

TRANSFORMATIVE PATHWAYS TO SUSTAINABILITY IN ECOVILLAGES

INSIGHTS FROM LOS PORTALES, SPAIN

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ABSTRACT

Current policy and practice have inadequately addressed the fundamental roots of unsustainability, with prevailing incremental approaches failing to generate the necessary scale, speed, and depth of action. Amidst this backdrop, emerging research highlights the interconnectedness of inner (individual) and outer (collective and systems) levels and the potential of inner change to drive sustainability transformations. Despite this, empirical studies exploring the connection between individual and collective levels remain scarce, particularly within the context of ecovillages which constitute holistic communities with substantial transformative potential due to the integration of social, economic, ecological, and cultural dimensions.

This study seeks to fill this critical gap by investigating the inner-outer dynamics within the ecovillage of Los Portales in Spain. Employing a mixed-methods approach that includes in-depth interviews with ecovillage members, participant observation, and document review, the research explores how members individually embody transformative qualities and how these are nurtured within the collective environment of the ecovillage.

The results of this study reveal intriguing connections between the individual and collective levels within ecovillages. There is a constant interplay where individuals actively shape the collective environment, which, in turn, provides an enabling space for individuals to cultivate transformative qualities. Central to this dynamic is the pivotal role of inner work, which underscores the necessity of inner development in fostering collective growth. Furthermore, the study underscores the significance of embracing a relational view of reality, recognizing that meaningful transformations arise from the intricate and interdependent web of relationships between individuals, their communities, broader society and the natural world.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Problem Definition

The landmark paper from Steffen et al. (2011) presented the Anthropocene as a crucial paradigm shift in human thinking, urging the repositioning of humanity within Earth's system. Humans suddenly became a geological force capable of altering the planet's geology and ecosystems. The authors hoped that, by 2015, the dangers of the current trajectory of the Anthropocene would become evident, prompting humanity to decisively shift from a path centered around exploiting the Earth system towards a pathway dedicated to stewardship. However, the Anthropocene as the much-needed paradigm shift has fallen short of its promises. According to the State of Climate Action 2023 report (Boehm et al., 2023), global efforts towards limiting warming to 1.5°C are failing on all fronts, with 41 out of 42 indicators lagging significantly behind the pace and scale required to address the climate crisis. Interestingly, the only indicator that has made progress is the sales of electric passenger vehicles.

Despite the extensive focus on sustainability within scientific research, policy-making and societal discourse, humanity continues to follow profoundly unsustainable development trajectories. Progress towards sustainability is obstructed by deeply embedded power structures and inequalities that significantly constrain the capacity for change at individual, collective, and systemic levels (Beery et al., 2023; Wamsler et al., 2022). These structures are upheld by widespread cultural narratives and paradigms that emphasize a separation from oneself, others, and nature (Jordan, 1995). Consequently, it can be argued that numerous structural challenges facing society today are fundamentally anchored in human consciousness, specifically in how we perceive ourselves, others, and the world around us (Wamsler et al., 2022). These perceptions are profoundly shaped by our individual and collective beliefs, values, and worldviews. There is an urgent need to learn and orient towards new ways of living that are grounded in connection instead of separation (Kesebir & Kesebir, 2017).

Recent years have seen growing recognition in research and policy of the need for more integrative approaches that link inner and outer dimensions of sustainability to accelerate the transition across individual, collective and system levels (Ives et al., 2019; O'Brien, 2018; Wamsler et al., 2021). The 2022 IPCC report highlighted inner qualities/ capacities as a lever for accelerating transitions. This perspective views the climate crisis as a problem that is rooted in our inner values, beliefs and worldviews/ paradigms about how the world functions. Accordingly, addressing the global crisis of unsustainability necessitates a complete

reevaluation of our current lifestyles and a shift in our ways of thinking, being and living in this world (Gilby et al., 2019; Gifford et al., 2018; Laininen, 2018).

1.2. The Transformative Potential of Ecovillages

Deep structural changes and paradigm shifts in complex political and economic systems are unlikely to occur in the short-term. However, across the globe, a paradigm shift appears to be emerging as evident in the multitude of grassroots initiatives that are practicing alternative ways of being, doing and organizing (e.g. ecovillages, intentional communities, transition towns, permaculture movement, and more) (Davelaar, 2021). Grassroots initiatives are actively changing social relations, norms and practices at the local level by experimenting and actualizing their desired futures in the here and now (Kunze & Avelino, 2015). Members of these initiatives are actively unlearning dominant ways of living in the world and embracing practices and ways of living influenced by non-western epistemologies, such as human-nature relatedness, ecocentrism, indigenous values and mindfulness. Grassroots initiatives hold the power and potential of contributing to large-scale transformations if they challenge and unmake dominant unsustainable paradigms (Tschersich et al., 2023).

Ecovillages stand as compelling examples of such grassroots initiatives as they integrate various areas of human life across four interconnected dimensions: ecological, social, economic, cultural/ spiritual. As living laboratories of innovation and experimentation, ecovillages provide concrete holistic examples of social innovations, practices and systems across these interconnected dimensions (Kunze & Avelino, 2015). The transformative potential of ecovillages lies not only in their ability to implement these practices but also in their capacity to serve as models for broader societal change. By showcasing the possibilities of a life integrated across these dimensions, ecovillages provide valuable insights and inspiration for building more sustainable, resilient, and harmonious communities worldwide (Schwab & Roysen, 2022). Their existence challenges prevailing paradigms and invites us to reconsider our relationship with ourselves, each other, and the natural world.

1.3. Knowledge Gap

Despite the recent recognition and attention from policy and practice, there remains limited knowledge and understanding on the link between inner and outer transformations for sustainability. Most contributions in the field have been theoretical with a lack of empirical insights, particularly in the context of ecovillages which have significant potential in fostering these transformations, as reflected above. The majority of empirical research on ecovillages tends to concentrate on descriptively portraying the community dynamics within these

spaces. This focus often overlooks the intricate relational aspects that illustrate how individual, collective, and systemic levels are interconnected.

Ecovillage members play a crucial role in forming and influencing the collective structures and cultural norms of their communities. Consequently, it is essential to gain a deep understanding of their internal experiences, encompassing their values, beliefs, and worldviews. A notable study by Pisters et al. (2020) investigated individual learning journeys of ecovillage members but highlighted the need for further research into how these journeys feed into the collective or community level. In relation to that, Wamsler et al. (2021) who conducted a comprehensive literature review of inner-outer change for sustainability transformations found limited research and knowledge on the role of enabling environments at the collective level, and their potential contribution towards sustainability transformations.

Finally, to my knowledge, there appears to be a lack of empirical studies that examine the interplay between the individual (inner) and collective (outer) levels and the potential contribution of this relationship towards sustainability transformations.

1.4. Research Aims & Questions

In this regard, this thesis has a triple aim. Firstly, it aims to enrich the wider discourse on inner-outer sustainability transformations by exploring the diverse ways in which ecovillage members individually possess and embody transformative qualities. Transformative qualities encompass a range of personal attributes and developmental processes that contribute to and signify meaningful shifts in an individual's mindset, values, behaviors, and relational dynamics within their broader environment (Wamsler et al., 2021). These qualities are a metric for assessing inner change in individual members with the capacity to change the ways we perceive and relate to the world around us.

Secondly, this thesis aims to explore the role of ecovillages in creating spaces that cultivate and nurture these transformative qualities. By doing so, it seeks to address the existing research gap regarding the role of collective spaces in facilitating inner-outer transformations for sustainability.

Finally, this thesis aspires to make a novel contribution to the transdisciplinary field of sustainability transformations by investigating the interaction between individual (inner) and collective (outer) levels within ecovillages, and how this interaction may foster transformative pathways towards sustainability.

I, therefore, consider the following research questions:

How can ecovillages contribute to inner and outer transformations for sustainability?

1. To what extent do ecovillage members individually possess and embody transformative qualities?
2. How do ecovillages create collective enabling spaces that cultivate and nurture transformative qualities? What sort of norms, principles and community practices and structures exist that cultivate and nourish these qualities?
3. How can the interplay between the individual and collective levels contribute to sustainability transformations?

1.5. Societal Relevance

“Humans are both subjects and objects of making history – reality today shapes the imaginary of how reality could be in the future” (Göpel, 2016). The dominance of modern society’s mainstream paradigms in decision-making and public discourse shape future relationships and people. Continuing with the same underlying logics and paradigms would greatly diminish our likelihood of comprehensively tackling the fundamental causes of unsustainability and effectively addressing the climate crisis. Ecovillage members are actively shaping their present and future realities by prefiguring their desired future visions of a society through their social practices, social relations and decision-making processes in the now (Monticelli, 2018). Understanding the extent to which ecovillage members possess and embody transformative qualities is crucial for developing programs and policies aimed at fostering these traits in wider society.

By exploring ecovillages as collective enabling spaces, the research can identify collective practices and structures that could potentially be replicated or adapted within other contexts, such as urban neighborhoods, educational institutions or workplaces. This is already gaining traction in current policy frameworks, as ecovillages are becoming increasingly more recognized and integrated within national and regional policies. For example, the EU’s cohesion policy granted €1 million to Boekel Ecovillage in the Netherlands due to its innovative climate-resilient infrastructure and building practices (European Commission, 2023).

1.6. Scientific Relevance

This research significantly advances the transdisciplinary field of sustainability transformations, particularly focusing on inner-outer transformations for sustainability. By examining the transformative qualities embodied by ecovillage members, this study enriches the conceptual understanding of inner change within the sustainability context.

Moreover, this research provides detailed empirical insights into the specific collective practices and community structures that nurture and sustain these transformative qualities. By doing so, it offers a nuanced understanding of how these communal environments function as fertile grounds for individual and collective transformation. This empirical contribution is critical, as it moves beyond theoretical discourse to offer tangible examples of how sustainability can be actualized through integrated inner and outer transformations.

Finally, the interplay between the individual and collective levels enriches the discourse of the relationality between inner and outer transformation, highlighting empirically how inner transformation is not an isolated phenomenon but is deeply embedded within and influenced by the collective context (Meadows, 2008). While traditional sustainability research often focuses on large-scale systemic changes or individual behavioral shifts in isolation, a more integrated approach provides a more holistic understanding of sustainability transformations (Rauschmayer, Bauler, & Schöpke, 2015).

1.7. Outline of Thesis

The organization of this thesis unfolds as follows: Chapter 2 offers a foundational exploration of key concepts central to the thesis. It establishes the conceptual framework necessary for understanding the subsequent chapters. Chapter 3 outlines the theoretical framework adopted, detailing how it has been operationalized to suit the aims of the study. Chapter 4 comprehensively examines the chosen case study and the methodological approaches employed in the research, elucidating their application and relevance. Chapter 5 presents the findings derived from the research. Finally, Chapter 6 critically analyzes these results, discusses their broader implications, and proposes avenues for future research.

2. CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

The conceptual background section provides an overview of the theoretical foundations, key concepts and relevant literature that inform and contextualize this study.

2.1. Ecovillages

The ecovillage movement emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. Over the past 60 years, it has grown and matured into a global movement of around 10,000 communities worldwide (GEN, n.d.). The Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) provides a holistic definition of an ecovillage as “an intentional, traditional or urban community that is consciously designed through locally owned, participatory processes in all four dimensions of sustainability (social, cultural, ecology and economy) to regenerate their social and natural environments” (GEN, n.d.).

Ecovillages constitute demonstration sites that challenge incumbent paradigms by providing concrete alternatives to the unsustainable culture of modernity (Lennon & Berg, 2022). They challenge the idea that this dominant cultural paradigm is the default way of being in the world and they strive to create space for alternative worlds and worlds otherwise. These communities are embodying, experimenting, and practicing ways of living that are ecologically, relationally, socially and economically sustainable. They challenge fundamental principles of modern capitalism by promoting self-sufficiency, cooperation, mutual support and a sharing economy. Furthermore, ecovillages foster a deepened connection with the natural world, emphasizing a reciprocal relationship that enhances both human and environmental well-being (Carman, 2015).

Through their innovative practices and holistic approach, ecovillages are forging new cultural pathways, redefining ways of being, doing, and thinking. They offer tangible models of sustainable living that inspire broader shifts in societal norms and values, demonstrating that alternative futures are not only possible but actively being realized.

2.2. Sustainability Transformations

As the imperative for transformations towards sustainability becomes increasingly critical to move society towards sustainable and equitable futures, the field of sustainability transformations has witnessed significant growth in recent years. This field is characterized by a rich conceptual plurality, with diverse perspectives emerging from various bodies of scholarship (Feola, 2015). This diversity contributes to a wide array of interpretations and approaches to understanding and achieving sustainability transformations. Although a singular,

universally accepted definition remains elusive, transformations are commonly conceptualized as “fundamental, system-wide reorganizations across technological, economic, and social factors, including paradigms, goals, and values” (IPBES, 2019, p.14).

