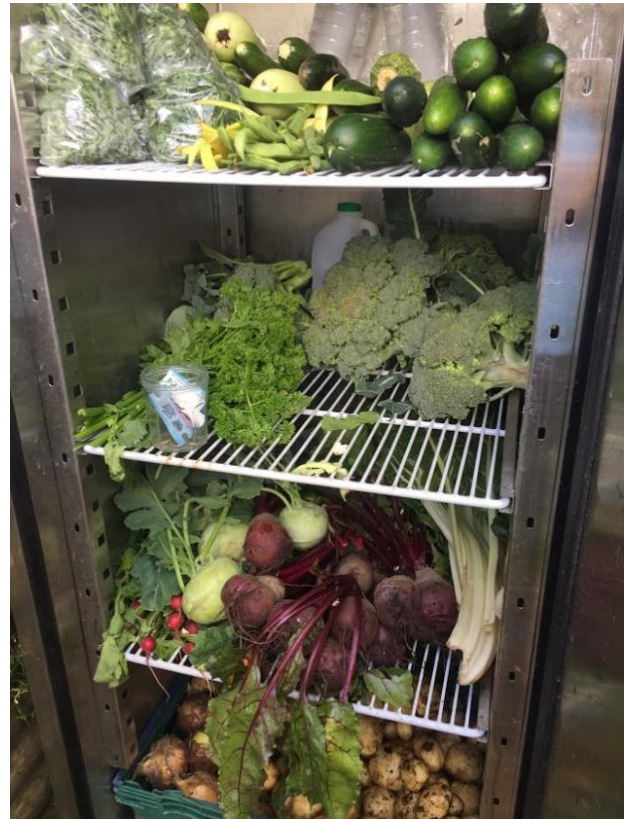


Figure 10 – Liam's fridge, filled with food grown in the RED gardens



Figure 11 – Bug Hotel in the Sensory Garden



Figure 12 – Sensory Garden, hand painted sign



Figure 13 – Taste area in the Sensory Garden



Figure 14 – Sight area in the Sensory Garden



Figure 16 – The Labyrinth, in the shape of a seven circle Celtic spiral, individuals can walk the labyrinth as a form of meditation. It has been made with stones that have been gathered by members from around the Ecovillage



Figure 15 – The Community amphitheatre, this was where the community meetings took place when people had to socially distance. Usually it is a space for live music, theatre performances and events.



Figure 17 – One of the Educational signs that can be found on the biodiversity trail along the perimeter of the Ecovillage



Figure 18 – The transformation of the polytunnel into a socially distant meeting space

Figure 19 – The beginning stages of growth in the polytunnel



Figure 20 – By now the plants did not leave much space for anyone to sit inside and still be able to see each other...



Figures 21-25 depict the polytunnel and some of the produce Aoife and I grew there





Figure 26 – Fresh sourdough bread from Riot and Rye bakery in the Ecovillage



Figure 27 – Pizza gifted as a way of thanks to Aoife for all the Chi Gung sessions

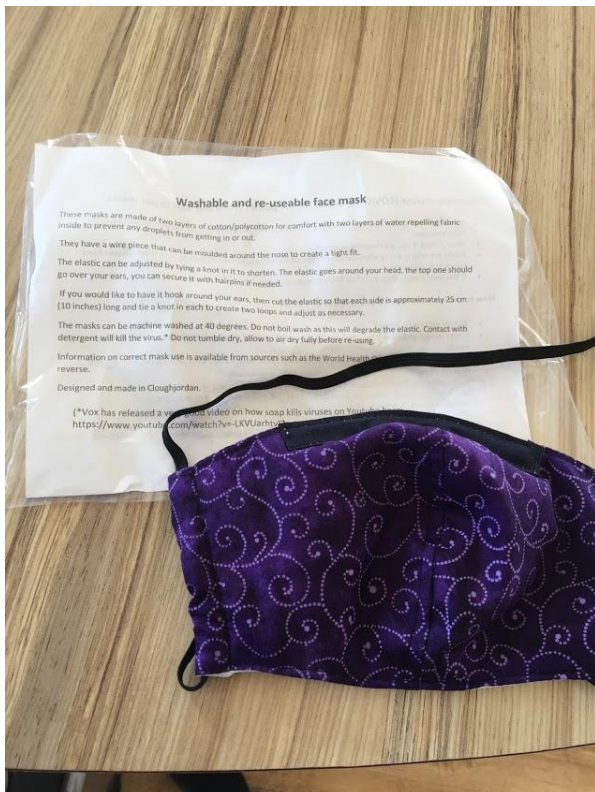


Figure 28 – One of the masks made by a local member during the pandemic



Figure 29 – Sanitiser made by a member following the clear out of stock in the shops, money was to be left in the honesty box



Figure 30 – The apple tree walk, along the allotments with over 70 different native Irish species

*“We all want the same thing there are just many journeys to get there...
and it’s about finding that balance”¹³³*

¹³³ Informal conversation, fieldnotes, 11/04/20