Sustainability transformations have developed within multiple academic disciplines, leading scholars to recognize these transformations as complex, multi-dimensional processes that are inherently politically contested (Pickering et al., 2022). This complexity arises from the intertwined nature of the social, economic, and environmental dimensions that sustainability transformations seek to address, and the scales ranging from individual to states and regional and international governance institutions (Linnér & Wibeck, 2019). The politically contested aspect of sustainability transformations is rooted in the diversity of stakeholder perspectives regarding both the means and end goals of transformation, as well as concerns over the potential disruption of the existing configuration of power and resources (Patterson et al., 2017).

Within the field of sustainability transformations, a concept that has been widely used to systemically think about the underlying complexity of transformation is the notion of “leverage points”, introduced by Meadows (1999). Leverage points are strategic intervention points within a system that can potentially induce varying levels of impact towards system change. Historically, most interventions aimed at addressing the sustainability challenges have predominantly targeted shallow leverage points which typically involve technical optimizations and efficiency improvements (Abson et al., 2017; Fischer et al. 2007). However, such interventions, when pursued in isolation, fail to achieve transformations as long as other system characteristics remain unchanged.

According to Meadows (1999), deeper leverage points include the underpinning values, goals and worldviews of actors that shape the emergent direction of a system. This shows that individual transformation, relating to a change in our internal beliefs, values, and worldviews about the world, is critical for the transformation of the system itself. As eloquently articulated by Leventon et al. (2021), “we cannot change the intent of the system without changing the intent of the people that are embedded within, and perform, that system”.

2.3. Inner-Outer Transformations towards Sustainability

Following this line of thought, the field of inner-outer transformations has emerged as a crucial area of study in sustainability transformations research. Scholars in this field contend that the most powerful leverage points for sustainability exist within inner dimensions (Abson et al., 2017; O’Brien, 2018; Wamsler et al., 2020; Woiwode et al., 2021). O’Brien’s (2018) work elucidates this connection by delineating three interrelated tiers: the practical (encompassing

tangible actions and interventions), the political (involving structures, norms, rules, and institutions), and the personal (comprising values and worldviews). His analysis highlights how transformations in the personal sphere can instigate changes in the outer realms, suggesting that meaningful sustainability change can indeed originate from within.

Transformations towards sustainability thus necessitate not only external changes in policies and practices but also a fundamental shift in human consciousness. Based upon this foundational understanding, scholars in the field of inner-outer transformations have introduced the concept of inner capacities or *transformative qualities* as a means to assess and measure transformations occurring at the individual level (Caniglia et al., 2023; Wamsler et al., 2021). This paper adopts Wamsler et al.'s (2021) definition of transformative qualities, described as “certain internal qualities/ capacities (understood as cognitive, socio-emotional and relational processes) that underpin people’s learning, everyday life choices and decision-taking, and can facilitate the paradigm shift needed for a more sustainable future”. Although there is no definite list of these inner capacities, scholars from diverse disciplines have increasingly been using and engaging with this conceptual framework (Dlouhá et al., 2019; Ives et al., 2019; Lehtonen et al., 2018).

In exploring and understanding the dynamics of inner change, it is imperative to consider the system in which these individuals are embedded and act within (Ives et al., 2019). This dimension includes knowledge of internal and collective phenomena and their interactions. The literature on the role of the collective level in inner-outer transformations for sustainability is still rather nascent. Scholars have suggested that action at the collective level should foster a culture of inner growth and create related learning environments that nourish inner transformation and cultivate related transformative qualities (Wamsler et al., 2021). This aims to normalize and support both individual and collective modes of thinking, being and acting, that are redefining ways of existing in this world.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1. Theoretical Framework

This research will be building upon the framework by Wamsler et al. (2021) (Figure 1). Using a systemic literature review, the authors explored how current research depicts and comprehends the interlinkages between inner and outer (collective and systems) change for sustainability transformations. To my knowledge, this is the most comprehensive research of the connection between inner-outer transformations for sustainability to date. The framework developed by the authors, as depicted in Figure 1, identifies several patterns regarding the factors that are considered pivotal in enabling inner change to drive outer transformations towards sustainability.

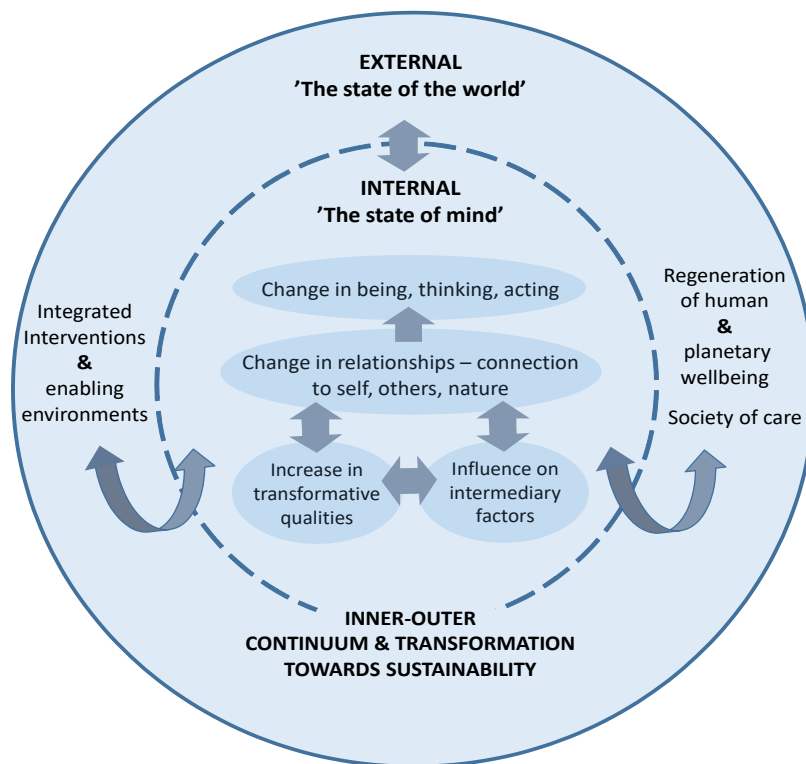


Figure 1. Model of change for inner-outer transformation towards sustainability (Wamsler et al. 2021)

According to the research, transformative qualities play a crucial role in the interlinkage between inner and outer change. The authors placed these qualities into five broad categories: awareness, connection, insight, purpose and agency. According to Wamsler et al. (2021), transformative qualities have the potential to change inner states, encompassing values, beliefs and worldviews/ paradigms. They can shift the ways in which we perceive and relate to ourselves and the world around us.

These qualities can be cultivated and nurtured within enabling environments at the collective level. For example, the creation of safe spaces for reflection, learning and co-creation, are considered enabling factors in nurturing transformative qualities. However, the authors acknowledge that very little research and knowledge on these types of enabling environments. Ultimately, the authors argue that an increase in transformative qualities supported by enabling environments can result in internal paradigm shifts that can contribute to external transformations for sustainability by cultivating a society of care and promoting the regeneration of human and planetary wellbeing.

3.2. Analytical Framework

This research focuses explicitly on the inner (individual) and outer (collective) levels, and their interlinkage. The analytical framework of this research is presented in Figure 2 below.



Figure 2. Analytical framework for this research

In this study, I have deliberately excluded the influence of intermediary factors from the analysis of individual and collective levels for two principal reasons. First, omitting these factors reduces complexity, allowing for a more streamlined and focused examination of the direct interactions between the individual and collective dimensions. Second, a significant body of theoretical research, including works by Ives et al. (2020) and O'Brien (2018), has primarily concentrated on the individual and collective levels, often without incorporating intermediary factors. By aligning with this established focus, my research remains consistent with the

theoretical rationale of the framework while providing a simplified yet impactful analysis.

Firstly, this research investigates the extent to which transformative qualities influence changes in relation to oneself, others and the natural world. For the operationalization of transformative qualities, I draw upon the five main clusters of transformative qualities and their associated key qualities derived from the systemic literature review by Wamsler et al. (2021):

1. **Awareness:** The ability to meet situations, people, others and one's own thoughts and feelings with openness, presence and acceptance
 - **Key qualities:** *self-reflection; self-awareness, presence, attention, openness (to listen, learn, adapt and change), cognitive flexibility, psychological resilience*
2. **Connection:** The ability and desire to see and meet oneself, others and the world with care, humility and integrity, from a place of empathy and compassion
 - **Key qualities:** *compassion (towards oneself, others, future generations, nature); empathy; kindness, human-nature connection; care; humility; integrity*
3. **Insight:** The ability to see, understand and bring in more perspectives for a broader, relational understanding of oneself, others and the whole
 - **Key qualities:** *perspective-taking; relational awareness/ thinking; integral thinking; integration of different ways of knowing; sense-making*
4. **Purpose:** The ability to navigate oneself through the world, based on insights into what is important (intrinsic, universal values)
 - **Key qualities:** *sense of purpose; sense of equity; sense of responsibility; future orientation; reciprocity, solidarity; equitable thinking; meaning-making*
5. **Agency:** The ability to see and understand broader and deeper patterns and our own role in the world in this regard, and to have the intention, optimism and courage to act on it
 - **Key qualities:** *sense of agency; sense of empowerment; courage; optimism; action-oriented mindset; solutions-based mindset; creativity; qualities/ capacities to empower others*

Furthermore, this study seeks to uncover how ecovillages serve as nurturing environments that foster the development of transformative qualities. To achieve this, the research investigates the collective level through the lens of three key dimensions:

1. **Community Practices and Processes:** Examining the daily practices and participatory processes that shape and sustain the community life within ecovillages.
2. **Cultural Values and Norms:** Analyzing the underlying cultural values and social norms that guide behavior and foster a shared sense of purpose and identity.
3. **Organizational Structure:** Exploring the structures of decision-making and economic systems that influence how resources are managed and decisions are made.

Finally, the study aims to elucidate the interplay between individual and collective levels within ecovillages, exploring how inner change is both shaped by and contribute to the broader collective dynamics. This holistic examination seeks to reveal the symbiotic relationship between inner and collective transformation, offering insights into how these elements mutually reinforce each other in the context of ecovillage life.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1. Case Study

Considering the time constraints of this research, this thesis focused on one in-depth investigation of an ecovillage community for the duration of seven weeks. The selection of one case study allowed for the in-depth exploration of the community's unique characteristics, practices and dynamics. The following selection criteria were developed to identify a suitable case study:

1. **Longevity and stability:** The ecovillage should be well-established and currently active. The existence of enduring sustainable practices and governance systems can facilitate the exploration of collective practices and their relation to individual inner qualities.
2. **Language:** The main communication language of the ecovillage should be in a language that I am familiar with and can confidently speak. In my case, that is Greek, English, and Spanish.
3. **Feasibility and practicality:** This criterion relates to consideration of logistical aspects, such as distance of the ecovillage, availability of resources to conduct the research there, etc.
4. **Willingness and engagement:** The community should be willing to participate in the research and actively engage with the research process. A stronger collaboration and support can enhance data collection and understanding.
5. **Passion and interest:** To a lesser extent, I will consider my personal interest for the community's principles and philosophy, ways of working and relating to oneself, each other and the natural world.

Case study: Los Portales, Spain

Based on the abovementioned criteria, the ecovillage of Los Portales was selected due to its fulfilment of all the specified requirements. Los Portales is a community that was founded in 1978 in Brussels, Belgium with the goal of fostering personal evolution through the sharing of dreams, drawing on Carl Jung's theory and methods. Initially, a small circle of individuals met weekly in Belgium to share their dreams, while gradually realizing the significance of human relationships in each individual's personal growth. This realization led them to live communally in Brussels to further deepen their understanding of themselves by cultivating and deepening their relationships with others. Recognizing the need to nurture a deeper connection with nature, the group subsequently relocated to a piece of land they found in Andalucia, Spain in 1984. Many of the initial community members are still core members or actively involved with Los Portales after its 40 years of existence. During the time of my fieldwork, the community consisted of

around 35 living members and 10 volunteers from the European Solidarity Corps program.

Over the years, the community has experienced numerous fluctuations. This includes varying numbers of residents and children, the loss of founding members, and the eventual decision to welcome external visitors to Los Portales. For most of its existence, the community remained largely closed to outsiders. This was a deliberate decision to focus on each member's personal evolution and the strengthening and resilience of the community as a collective. This period of introspection was crucial in preparing the community to engage meaningfully with outsiders while maintaining its core principles and stability. Approximately 15 years ago, the community made the conscious decision to share their inner workings with the broader world by starting to welcome volunteers and guests, organizing events, workshops and retreats, and participating more actively in regional and international networks.

The main goal of the community continues to be centered around inner work, with a deep commitment to explore the relationship to oneself, to others and the natural world. With this commitment and during its 40 years of existence, the ecovillage has developed in many directions and integrated all dimensions of sustainability within its community (ecological, social, economic, cultural/spiritual). In the ecological domain, the community is using the principles of permaculture and is mainly self-sufficient by producing their own organic food. The community is actively regenerating their land and landscape through ongoing reforestation, water retention and landscape restoration projects. The community consists of a diverse and multi-generational group of people that organizes itself through a sociocratic governance structure. The community also uses innovative inner work practices such as dreamwork, process work, forum tools and other tools to practice deep democracy and deal with relational tensions and conflicts. The community's economic practices are based on the principle of sharing and abundance. Drawing from the principles of the gift economy, each member contributes according to their possibilities and obtains from the group according to their needs. Over time, the community has managed to become self-sufficient by building community enterprises, hosting workshops and giving courses. Finally, the community engages with broader society by maintaining active links with the local authorities and educational institutions as well as being part of local and regional networks.

4.2. Methodological Approaches

The methodological approaches of this research have been deliberately selected to facilitate the understanding and exploration of inner qualities and collective processes, practices and structures. For the purposes of this research, the research was based on the triangulation of participant observation, in-depth semi-structures interviews, and document review.

4.2.1. Participant Observation

Participant observation proved to be an invaluable methodology in this research. Drawing inspiration from Tedlock's (1991) concept of "observation in participation", this approach allows the ethnographer to fluidly transition between an observer and participant role. By doing so, the ethnographer can actively participate in and simultaneously observe their own and others' involvement within the ethnographic encounter. As highlighted by Lund (2022), "what people say is not necessarily the same as they do", underscoring the necessity to combine interviews with participant observation to achieve a more objective and comprehensive understanding of the community. This methodological approach allowed myself, as the researcher, to capture the nuances and complexities of everyday interactions and encounters, which subsequently informed several of the interview questions. The field observations were written down in a notebook.

The fieldwork spanned a total of seven weeks, a duration that was crucial for gaining deeper insights into the daily functioning of the community and establishing trust and rapport with members before conducting interviews. During this period, I fully immersed myself into community life. My involvement in the community's daily activities included five-hour morning work shifts in various areas such as gardening, kitchen duties, animal care, landscape restoration and protection, preparation for events and retreats. Additionally, I engaged in several of the community's inner work practices including dreamwork, forum and deep listening, culminating in a particularly transformative workshop on dreams at the end of my stay.

Throughout this time, I had numerous informal conversations with ecovillage members, which provided me a deeper understanding into the collective practices and structures of the community, along with the diverse ways in which these providing an enabling space for the cultivation of inner qualities and individual transformation. Informal discussions with guests, mostly during events and retreats, were also significant, shedding light on the impact that workshops and short-term stays in the ecovillage can have on visitors.

4.2.2. Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were employed for this study, a choice grounded in their capacity to combine structure with flexibility. Semi-structured interviews allow researchers to prepare a set of guiding questions while affording interviewees the opportunity to articulate their thoughts in a more open and unrestricted manner (Longhurst, 2003; Ruslin et al., 2022). The semi-structured nature of the interviews enabled participants to expand on topics as much as they desired. Follow-up questions were used to delve deeper into specific reflections and areas of interest. The interviewees were selected to ensure representativeness of the ecovillage population, considering factors such as length of membership (both new and old members), age, and gender.

The interviews were categorized into two distinct types: ecovillage members interviews (n=6) and key informant interviews (n=2). The ecovillage member interviews were comprehensive and focused on delving into the various transformative qualities. These in-depth conversations aimed to gather detailed reflections on the personal experiences of members, specifically seeking to uncover whether and how transformative qualities were nurtured within the ecovillage. For example, to explore the transformative quality of *human-nature connection*, participants were asked: “You live amongst beautiful nature and scenery. I was wondering whether your relationship to nature or the way you perceive nature has changed or evolved during your time in the ecovillage?”. It is important to note that while some transformative qualities were directly addressed, others emerged more subtly and indirectly through the course of the discussions.

Conversely, the key informant interviews investigated the collective and contextual dynamics of the community. Specifically, they were oriented towards exploring the history of the community, its past and ongoing challenges, collective practices and organizational structures. Furthermore, as briefly stated earlier, interview questions were adjusted and customized based on field observations. This adaptability ensured that the research captured nuanced insights relevant to the community’s unique characteristics and developmental trajectory.

4.2.3. Document Review

The utilization of document review served as a complementary methodology to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the ecovillage. This approach enabled insights into both the ecovillage’s self-representation (primary documents) and how it is perceived externally (secondary documents), allowing for a multifaceted exploration of the ecovillage.

Primary sources included the ecovillage’s official website which detailed its goals, collective practices and organizational structures. The website also featured blog

articles authored by ecovillage members, offering firsthand accounts and reflections on their ecovillage experience. Furthermore, information was gathered from the ecovillage's social media pages, which provided updates on recent events and workshops, while highlighting the ecovillage's connection to a broader network of communities. Such primary sources are crucial for capturing the lived experiences and internal narratives of the community (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Secondary sources encompassed the review of media sources, and particularly documentaries that provided glimpses into the evolution and representation of the ecovillage over different periods of time. These sources provide context on how the community has been received by the public and how it fits within broader societal trends (Yegidis, 2018).

4.3. Data Analysis

All collected data from the diverse methodological approaches were systematically uploaded into NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software platform. The interviews conducted were recorded, meticulously transcribed, and, for those carried out in Spanish, translated into English to maintain consistency and accuracy in analysis. Field notes derived from participant observations, as well as data collated from document reviews, were also transferred into NVivo. This integration into a single software platform facilitated the coding process, enabling the organization, analysis, and synthesis of data across different sources.

For the analysis of the individual level, a deductive approach to coding was employed. This approach used the predefined categories of transformative qualities and their subsequent key qualities as the basis for formulating codes. This deductive approach ensures that the analysis is grounded in established theoretical concepts, providing a structured lens through which individual transformations can be examined (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

Conversely, given the limited research on collective enabling environments, the analysis of the collective level utilized an inductive approach to coding. While a preliminary operationalization of the collective level was conducted, the final categories and themes were derived directly from the data, particularly from insights gained through participant observation. This inductive approach, particularly drawing from insights gained through participant observation, allows for the emergence of themes that are deeply rooted in the lived experiences and interactions within the ecovillage (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

All data were systematically analyzed using the process of thematic analysis, a method that involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis was chosen for its flexibility and its ability to provide a rich and detailed account of the data.

4.4. Ethical Considerations

The ethical handling of data was crucial in this qualitative research study. Upon my arrival in the community, I ensured transparency by introducing myself as a researcher and explaining the focus of my study. I further encouraged community members to approach me with any questions or concerns regarding the research.

Prior to conducting interviews, I diligently obtained the informed consent of participants. This entailed informing the participants about the nature and objectives of the research, possible risks and benefits, and their option to withdraw from the research at any point. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity throughout the research process; pseudonyms have been used, and no personally identifiable information is or will be disclosed in any presentations or publications of the thesis.

The secure storage of data has also been thoroughly considered in both physical and digital spaces, to safeguard against unauthorized access. Moreover, I made a commitment to continuously reflect on ethical considerations throughout the research process. This practice involves continuous evaluation of ethical implications, even beyond the completion of the thesis, to uphold ethical standards and honor participants' rights and privacy.

5. RESULTS

5.1. Individual Level

This section explores the presence and embodiment of transformative qualities in individual members of the ecovillage. Figure 3 below provides a visual representation of each category, highlighting the key qualities examined and their prevalence according to findings. While it is possible to describe and analyze most of these qualities, the discussion of the results will focus on the most prevalent ones for the sake of brevity.

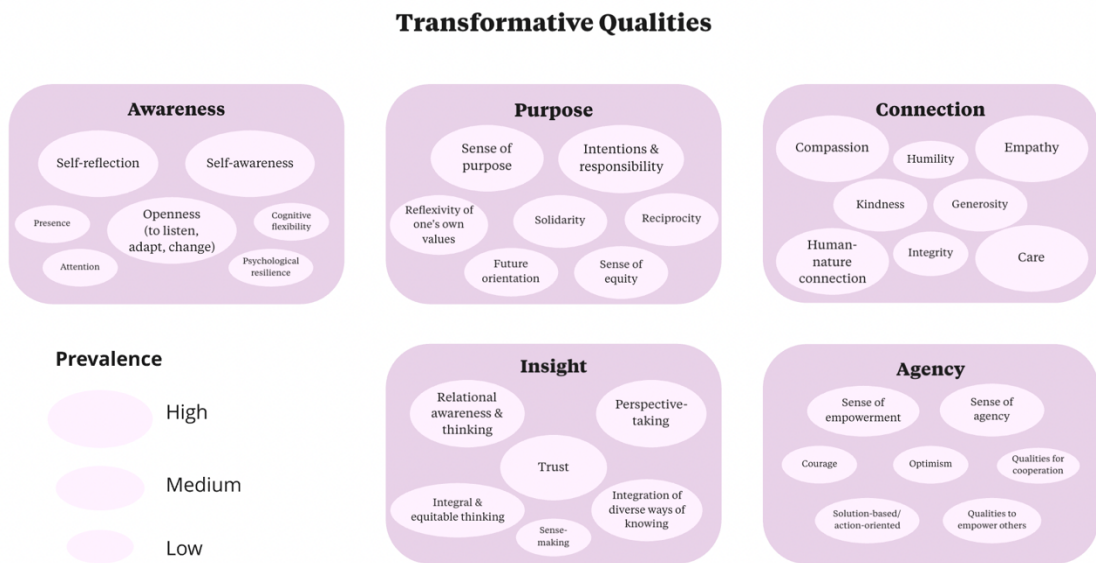


Figure 3. Transformative qualities and their prevalence based on findings

5.1.1. Awareness

The responses from ecovillage members revealed that the most prominent qualities in the Awareness category were *self-awareness* and *self-reflection*. These qualities were accompanied by a significant *openness* to altering their ways of being, thinking, and acting.

Self-reflection & self-awareness

In my interviews, self-reflection and self-awareness emerged as significant aspects of the daily lives of ecovillage members. Self-reflection and self-awareness are not only encouraged but are an integral part of the functioning of the community. These qualities are consistently cultivated through the inner work practices of the community.

Self-reflection is an introspective process that encourages and cultivates self-awareness. Through self-reflection, ecovillage members become aware and gain control of their unconscious processes that influence their emotional states and behaviors. These individuals demonstrated a profound understanding of their identities, qualities, blind spots, projections and traumas, as well as how these factors influence their behaviors and perceptions of themselves and others. This can be seen in “Nena’s” personal reflection:

Above all, I have become aware of the character that I had created. There was a lot of madness in my family. My bipolar father, my bipolar brother, my mother, very controlling, very invasive. So, I protected myself. I went around the world with this tower around me, with an extraordinary sense of security. I didn't have any sensibility to perceive people, or perceive things, or have empathy. Living in Los Portales, I started to dismantle the tower, piece by piece. And when I found myself naked, I started to discover who I really am. Of course, it hasn't been easy. But what I have found is something else, it is so different.

Self-awareness in this context touches on both the relation one has to oneself and in relation to others. By understanding and refining the relationship to oneself, ecovillage members are better equipped to navigate relationships within the community. This often involves developing awareness of their family patterns and projections, which can profoundly affect interpersonal dynamics. “Cara” elaborated on this process by stating:

It's so difficult to see beyond our little frame of the rational mind. If you don't go beyond that, I'm right and you're wrong, it's hard to really get along with other people. And we see it in families. We see it in, you know, I'm right because I feel something or I reacted a certain way because I'm hurt from my story. I have that trauma, this situation or whatever that affects my reaction. And if you don't understand that, you tend to reproduce it anyway, unconsciously, without knowing that's what it is. It's all inner work.

Openness (to listen, adapt, change)

The decision to join and live in an ecovillage community represents a conscious and deliberate commitment by individuals to engage in personal and collective transformation. This commitment entails a willingness to undergo significant changes in one’s ways of being, thinking, and doing. Members recalled having experienced great personal evolution and moments of transformation during their time in the ecovillage. “Zoe” recounted her journey by explaining:

When I relived the same things, the same traumas, the same emotions of the past, when I relived it here, I realized that somehow I always reproduce

the same things. Because in the same place, with the same people, so beautiful, you get to feel super good and happy, and in another moment, you feel that you want to leave, that nobody loves you, nobody understands you, you are weird, and you want to isolate yourself. How is it possible that in the same place you get to live these extremes? In a moment I realized, maybe it is me, it comes from me, it is what I interpret from my reality, from my wound, but it is not changing the place, the country, the job, that will make this disappear.

Zoe's recount signifies the responsibility that ecovillage members assume in addressing their own issues and traumas, rather than attributing them to external circumstances or other people. This clearly reflects their openness to listen, change, adapt on a personal level with the intention of reaching and embodying a more conscious version of themselves.

The first condition is a question I have to you and you can ask yourself and every person who asks you the question: Are you willing to devote all your energy to your personal evolution or not? That is the key. I didn't say that you have to go into a monastery to pray all day long. To dedicate yourself to yourself and to develop the meaning of your life. ("Jacques")

5.1.2. Purpose

The interviews revealed several valuable insights into ecovillage members' perception of purpose. Specifically, the most prominent transformative qualities in this category were *sense of responsibility* and *sense of purpose*. While these qualities were most frequently noted, other transformative qualities within this category also surfaced, albeit less frequently, in several ways that will be elaborated upon below.

Sense of responsibility

Upon becoming part of the ecovillage, members make an active commitment to take responsibility and ownership not only of daily tasks and communal activities, but more importantly, of their actions, reactions and emotional processes. This commitment marks a profound shift from perceiving themselves as victims of their circumstances to assuming personal responsibility. "Carlos" most clearly illustrated this by stating:

I think it's a shift from being a victim to being responsible of your life. I would say the most difficult and the most beautiful part of this path is to take everything and say, okay, I take it. It's mine. I cannot say it's because of that person or I'm sad because of... I assume the responsibility. It's a choice that was made by myself.

This quality is highly correlated with members' *openness to change*. By embracing change, ecovillage members are able to move away from a victim mentality and toward a mindset of accountability and self-awareness. By gradually cultivating self-awareness, members have been able to reclaim attributes and emotions projected onto others, thereby enhancing their capacity for empathy and understanding. This process not only fosters personal growth but also contributes to maintaining harmonious interpersonal relationships within the community.

The more you are connected with your inner center, the less you get trapped by positive or negative emotions. Normally when we are not conscious of something, or a quality within us, we tend to project outside, positive and negative. So, we would say that this person is fantastic or I hate that person. But little by little, when you start to take it back, you project less. We try to see the person as a person, as a human, but not as a reflection of who am I. For me, the work is, little by little, taking back what I put outside in the world or on other people. Take it back and say: "No, it's mine". (Carlos)

Sense of purpose

As introspection is a core component of the ecovillage experience, members are encouraged to reflect on their values and their sense of purpose to gain a better understanding of their place in the world. The interviews revealed that their sense of purpose is closely tied to their ability to engage in inner work within an environment that supports and nurtures their journey towards self-understanding. Reflecting on her personal process, Zoe expressed deep appreciation for her personal evolution in the ecovillage by stating: "life here gives me a lot of meaning, deep meaning, every day and every year more and more".

Ecovillage members' sense of purpose is also often profoundly intertwined with their perceived impact on the world. Members frequently expressed feeling like agents of something greater, beyond their individual aspirations. This perspective is a driving force that anchors them into the community and propels their contributions to the evolution of the project. As Nena explains:

I like it when people come here even if it's just for a day or two. And they leave and say, I don't know if I would live in a community, but it calms me down to know that there are people who do it and that there is this utopia. And I think, wow, we have a responsibility. So, I care a lot that this project continues. Because I'm sure that we are a future model. I think we have something to contribute to the world. Not just a lifestyle model but also an aspiration to live with more connection, with more consciousness.

Reflexivity of one's own values

The process of reflexivity on one's own values was particularly evident when members were asked if they missed anything from their previous modern urban lifestyles. Although some acknowledged the perceived sacrifices they make, such as relinquishing certain individualistic freedoms to live a communitarian lifestyle, the overall sentiment among ecovillage members was one of contentment and fulfilment. These sentiments seemed to stem from the alignment of their living conditions with their personal values and aspirations. The ecovillage effectively encompasses many of the values that its members seek, including a strong sense of belonging and shared purpose, a devotion to inner work and deepening interpersonal relationships, and a reconnection with nature facilitated by living in a beautiful natural landscape. In essence, the communal benefits have made the compromise of individual freedoms worthwhile for those who have chosen this path. This is vividly captured in some of ecovillage members' reflections, such as:

Can you hear that? Can you find that? Frogs. Birds. The wind in the leaves. Me with the food that you just brought from the garden. I've been in the city for a long time. You've got the traffic jam. The stress. People are very tense. And you are tense because you've got to respect timing. Sometimes you start very early, you finish very late and you don't have a lot of time for yourself. Sometimes I'm here and I think what should I do? I actually don't miss a lot of things from the city. (Carlos)

You can always tell yourself that you are missing things. I believe that life is a permanent choice in which you sacrifice one thing to have a better one. It is true that my materialistic child would want to have a big house, cars, a swimming pool, getting up late, etc. But I also recognize that if I spent a week doing nothing, I would feel very bad. So, we sacrifice things, but often they are material things. On the other hand, I see many people who have these comforts and come here to visit and say, "look, I don't know what to do with my life, it doesn't make sense". (Jacques)

Solidarity & reciprocity

The values of reciprocity and solidarity were prominently exhibited by the members. These values not only foster unity among members within the community but also extend outward to support groups facing challenges in the world. Several members recounted their involvement with broader activism, such as travelling to assist with the refugee crisis or becoming aware of global issues to determine how they can support as a community. This engagement has often occurred in collaboration with other ecovillages, further expanding their impact and reinforcing their commitment to solidarity and reciprocity beyond their immediate environment.

We live in very difficult times. And these are difficult times for us too. Sometimes you think living in an ecovillage in such a beautiful place protects you against what happens outside. It's not the reality. We always try to adapt to the needs of the world. During our monthly retreats, there is always this question: How can we respond better to the needs of the world being where we are? Well, take better care of the earth, feel more connected to the earth, feel more connected to everybody, feel more connected to the people who come here. How can I personally do that? What tools do I have to do that better? How can I use them better? All of that is continuously in the heads and minds of all the people who live here. ("Ria")

In essence, the values of reciprocity and solidarity cultivate a sense of interconnectedness and shared responsibility within the group, creating a robust and supportive communal environment. These values are integral to the community's identity and practices, underpinning the collective efforts to sustain and nurture both internal cohesion and external support networks. A more in-depth discussion of these values will be presented in the following section of the results, focusing on the collective level.

Future orientation

Members expressed a strong desire to continue living in the community, yet they also demonstrated an openness to future possibilities and an adaptive mindset towards whatever the future might bring. Several members expressed concerns about their state of health as they age, emphasizing a desire to remain in good health to continue contributing meaningfully to the community. Despite these concerns, the community fosters a strong, caring environment for its aging members, ensuring they remain integrated and valued within the collective framework. This support system was found to actively reinforce their sense of purpose and belonging in the community.

5.1.3. Connection

In this category, the most salient attributes were care, compassion, empathy, and the connection between humans and nature. Together, these qualities form a comprehensive framework for exploring the multifaceted nature of connection in the context of the ecovillage.

Care, compassion, empathy

Within the ecovillage, members seem to attain very strong qualities of care, compassion and empathy. Through introspection and the sharing of their deepest

vulnerabilities via inner work practices, ecovillage members have fostered a profound sense of compassion firstly for themselves and then for the rest of the community. The connection and compassion for themselves emerges after a long process of delving into and healing the wounds of their past, understanding themselves better (*self-awareness*) and then being able to share and extend that compassion to others. Interestingly, some members do not consider themselves as “friends” in the traditional sense, since they do not share common backgrounds, tastes, or interests. However, by engaging in inner work practices, they have allowed to forge connections on a deeper level, rendering surface-level differences irrelevant.

If you meet a super bad person, you might feel that there's a story behind them, so you can embrace that pain or that suffering that is expressed in the form of evil. It's very exciting to change the perception of who you are for someone much broader, more welcoming, and more connected with other dimensions. (Nena)

Human-nature connection

Having cultivated a deeper connection with themselves, members feel that they can extend that connection to everything around them, especially nature. Most members report a profound transformation in their relationship with nature after living in the ecovillage. While some members seem to naturally possess that sensitivity towards nature, others are still on the path of cultivating that relationship but retain that sentiment of deep gratitude for what nature provides for them. Even more, nature is considered as a member of the community, rather than something separate or disconnected from it. They see nature as part of themselves and respect and treat it accordingly.

I look at birds, I look at frogs, I look at foxes and animals, I look at the trees, and I've got the feeling that I don't understand anything at all. It's so complex, so beautiful, and each part is a part of something bigger. For me it's a luxury and a mystery. (Carlos)

That relationship to nature is also nurtured and cultivated daily through growing and eating food from their own garden and mindfully being present with nature and its changing seasons. Additionally, the community has a strong educational focus, openly sharing the knowledge and wisdom that they have accumulated over the years with volunteers and visitors. They offer insights into various sustainable practices including permaculture, renewable energies, sustainable building techniques, reforestation and ecosystem regeneration, among others. Furthermore, the community organizes several seasonal gatherings that celebrate natural occurrences, such as solstices, full and new moon celebrations, serving as an opportunity to reflect on their relationship with nature and express gratitude.

This ongoing interaction with nature fosters a sense of interconnectedness and reinforces the ecovillage's core value of environmental stewardship. By living in harmony with nature and recognizing its intrinsic value, members strive to create a holistic and sustainable way of life that honors the earth and its ecosystems. Their practices and connection with nature not only benefit their immediate environment but also serve as an inspiration and blueprint for others seeking to reconnect with nature and embrace a more sustainable and conscious lifestyle.

Humility, integrity, generosity and kindness

The qualities of humility, integrity, kindness and generosity are subtly woven in the fabric of the community, making them difficult to distinguish. However, several examples highlight how ecovillage members embody and practice these qualities.

The quality of humility is reflected in members' self-awareness of their strengths and weaknesses, their willingness to adjust to each other's needs, to receive and accept feedback from others, and to embrace different ideas and perspectives. Integrity is evident in the community's emphasis on honesty and transparency. Members value clear communication about their needs and desires and adhere to strong moral principles and values. An ecovillage member showcased these qualities of humility and integrity by demonstrating how they can have self-awareness of their flaws but also value open and honest communication with the rest of the community to solve potential conflicts:

I think that I am a person who absolutely tries to avoid any conflict. Now I know that it is not good to avoid it or stop the emotions because they are there and they are hurting me, they are hurting my body, I am feeling it. But the conflict is something very natural, very human, and here we have tools to solve it, a lot of tools, support, we can talk, we are very transparent, and it is part of our daily life to solve the conflict. It is part of life, there are people with whom we have more difficulties and I also know that through the conflict we learn from ourselves, we grow. The conflict is another tool in the environment of life that teaches us things about ourselves. (Zoe)

Generosity and kindness are cornerstones in the culture of the ecovillage, reflected in their practices of sharing, care and compassion. The collective framework of a gift economy within the community amplifies these qualities as everyone shares according to their abilities and receives according to their needs. This spirit of generosity and kindness extends to the support and care provided to all the community members and especially to the elderly. A poignant example of this was a gesture of ecovillage members towards an elderly member of the community:

You didn't know “Arthur” who was a very good friend of mine, he died two years ago, one of the founders of the community. And this guy was in this room there and he had to be in a wheelchair because he couldn't move around. So we made a bathroom for him in his room, in a place that was almost impossible to do, that took an incredible amount of hours of work and an incredible investment but we didn't calculate it because it was for André. Do you understand? (Jacques)

5.1.4. Insight

The category of insight illuminated the ways in which members perceive their relationships within the community. Notably, relational awareness and thinking emerged as central, reflecting the community's relational view of reality.

Relational awareness & thinking

In the community, relationships are perceived as the core tool for ecovillage members to develop awareness of themselves, their relational patterns and how these affect the community. There is a commitment to work towards cultivating more meaningful and honest relationships and connections.

In their decision to pursue a communal way of living, each member brings their own past lives with them onto the community. A common manifestation of this, often mentioned by members, is through projections on others and the community. Projections involve attributing one's own negative traits or undesired emotions on to others without being aware of it. Ecovillage members have shared several examples of making such projections while living in the ecovillage. A member provided an example of making a negative projection onto another woman in the community whom she perceived as a mother figure:

I had a very bad relationship with my mother. My mother never accepted my life decisions, my choices, none of my friends. With this story behind, when you get to a group, the first thing you're going to do is project all the patterns you have from your family into the group. And especially with “Ruth”, who, for me, played the role of a mother. I had many conflicts with her. She didn't have any conflicts with me, but she always had to stop me because I made very negative projections about her. Due to my own personal story, I was very eager to be able to control things, to control people, to have power over people. So, of course, I had a direct conflict with Ruth because I wanted her position. Looking back, I wonder, how could I think of this? This was particularly challenging for me. (Nena)

Ecovillage members recount that by becoming aware of their patterns and examining these projections, they come to realize that these projections are

actually reflections of their own inner struggles and unresolved issues. This self-awareness allows them to recognize parts of themselves they might have been unknowingly projecting on others. Through dedicated efforts to enhance their relational awareness and thinking, members aim to foster deeper and more meaningful connections. They do this by clearly communicating their needs and desires, and by learning effective methods of managing interpersonal conflict.

However, it should not be assumed that ecovillage members have perfected their relational awareness skills. Rather, each member is on their own individual journey of cultivating awareness of their relational patterns. Despite this, every member is open and committed to exploring and learning about their relational dynamics. This commitment to personal and interpersonal development is a cornerstone of the ecovillage's culture, fostering a supportive environment where all members can evolve and thrive together.

Perspective-taking

Ecovillage members showed a noticeable capacity for perspective-taking, which is the ability to understand a situation from another person's perspective. This capacity is cultivated through the inner work practices of the ecovillage and the sociocratic model of decision-making which emphasize active empathetic listening and respecting others' viewpoints. Perspective-taking emerges as a crucial component in how ecovillage members navigate interpersonal relationships and overcome conflicts in the community. It is a skill that members seem to have learnt and developed during their time in the ecovillage, while strengthening their empathetic skills in the process. Nena's example offers a compelling illustration of perspective-taking:

I've had conflict with a person who had a very painful childhood because her mother treated her very badly, hit her, punished her, horrible things that a mother should never do to her children. And this, in this person, provoked a behavior that always sought conflict. At first, I didn't understand anything. I questioned, why is she always trying to fight with me? We always had many confrontations until I could understand her story and say, of course, she's suffering a lot and she's repeating a scheme. So, you try to get out of the conflict in another way. Instead of confronting yourself, you listen, you embrace, you take care of her pain. I've learned a lot how to manage emotionally.

Integral & equitable thinking

Similarly to perspective-taking, integral and equitable thinking involves a holistic and fair approach to community dynamics, whereby the voices of all members are

appreciated and valued equally. This is actively done through various practices and principles that ensure inclusivity, fairness and collective wellbeing.

I remember when “Grace” was telling me, look, we are like an orchestra, right? So we've got a lot of instrument players, we've got the director. And everyone believes that the director is the one who's leading. No, they're just helping to coordinate all the musicians. But of course you will hear more the pianist, the first solo player, then the triangle, ding! But they are equally necessary to make the music. If someone is missing, it's not the same music.
(Carlos)

Integration of different ways of knowing

The integration of different ways of knowing within the community involves not only considering diverse perspectives but also going beyond logic to access the subconscious, irrational aspects of the mind. As Kai put it, “the rational is not the real engine of our actions”.

Dreamwork

The community actively tries to tap into the subconscious through several of their inner work practices, with dreams being their central method. Dreams are seen as the gateway to the subconscious, offering insights into the irrational and often hidden parts of the psyche. Through the sharing and interpretation of dreams, the community members gain deeper awareness and understanding of themselves, each other and their surroundings, which later inform their personal and collective decisions. A deeper analysis of how the community uses dreamwork is analyzed in the following section on the collective level.

Spiritual knowledge systems

Beyond accessing the subconscious through dreams, members of the community also use spiritual, creative and embodied ways of knowing. Each member has adopted diverse approaches and therapeutic methods, incorporating both ancient traditions and contemporary practices from across the globe. Examples of these methods include natural health techniques (homeopathy, reflexology, nutrition), energy work (EMF, Chi-Kung, Shiatsu, meditation), body work (massages, Tai-Chi, pilates), emotional release and healing remedies (EMDR, art therapy).

Artistic ways of knowing

Furthermore, community members utilize artistic ways of knowing to access their creative potential, recognizing it as a unique source of knowledge and insight. Engaging into art, music, theatre, dance, and other creative expressions, allows members to tap into their inner worlds, fostering self-discovery and creative expression that transcends purely logical means.

Bodily knowledge

The community members also acknowledge the importance of bodily knowledge in fostering a connection between the mind, body and spirit. In this process, members pay particular attention to sensuous information, perceptions and emotions that emerge during body-based exercises. Practices such as yoga, meditation, and somatic experiencing support members in becoming more attuned to their physical sensations and emotional states.

By integrating these diverse ways of knowing – spiritual, creative, and embodied - the community creates a rich tapestry of knowledge that supports personal and collective growth and fosters a deep and multifaceted understanding of life.

Trust

An important quality that emerged from the members' responses is the concept of trust. At the individual level, this trust often takes a spiritual dimension, particularly in terms of trusting one's own intuition. Several members reflected that their intuition guided them to join the community, affirming it as the right decision.

Furthermore, members exhibit a profound trust in the unconscious, believing it steers them towards the right path in life. This trust extends to the challenges they encounter, both personal and collective, which are often perceived as opportunities for growth and evolution. During the initial challenging phases of the project, members noted that the "glue" holding them together was their unwavering commitment and trust to the project and their shared vision. Finally, this trust extends to a greater trust in life and its unpredictable nature. "Kai" articulates this sentiment when reflecting on the future of the community:

When we, the elderly, are no longer here, there might be people who take over. And if not, it's like a living being. It is born, grows, develops and one day it dies. We are not obsessed that there are young people to continue. If there is, it will. If not, maybe it has fulfilled its function.

5.1.5. Agency

The category of agency was the least prevalent among the categories of transformative qualities examined. While these qualities were less frequently mentioned during the interviews, they were profoundly present in the intersection of the individual and the collective, specifically through the ways that community practices and structures nurtured these qualities. Most of the insights on this category were derived from the participant observation process.

Sense of agency & empowerment

Ecovillage members recount feeling heard and empowered to have responsibility and to influence communal outcomes. This is facilitated through the participatory decision-making in the community which ensures that every voice is heard and valued. Members are further encouraged to take initiative and propose ideas for the evolution of the project. By supporting individual ideas and providing a space for their realization, the community cultivates a culture of creativity and innovation.

Ecovillage members also exhibit a strong sense of agency in the decisions they make regarding their life outcomes. Living in the ecovillage is a conscious choice for each member, stemming from a deep trust that they are where they are meant to be. This is reflected in how many of the ecovillage members have left and returned to the ecovillage over the years.

Qualities for cooperation & empowerment

Several qualities were identified that contribute to fostering cooperation and empowerment in the community, including transparent and open communication, trust and respect, and empathy and compassion. These qualities are nurtured on a collective level through the community's inner work practices and decision-making structures, and will thus be elaborated upon later on in this paper.

Solution-based/ action-oriented

Ecovillage members demonstrate a proactive and action-oriented mindset by actively engaging in problem-solving, collaborating with others and embracing continuous learning. Ecovillage members work together to develop effective action plans to address the multifaceted needs and challenges of the community. This solution-based mindset is complemented by the openness of members towards continuous learning and adaptability, continuously seeking ways to improve and refine their practices in light of evolving insights, feedback and experience.

Courage & optimism

Courage is evident in ecovillage members' decision to step away from conventional lifestyles and experiment with alternative ways of living and being. This courage is exemplified not only by their initial decision to embark on this journey but also by their perseverance in the face of numerous challenges encountered along the way. From resource constraints to skepticism from wider society, ecovillage members appear to have undergone these difficulties with resilience and determination. Members often recall challenging times during the

initial stages of the project where they had to live in tents and rely only on the flickering light of candles. This sort of discomfort that they were willing to endure displays members' devotion towards the project and their collective aspiration to explore inner growth together. Their courage therefore extends beyond the individual and encompasses a collective ethos of resilience and unwavering dedication towards the project.

5.2. Collective Level

This section explores the collective dimensions of the ecovillage, focusing on the community's inner work practices, cultural norms and values, conflict resolution processes, and organizational structure, including decision-making and economy systems. By examining these collective practices and structures, this section provides a comprehensive understanding of how the community functions at the collective level. In addition, it aims to provide a first glance of the interplay between the individual and collective levels, highlighting how the transformative qualities cultivated at the individual level are intricately linked to and reinforced by the collective level. Accordingly, Figure 4 shows an initial framework illustrating the connections between collective practices and structures, and transformative qualities.

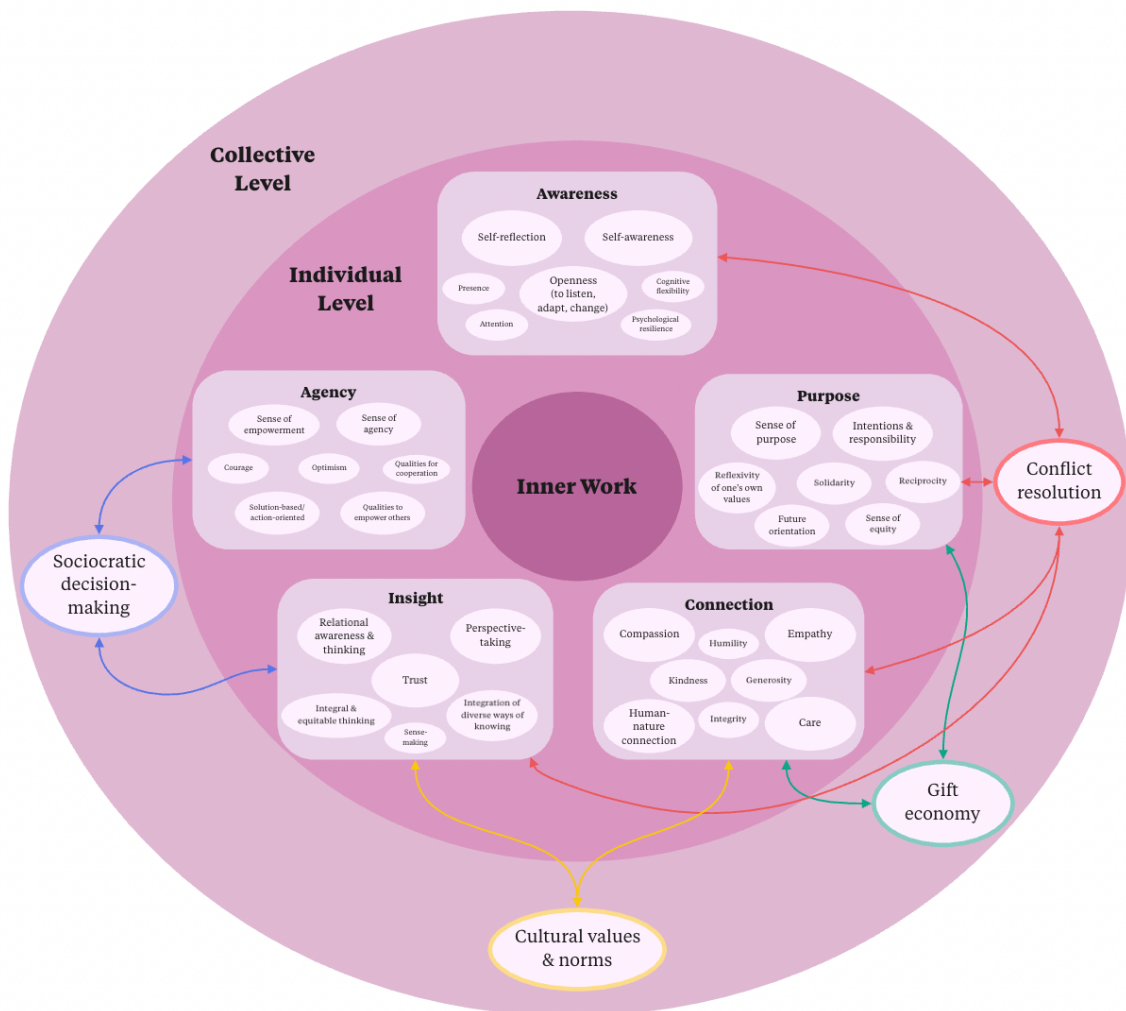


Figure 4. The interplay between the individual and collective levels

5.2.1. Inner work

Inner work is the core element that unites the community, making it crucial to explore as a collective practice. Inner work is intrinsically connected, either directly or indirectly, to all the categories of transformative qualities, which is why it is placed at the center of Figure 4's diagram. The detailed connections between inner work and several transformative qualities will be elaborated below.

Meaning of inner work

Many ecovillage members referred to inner work as a process of profound *self-reflection* and *self-awareness*, encapsulated in the ancient aphorism "know thyself". When asked about the meaning of inner work for her personally, Zoe stated:

To know myself... To see a little how I function, where things come from, how I behave, how I speak, what I feel, where I come from, how I am programmed, and to transcend it, not to stay in my survival mechanisms that I developed in my life. These mechanisms were useful in the past, but now they make me suffer, they hurt me. Also, everything is related to love, to learn to love unconditionally, both myself and others, the greatest thing.

Others described the inner work required to cultivate self-awareness as a downward spiral, reflecting a continuous and never-ending process where each time delves deeper into that psyche. Nena articulated this by stating:

That's why we often talk about a spiral job. It's a spiral that goes down. You say, I've already worked on this. Many years ago, I've already seen this. Yes, but now you see it at a deeper level. It means that there's another level that you can work on more and expand your perception. And then you go back and say, again? But you always go to a deeper level. And this, of course, changes the perspective of things a lot. You see more and more wider, bigger, higher, deeper. This is the engine of my life, if you want. What keeps me here is this feeling that I have that there's no end to this job. It never ends.

Finally, members suggested that inner work has acted as a form of guidance for them, a crucial process for discovering themselves and finding meaning and a *sense of purpose* in their lives.

Inner work for me is fundamental. I don't think I could live without it. It's like having a GPS. You want to go somewhere, so it shows you the way. If something is not right or you're lost, your GPS tells you you're lost. It's about having a connection with yourself on a deep level that gives a lot of meaning to your life. You start to understand that your life has meaning.
(Ria)

Commitment to inner work

On a collective level, there is a very strong commitment and *sense of responsibility* to inner work by all members. Once becoming a member of Los Portales, every member is obligated to join meetings related to inner exploration, relationship or group work. This is fundamental for the proper functioning of the community, and it reflects members' *openness to listen, adapt, and change*. As Ria expresses:

You can't say I don't have time to go to the meeting. It's key. For this community to function well, and it's been 40 years here in Los Portales right now, it's because everybody is involved in this exploration of what I bring to the community, to my relationship, what my issues are, whether I have to resolve issues with my past to be at peace with my past. The commitment is... I'm always going to look at the causes of my problems. I'm always going to look at the nourishment that I bring to the collective field.

Through this fundamental commitment to inner work, inner work becomes evident in how members handle interpersonal relationships and communal living. Inner work allows members to cultivate the qualities of *empathy, compassion, and cooperation* which are essential to harmonious living. The willingness to engage in difficult conversations, to listen and adapt, and to continuously strive for personal and collective improvement are fundamental to the community's functioning. The community environment supports and amplifies these inner work processes by providing a space where individuals can confront and work through their psychological and emotional challenges in a supportive and understanding setting. This reflects a symbiotic relationship between personal transformation and the collective evolution of the community, enhancing both individual and collective flourishing.

It should be noted that members sometimes expressed inner work as a challenging and difficult process, even though it is ultimately deeply rewarding. Some members admit to having an ongoing struggle with their own inner work processes. This reflects that inner work often involves confronting personal challenges and requires persistence and effort.

The inner work? For me it's a challenge. Because in my personal configuration, it's very difficult for me to go inside. Because that's me. That's my challenge in this life; to really go deeper, to listen to what's happening inside. It was difficult for me when I started and it's still difficult now. (Carlos)

Inner work practices

The community has tried and experimented with various inner work practices over their 40 years of existence. During my fieldwork, several practices emerged

as particularly prominent, including dreamwork, feedback, active listening, forum and family constellations. The frequency of these practices varies, with some conducted on a weekly basis and others being used during the community's monthly internal retreats.

These practices are serving the community in a myriad of ways, both on a personal and collective level. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore each practice in detail, it would be worthwhile to delve a bit deeper into dreamwork, the practice which initially brought the community together and which continues to serve as the community's central inner work practice.

Dreamwork

The community has been using dreamwork based on Carl Jung's theory and methods. This practice involves the sharing, interpretation and analysis of dreams to gain insights into the unconscious mind. Members regularly share their dreams in both small circles and larger weekly gatherings.

Dreams have played a crucial role in shaping the life trajectories of many community members and supporting them in discovering their *sense of purpose*. Members often recounted experiences of having dreams that profoundly influenced their life choices. By reflecting on their dreams, members gain a deeper understanding of their desires, fears and motivations, supporting them in making choices congruent with their true aspirations.

On the collective level, the regular sharing of dreams in a group setting fosters vulnerability and cultivates the qualities of *compassion* and *empathy* among members. Community members often represent their dreams through role-playing exercises. This involvement in someone else's dream allows members to practice active empathy by putting themselves in another's shoes and attempting to understand their experiences and emotions.

When you share your dreams and you share your process, that's the most personal part of yourself, and you also share what happened to you. So, whenever you had, for example, a projection, and you say, "oh, I can't stand this guy". And then he would share his dreams in the group, talking about his life and his past. And you say, "who am I to judge them?" Of course, I think it's impossible to have this work together without empathy, compassion, and deeper understanding. (Carlos)

You could do the dream work on your own, but doing it together, first you see that others are sometimes experiencing the same issue as you. Often you can resonate with the situation of other people, and you also understand where they are at. So, you can be more compassionate in the moment. You can be more understanding if there is somebody who's going through something difficult, you understand why. (Cara)

5.2.2. Conflicts

Studying conflicts within the community proved particularly interesting, as these conflicts appeared to illuminate and be intertwined with various transformative qualities exhibited by ecovillage members. Conflicts are also especially important to study as they are they constitute one of the key reasons of why projects fall apart. Hence, understanding the ways in which the community approaches and resolves conflicts can shed light to the community's longevity and resilience.

Conflict resolution processes & tools

Over the years, the community has embarked on a learning journey to understand and manage conflicts more effectively. Members assert that their preoccupation with inner work practices have supported them instrumentally in managing conflicts. Dreamwork, in particular, continues to serve as the primary tool for initially understanding the sources of conflicts, as they support members in uncovering unconscious processes and emotions.

It should not be assumed that the community has managed to magically transcend all conflicts. Learning to understand and navigate conflicts is a process that takes time as each member has a unique history and set of difficulties. Newer members, especially, receive substantial support and guidance from the older core group within the community to facilitate their integration and management of conflict resolution. At times, the community has sought external facilitators to help manage group conflicts that could not be resolved internally. Members recount experiencing challenging times during the initial phases of the project. As Carlos elaborated:

At the beginning we would often yell at each other because we were very far from who we are. Now, we still have some conflicts, but we are able to take them inside and see why they emerge, navigate them. Of course, we use a lot of tools that support us, such as feedback and deep listening. We know how to express things, and we know enough of each other to be able to have this space of trust, where we can communicate clearly without going through a battle or yelling. From outside it looks like we are very calm. But, yes, I think it's because we are getting more and more connected.

Conflicts & inner work

A deeper examination of conflicts within the community reveals the critical role of inner work, highlighting several of the transformative qualities such as *self-reflection*, *self-awareness*, *openness* and *responsibility*. These qualities, initially explored at the individual level, manifest strongly at the collective level, illustrating the interplay between individual and collective.

As seen from Carlos' statement, members are encouraged and learn to *take responsibility* for their actions and reactions, behaviors and the conflicts they sometimes contribute to the community. This practice involves recognizing unresolved personal issues from the past and understanding how these issues might be projected onto the community. As members cultivate *self-awareness* and become attuned with their inner selves, they are better equipped to identify and address the root causes of their issues. This self-awareness is strengthened by the development of communication skills through various inner work practices, such as feedback, deep listening and nonviolent communication, among others. Nena's personal reflection illustrates the crucial role of inner work and communication in navigating conflicts:

In the end, the only way to grow together is with that transparency, that honesty, to say, look, this hurts me. You don't say, it's your fault. You say, when you do this or say this, it hurts me. It's very different. You take the emotion, and the other person knows your emotion and says, well, next time I'll be careful. But this is a process that I've had to learn little by little to do it and to receive it too. When they tell me, sometimes you're very hard, and when you're so hard, I feel small, I feel crushed. The next time, I'm going to say it more gently, with more heart, to see if I can transform this relationship into something more constructive, more human.

As can be seen, the ecovillage's approach to conflict resolution exemplifies the profound impact of inner work on both individual and collective wellbeing. Through practices that promote self-reflection and self-awareness and through the deep commitment and responsibility to inner work, members learn to address and navigate conflict with empathy, compassion and care. This process leads to a different form of relating to one another. Conflicts are not only perceived as challenges that need to be resolved but also as opportunities for personal and collective growth. The interplay between the individual and the collective is reflected in how the ecovillage's supportive structures, particularly its inner work practices, help members cultivate transformative qualities that facilitate effective conflict resolution.

5.2.3. Culture

As the fieldwork progressed, various values and norms began to surface, providing a snapshot of the ecovillage's culture. This culture is characterized by numerous informal and unspoken values and norms that significantly influence the behavior and thought processes of its members within the communal setting. These implicit values shape the way individuals interact and uphold shared ideals, thereby profoundly impacting the overall social dynamics of the community. Consequently, it is essential to highlight several of these values that form the very fabric of the ecovillage.

Relationality

The ecovillage culture places a strong emphasis on relationality, viewing all aspects of existence as interconnected – encompassing relationships with oneself, with others, and with the natural world. These relationships are seen as deeply interwoven and are meant to be cultivated and healed. This principle is vividly illustrated by Carlos's reflections on the community's history:

It was a long journey from what we were at the beginning as a small dream world community to this eco-village. It was like connecting first inside yourself, then with the others. And then understanding that we are not just the sum of each one of us, but a lot more. There is an entity that is the community. And then landing here in Los Portales, it was connecting with the land, the animals, nature. We understood that we are not a part of that, we are A part of that. In that moment we realized that the ecology we were applying to ourselves, little by little we were able to get bigger and to start to apply it to our relationship with the environment. I think it was like moving from an inner ecology towards an outer ecology. We are not ecologists because we are militant. We are ecologists because really we connect. At first we needed to be connected to our real person, to be able to connect to the real world.

The community was formed with the intention of supporting personal evolution through communal living. This intentionality is reflected in how the community serves as a tool for individuals to recognize and address their personal issues. Relationships within the community function as mirrors, reflecting each person's interior world and highlighting areas for personal growth. All the inner work practices adopted by the community are designed to support and enhance this relationality. Practices such as dreamwork, feedback and deep listening go beyond individual self-improvement to foster deeper connections among members.

Furthermore, the conscious choice to live in close proximity to nature nurtures members' relationship with the natural world. The land is regarded as an integral member of the community. During the initial phases of the project, members described experiencing conflicts with the land, especially due to its dryness. To address this, the community implemented keyline water management systems, thereby supporting the land's regenerative processes and restoring its water supply. The community constantly reflects on its relationship with the land with the intention to support its flourishing rather than change it. This practice emphasizes the community's commitment to environmental stewardship and sustainable living.

Care & Compassion

The ecovillage culture is characterized by an apparent commitment to care and compassion for its members. This supportive environment plays a crucial role in individuals' personal journeys and developmental processes. As Nena poignantly reflects, "All these processes that I've done alone, I wouldn't have done them ever. I've done them because I live in a community, because the group supports me and creates a safety framework."

Members of the ecovillage describe this culture of care and compassion as organic and inherently woven into the fabric of community life. It is underpinned by informal values of reciprocity, generosity, and kindness, rather than imposed by formal structures. This organic nature of support fosters a strong sense of solidarity among the members. The depth of this solidarity is exemplified in the community's approach to life transitions and end-of-life care. Ria captures this ethos vividly:

The people who grow old here, they are accompanied to the end. There is an accompaniment in all the stages of life. At birth, the children, the young, the old. You can end your life here very well, very well accompanied. It is a value of the community that we protect. We are not going to let someone come here and say, this old man is out. No. And the practices within the community do not allow this.

These informal values of care and compassion, which serve as foundational principles of the community, highlight the community's dedication to mutual support and collective well-being.

Pragmatism & Humility

The ecovillage operates with a strong sense of pragmatism and humility, meticulously managing its resources to sustain its operations. This approach is deeply rooted in an awareness of their limitations in both labor and financial capacities, prompting the community to make carefully considered decisions.

One illustrative example of this pragmatic approach is the community's financial strategy. The ecovillage has never taken out loans or incurred any debts, adhering instead to a strict policy of investing and spending only within the bounds of their available resources. By avoiding debt, the community maintains financial stability and independence, which allows them to focus on their core values and objectives without external pressures.

This pragmatic approach, grounded in humility, reflects the community's commitment to living within their means and fostering a sustainable and self-sufficient lifestyle. It reflects a broader ethos of making responsible and realistic

choices, ensuring that their actions today do not compromise their future wellbeing.

5.2.4. Decision-making: Sociocracy

This section aims to provide a comprehensive exploration of the decision-making model employed within the community, specifically sociocracy. This section further examines how the decision-making processes inherent to sociocracy intersect with and potentially enhance several transformative qualities.

The community has been using sociocracy as its decision-making structure since 2016. The community is organized in different circles that have a defined purpose and authority within their domain. Circles include tasks relating to domains like agriculture, landscape protection and regeneration, communications, visits, housekeeping (management of cooking, cleaning, etc), children's education and more. This allows members that are specialized within a domain to assume responsibility and to further develop their skills and knowledge within their area of expertise. These circles are linked through the General Circle which is the center of the flow of information among these circles, ensuring coordination and coherence.

The sociocratic model was found to be connected to several transformative qualities. Sociocracy has created safe spaces within the community where every member has the capacity and is empowered to voice their opinion (*sense of agency & empowerment*). The system promotes *openness* by encouraging members to actively listen and integrate diverse viewpoints (*perspective-taking*) into the decision-making process. This cultivates a *sense of equity* within the community as every voice has an equal chance of expression and holds equally weight in the decision-making process. When objections arise, the community views them as opportunities for reflection and practices collective *empathy* by striving to understand why there is an objection, what is the meaning behind it, and what it signifies for the group.

In sociocracy, we don't work with majority and then all the minorities, they're thinking, well, what about our point of view? Everybody has to agree. So, it means that if somebody doesn't agree, they have to explain why and justify it. And it may be that it opens a different point of view that the group didn't think about. Or maybe that person doesn't understand some aspects of whatever the other people are seeing. But we try to get everybody on the same page. (Cara)

Reflections from community members indicate that sociocracy has proven to be a highly valuable and effective system for decision-making within the community. This governance model enhances operational efficiency and facilitates the seamless integration of new members into the various circles. Sociocracy also

provides clear delineation of responsibilities for each member, ensuring that everyone understands their roles and contributions.

5.2.5. Economic system: The Gift Economy

The economic structure of the ecovillage was founded on the principles of the gift economy, whereby each contributes according to their possibilities and obtains from the group according to their needs. All property is collectively owned by the members. The gift economy in the community operates without strict rules, norms, or compulsory working hours, making it a highly flexible and adaptable system. The absence of rigid structures fosters an environment where members feel *empowered* to contribute in ways that align with their abilities, needs and circumstances.

This principle is reflected in the initial funding of the ecovillage, which relied on the personal incomes of individual members. While some contributed significantly financially to the initial investment, others contributed through labor, such as building infrastructure, or by meeting daily needs of the community, like cooking and cleaning. Importantly, no separation or hierarchy was created based on the kind of contributions made. The principle of the gift economy was respected - everyone contributes according to their abilities and receives according to their needs. This principle entails a process of self-awareness regarding each individual's needs and contributions, as exemplified in Jacques's statement:

What does the community ask of me? It doesn't ask me for a specific number of working hours, it asks me what I can give. I commit myself to give all that I can give. Can I give my physical strength? No, because I am dealing with back issues. But I can give my intelligence, my knowledge acquired with all my experience as an economist, my ability to transmit and communicate information. I can support in children's education. That's what I can give. What do I need? Do I need a lot of money? No, I don't. I've been working with money for 40 years. Do I need to take care of my health? Yes, it's essential and the community supports me in that. And so on...

For the gift economy to function effectively within a community, it is important to maintain close ties of *trust* among members. Whereas a market economy is formed by relationships between the goods being traded, a gift economy functions based on the relationships between the people exchanging their goods and services. In this regard, deep trust and intimate knowledge of one another are essential for the success of this economic system. Such trust enables members to have confidence that all their individual and collective needs will be met, fostering a *sense of equity* in the community.

Members' reflections indicate that *inner work* has significantly contributed to fostering these deep bonds of trust in the ecovillage. In particular, the regular

practice of dreamwork within the community allows members to explore and understand each other's inner worlds and personal struggles, thereby strengthening mutual understanding and *empathy*.

If a member says: "I need a room for a month, I'll explode, or I have to go on a 15-day trip." We say: "Take the money and go because we trust their process. We are not going to question them". You see, knowing the people deeply is a prerequisite for the gift economy. (Jacques)

The gift economy in the community functions alongside a mixed economy. To achieve financial sustainability, the community has diversified its income streams over time. These include establishing community enterprises, such as producing and selling artisanal bread, handicrafts, hosting workshops and retreats, accommodating visitors and offering courses. This hybrid economic model allows the community to sustain its operations while remaining true to its core values and principles. The community continues to maintain the principles of the gift economy for the daily operations of the ecovillage, ensuring that members contribute according to their abilities and receive according to their needs.

The gift economy fosters the practice and embrace of *reciprocity* among members. This economic system operates on the principle of mutual exchange, where contributions are made with the expectation of reciprocal giving. This system is grounded in the belief that collective efforts can yield greater results than individual endeavors. As Carlos reflects:

There is an understanding that together we can get a lot more. And the other part was of course I couldn't buy this land. At that time I was 24. So I thought I've got nothing. But in the group there were people who were able to put the money on the table and say we'll buy it. But without making any differences. With just trust in the project. Because we were sharing what the glue was the human inner work. That was the glue. So it was not I pay much so I need that much, I need more respect or a bigger house. Depending on your income, you could give more or less. But there was no comparison.

5.3. Interplay between Individual & Collective Levels

As can be seen, the individual and collective levels are inextricably linked. Gerard eloquently encapsulated this interconnectedness by stating: “There is a constant dialogue between the individual and the collective. The individual being at the service of the collectivity, and the collectivity being at the service of each individual”.

As individuals undergo inner transformation, they are simultaneously shaping and transforming the spaces around them. It is the individuals themselves that mold the collective and create enabling spaces that serve their own needs, those of their community and of the broader natural landscape. This underscores the reciprocal relationship between inner and outer change wherein individual transformation drives collective evolution, and the collective space, in turn, facilitates individual growth.

This is the balance that you make things possible in the long term. Because you know as a person that you are being fed by this project, and you feed the project. And you are offering service to something that is bigger than you. And this bigger than you is also helping you. It's a constant giving and receiving. (Gerard)

This constant exchange between giving and receiving is essential in fostering a strong community. In this context, the community’s ability to thrive hinges on its members’ commitment to both personal and collective growth. This symbiotic relationship ensures that individuals feel valued and supported, while the collective benefits from the diverse contributions of its members. Together, these interconnected processes appear to create a resilient and adaptive community capable of addressing contemporary sustainability challenges while nurturing the well-being of its members and the environment.

6. DISCUSSION

This section will synthesize the study's findings with the current body of literature on transformative qualities at the individual level and on collective practices and structures, highlighting their role in fostering such qualities. Additionally, the analysis will explore the dynamic interaction between individual and collective dimensions, with a focus on the importance of relational dynamics and inner development within this context. Finally, the discussion will broaden to consider the possible societal implications of inner-outer transformations, as reflected in the existing research.

6.1. Individual Level

The data revealed that ecovillage members possess and embody several key inner capacities and skills that are essential for transformative change. The most prevalent transformative qualities were:

- **Awareness:** self-awareness, self-reflection, openness to change
- **Connection:** compassion, empathy, care, human-nature connection
- **Purpose:** sense of purpose, intentions & responsibility
- **Insight:** relational awareness & thinking, perspective-taking, trust
- **Agency:** sense of agency & empowerment

This is in line with the broader discourse on the need for the cultivation of inner capacities for sustainability transformations (Ives et al., 2019; Lehtonen et al., 2018; Wamsler et al., 2021). The process of inner change, which involves identifying and transforming internalized patterns, values, beliefs and behaviors, is critical in the consciously working towards transgressing dominant systems and paradigms (Pisters et al., 2020).

While there is no universally defined set list of inner qualities, several studies investigating these qualities across diverse bodies of literature on sustainability converge on several critical capacities. Among these, *self-reflection* and *self-awareness* stand out as particularly significant. These qualities enable individuals to critically examine their values, beliefs and behaviors, fostering inner growth and adaptability (Frank, 2021; Giangrande et al., 2019; Jaakola et al., 2022; O'Brien, 2018). Several scholars also found *openness to change* to be highly crucial as it facilitates the willingness to embrace new ideas, perspectives and practices, which is essential in dynamic and evolving contexts (Kunze & Avelino, 2015; Mabsout, 2015).

Another critical capacity is *human-nature connection*, which has been widely recognized as a strong leverage point for sustainability transformation. This quality reshapes our relationship the natural world, playing an indispensable role in cultivating nature stewardship and governance (Barragan-Jason et al., 2021;

Ives et al., 2017; Riechers et al., 2021). Equally important are the traits of *compassion* and *empathy*, which promote deeper connections with others, fostering social cohesion and driving collective action (Frank, 2021; Giangrande et al., 2019).

Relational awareness, or the understanding and valuing of interconnectedness, also represents a critical capacity for fostering transformative change for sustainability (Giangrande et al., 2019; Jaakola et al., 2022). This quality emphasizes the importance of viewing everything as relational by recognizing the intricate web of relationships that bind individuals, communities and ecosystems together. *Perspective-taking*, or the ability to understand and appreciate the viewpoints of others, enhances empathy and fosters inclusive decision-making processes (Ayers et al., 2023; Giangrande et al., 2019)

Moreover, a strong *sense of purpose* is highly relevant as it nurtures a profound commitment and a sense of responsibility towards the stewardship of oneself, the collective and nature (O'Brien, 2021; Odii et al., 2024; Yeoman, 2021). Together with this, the *sense of agency and empowerment* is fundamental for individuals to feel capable of effecting meaningful change (Koskela & Paloniemi, 2022; Wamsler, et al., 2022)

These transformative qualities are essential for advancing sustainability transformations. By developing and nurturing these inner qualities, individuals and communities can more effectively navigate the complex processes of social and ecological transformation.

6.2. Collective Level

The findings of this research are consistent with the broader literature on practices and structures that can foster specific transformative qualities. Contemplative practices, or as framed in this paper “inner work practices”, hold significant potential for enhancing *self-reflection*, *self-awareness* and consciousness, as well as fostering the qualities of *compassion* and *empathy*. Such practices include meditation, mindfulness and compassion, deep listening and arts-based approaches (Bristow et al., 2020; Heras et al., 2021; Kok & Singer, 2017). Community members actively and regularly engaged in these sort of inner work practices, including dreamwork, feedback, active listening, forum and family constellations. These practices were found to be linked directly or indirectly to all the categories of transformative qualities. Primarily, they supported the development and nurturing of awareness qualities, such as *self-reflection*, *self-awareness* and an *openness to change*. Additionally, they were found to cultivate *compassion* and *empathy*, facilitated by the vulnerability inherent in sharing personal internal processes within a group setting. Inner work practices also often

acted as guide for members, supporting them in the process of discovering their direction and *sense of purpose* and *meaning-making*.

Moreover, a novel contribution of this research is the strong connection between inner work and conflict resolution. Kunze & Avelino (2015) delved into several inner work practices within ecovillages and their role in mitigating conflicts. However, as far as existing literature is concerned, there is a gap in understanding how inner work practices, and their associated influence on the cultivation of transformative qualities, can support conflict resolution processes. Through practices that promote *self-reflection* and *self-awareness* and through the deep commitment and *responsibility* to inner work, members learn to address and navigate conflicts with *empathy*, *compassion* and *care*. These practices lead to a different form of relating to one another. Hence, the interplay between the individual and collective is particularly evident here in how the ecovillage's supportive structures, particularly its inner work practices, help members cultivate transformative qualities that facilitate effective conflict resolution. These findings are significant given that conflicts are a leading cause of failure in many ecovillage communities (Barani et al., 2018). This highlights the need for new avenues of research into the link between inner transformation and conflict resolution, with the intention to support and foster the creation of more dynamic and resilient communities.

Furthermore, transformative communication and facilitation practices have been shown to create enabling environments for introspection, dialogue and collaboration (Fraude et al., 2021; Wamsler et al., 2022). These enabling spaces include non-hierarchical communication and decision-making setups, such as non-violent communication, deep listening, circles and councils. These practices can be powerful in creating new networks and new cultures of collaboration and practice (Fraude et al., 2021). In the context of the ecovillage, this is exemplified through the implementation of sociocratic decision-making processes. Sociocracy was found to support the cultivation of several transformative qualities, particularly in the categories of insight and agency. This decision-making model fosters an inclusive environment where every member feels encouraged to voice their opinion, thereby enhancing their *sense of agency* and *empowerment*. Additionally, sociocracy requires individuals to engage with diverse viewpoints and perspectives, promoting the development of *perspective-taking* and *relational* capacities.

Research on the economic aspects of ecovillages has predominantly examined how these communities resist and challenge modern capitalism, questioning prevailing capitalist norms and consumerist tendencies. However, there is limited exploration of the alternative values being developed through their practice of different economic systems. One such system, the gift economy, actively contests ingrained notions of individual property rights. Within ecovillages, economic relations are redefined to prioritize the collective common good over individual

desires (Lockyer, 2010). Kunze & Avelino (2015) found the gift economy to be strongly related to the quality of *trust* – a trust that everybody gives based on their capacities and receives based on their needs. This is inherently designed within the economic system since it eschews the calculation of individuals contributions, such as tracking hours worked, fostering a sense of communal responsibility and mutual support.

However, despite the role of ecovillages in creating and adopting alternative collective practices and structures across social, economic, ecological and cultural dimensions, empirical evidence on the critical role of these collective practices and their potential contribution to cultivating transformative qualities remains limited. In this regard, this study provides new insights into how the individual and collective levels relate to each other, addressing a significant gap in existing research.

6.3. The Interplay between Individual & Collective Levels: Relationality & Inner Work

As can be seen, the individual and collective levels are inextricably linked. This is in line with the broader literature on inner-outer transformations for sustainability, which posits that inner and outer phenomena, along with individual, collective and system-level dynamics, are perceived as interdependent and co-created (Ives et al., 2023). This perspective involves acknowledging the various actors and elements within socio-ecological systems as mutually influencing one another in complex, non-linear ways (García et al., 2020). Applying this perspective to an ecovillage community means seeing how members of the ecovillage relate to the collective community, and how these interactions dynamically shape both the members, the community's internal dynamics and its broader socio-ecological context.

Inner transformation is rooted in an integrative and relational view of reality. At the core of our sustainability crises lies a profound disconnection – the false assumption of separation between humans and the natural world (Jordan, 1995). Moreover, this disconnection extends to our inner selves and our relationships with others. The concept of relationality, as it pertains to our perception of the world and the enactment of socio-ecological transformation, involves an ontological shift from separation to interconnectedness. This shift transcends the traditional divisions between nature and culture, individual and community, and us and them that characterize modern ontology (Trowsell et al., 2020). Scholars are beginning to see this relationality as fundamental for sustainability transformations (Artmann, 2023; Walsh et al., 2023).

In the ecovillage, relationality was identified as a core value of the community. Having relationality as the community's foundation allows people to begin to

acknowledge, explore and transform patterns of disconnection with themselves, with others and the natural world (Jordan, 1995). This shift towards a more relational paradigm is facilitated in the context of ecovillages through a dedicated practice in inner work. Within ecovillages, the integration of inner work transcends mere individual introspection; it evolves into a collective endeavor where community members collaboratively explore, and challenge ingrained societal norms and paradigms. This is reflected by members' openness to change and their willingness to be influenced by others, as an essential part in that process of reconnection. Equally important is the commitment to take responsibility for one's actions and reactions, as well as for what people project onto others and the collective community. This integrated approach to inner work and relationality creates a foundation for deeper connections and transformative growth within the ecovillage.

The concept of relationality was also reflected in the dynamic interplay between the individual and the collective levels, characterized by a continuous dialogue that shapes and reshapes both levels. This constant interaction highlights the dynamic nature of places, which are constantly contested, shaped and re-shaped by relational processes (Duff, 2011). Rather than fixed in time and space, places are seen as dynamic assemblages of people and practices (Horlings, 2016). Viewing ecovillages from a relational lens underscores the fluid and evolving nature of both individuals and communities, where the individual and the collective are in a state of perpetual influence and transformation.

6.4. Beyond the Individual: The Societal Implications of Inner-Outer Transformations

While this study primarily focuses on the individual and collective levels of inner-outer transformations and their interlinkage, it is also pertinent to explore the broader potential for transformation at the societal level. This exploration is crucial in light of recent criticism that an emphasis on inner-outer transformations places excessive focus on individual behavior, potentially neglecting the broader systemic and structural changes required (Boda et al., 2021). Hence, the question arises: what is the role of inner transformation when linked to broader societal changes?

Under a relational view of reality, the inner-outer levels are interconnected and interdependent. According to Ives et al. (2023, p.2779):

Inner transformation rests on a relational ontology, whereby inner and outer, and associated individual, collective and system-level phenomena are understood as interdependent and co-created. [...] it is the quality of our relationships— with ourselves, others and the biosphere—that creates (sustainable or unsustainable) cultures and structures.

Inner-outer transformations should not be perceived as a “fixing” mentality aimed at changing people’s beliefs, values and worldviews. Such an approach can lead to a focus on individual change while ignoring the systemic underlying causes of today’s sustainability crises. Instead, it is about recognizing and perceiving the relationality between the inner and outer (collective and systemic) levels and creating spaces and conditions that help nurture a culture of inner growth (Wamsler et al., 2021).

The findings of this study reflect this perspective as they show that self-awareness is not separated from an awareness of the collective/ community and broader societal-wide structures. Ecovillage members actively engaged in inner work, which was found to be crucial in cultivating several transformative qualities. It is through the cultivation of such qualities that members can form and sustain collective spaces, which can then have a transformative impact on broader society. Numerous references from members highlighted the immense influence of Los Portales on outsiders and other communities, demonstrating its wider societal impact.

This view aligns with broader literature on sustainability transformations. Margaret Wheatley's concept of "islands of sanity" underscores the importance of inner work as the foundation for transformative change (Wheatley, 2024). Wheatley's work is premised on the notion that entrenched structures and systems are resistant to change, and the most effective approach is to establish "islands of sanity" - communities of practice that foster transformative change. These communities create conditions that nurture and bring out the best in human potential, including inherent generosity, creativity, and compassion. By focusing on inner work and fostering supportive environments, we can cultivate the qualities necessary for profound societal transformation.

By fostering relational communities and worldviews, we embrace an alternative mode of existence. It is important to note that these communities of practice exhibit significant diversity and do not adhere to uniform practices and structures, nor do they need to. This diversity aligns with Escobar's (2011) notion of the pluriverse - “a world where many worlds fit”. For instance, ecovillages in Latin America are increasingly aligning with the ancestral cosmogonies of the Andean and Amazonian regions and the biocentric societal paradigm of *buen vivir*, which acknowledges the rights of nature as a living entity (Chaves et al., 2018). Through their connection to local lifestyles, territorialities, cultures, and social struggles, grassroots initiatives exemplify potential pathways toward a more resilient, equitable, and ecological society. This approach contributes to a “global tapestry of alternatives” (Kothari et al., 2019), challenging prevailing contemporary lifestyles and paradigms of being, knowing, and living. The proliferation of such

initiatives holds the potential to transform and transgress current unsustainable paradigms.

6.5. Implications for Policy and Future Research

Deepening our understanding of the interconnections between the individual and collective levels can provide deeper insights into attempts to govern sustainability transformations. The following recommendations intend to leverage the insights gained from this research and offer actionable steps for advancing sustainability governance.

1. Expand Empirical Research

Future studies should broaden the scope of empirical research to include a wider variety of ecovillages and grassroots initiatives. This will help to generalize findings and understand how different settings influence the interplay between individual and collective transformative processes. Implementing longitudinal studies could also be highly useful to examine how transformative qualities and collective practices evolve over time within these initiatives. Such studies could provide insights into the long-term impact of these dynamics on sustainability transformations.

2. Policy Integration

Develop policies that incorporate insights gained from ecovillage practices into mainstream sustainability frameworks. These policies should encourage the creation and support of learning spaces and practices that facilitate both individual inner transformation and collective action. They should draw from successful practices observed in ecovillages to help individuals discover and address internalized social patterns, cultivate key transformative qualities, and enhance their connections to themselves, others, and nature. By integrating these elements, policies can better support holistic sustainability outcomes and promote deeper, more impactful transformations at both individual and collective levels.

3. Cross-sector Collaboration

Foster collaboration between ecovillages, academic researchers, and policymakers to exchange knowledge and develop innovative approaches that leverage the transformative potential of both individual and collective levels.

6.6. Research Reflections & Limitations

6.6.1. Reflective Journey in the Ecovillage

Moving forward, I wish to share a personal reflection on my time spent in the ecovillage, an experience profoundly intertwined with my research. Immersing myself in the ecovillage experience allowed me to fully engage with the community's way of life, inner work practices and tools, unveiling their remarkable potential to transform ways of being and thinking. Additionally, spending an extended period in nature deepened my appreciation and understanding on the intricate relationality between the inner and outer worlds, the self, others and nature.

Upon my arrival, I had no prior experience or expectations regarding the impact of dreams on inner processes. My journey was driven purely by curiosity and a willingness to learn. By participating in dream-sharing groups with other volunteers and attending a weekend intensive training on "Dreams & the Subconscious", I gained profound insights into the use of dreams as a means of accessing the subconscious mind and as a powerful tool for guidance. Through this process, I experienced profound realizations about my past and how it has shaped my present ways of thinking and being. I am profoundly appreciative for the opportunity to glimpse into the knowledge and wisdom that the community has cultivated over the past forty years. Ultimately, the experience illuminated to me the profound interconnectedness of inner transformation, and the ways it shapes and nurtures individual's relationships with others and the natural world.

6.6.2. Methodological Limitations

1. Researcher Bias

Reflecting on methodological limitations necessitates acknowledging firstly my own personal position and bias. It is important to have reflexivity on how the researcher's position in the field impacts relations and interactions along with the knowledge produced. In-depth fieldwork can lead the researcher to become so absorbed within the ethnographic encounter whereby critical thinking may be compromised. As suggested by Sorggard and Jorgensen et al. (2014), it is crucial to maintain a balance between proximity and distance in the ethnographic counter.

To address this limitation, I made a concerted effort to remain mindful of my role as a researcher throughout the fieldwork. This self-awareness involved regularly reflecting on my positionality and its potential impact on my observations and interactions. By maintaining this critical perspective, I was able to observe the

community's daily functioning with a more objective lens and adapt my interview questions in response to emerging insights.

2. Bias in Members' Responses

Another significant limitation is the potential bias introduced by the participants' desire to present the ecovillage in an idealized manner. Members of ecovillages, who are often deeply invested in the community and its values, may be inclined to emphasize the positive aspects of their experiences and the successes of the community. This bias can lead to overly optimistic or selective reporting, potentially skewing the results towards a more favorable depiction of the ecovillage than might be warranted. Such social desirability bias has been well-documented in research involving self-reports and interviews (Paulhus, 2001; Tourangeau & Yan, 2007). It is important to account for this bias in the analysis and interpretation of the data, recognizing that members' responses might not fully capture any challenges or limitations experienced within the ecovillage.

This limitation was addressed and partially mitigated through various techniques outlined by Bergen and Labonté (2020) to reduce social desirability bias. These techniques involved providing a comprehensive explanation of confidentiality and anonymity procedures to participants, directly inquiring about the challenges faced within the community, and employing follow-up questions to elicit more candid responses.

3. Prevalence of Transformative Qualities

Another limitation involves the focus of the interview questions on specific transformative qualities. For instance, the topic of perspective-taking was explored by asking participants, "How do you approach understanding different perspectives within the ecovillage?" Consequently, there may be a disproportionate emphasis on responses related to the qualities explicitly investigated, while other inner qualities that were not directly addressed could be underrepresented.

This limitation was partially mitigated by employing a mixed-methods approach, which allowed for the emergence of various transformative qualities during the participant observation phase. Furthermore, follow-up studies could explore transformative qualities not covered in the initial research can provide additional insights and balance the findings. These studies can focus on different dimensions of transformation or examine how new qualities interact with those previously studied. This iterative approach helps to refine and expand the understanding of transformative processes (Yin, 2018).

4. Heterogeneity of Ecovillages

A final but significant limitation of this research is the inherent heterogeneity among ecovillages, which are highly diverse and distinct from one another. Consequently, the findings from this study, which were derived from the specific context of Los Portales, cannot be generalized to all ecovillages. Prior to commencing fieldwork, I was unaware of the degree to which Los Portales emphasizes inner work as a central component of its community practices. This focus on inner work significantly facilitated the exploration of the connection between inner and outer change. However, the insights gained about this connection are not universally applicable due to the variability among ecovillages. Different ecovillages may prioritize varying aspects of community life, such as social activism, ecological sustainability, or alternative economic practices, which can influence their approach to inner and outer transformations.

7. CONCLUSION

This research has illuminated the significant role that ecovillages can play in fostering inner and outer transformations for sustainability. Through a comprehensive exploration, I have demonstrated the presence and embodiment of several key transformative qualities within ecovillage members. These qualities are not merely individual attributes but are nurtured and enhanced by the unique collective practices and structures within the ecovillage. Ecovillages create enabling spaces where individuals can engage in inner work, which is crucial for personal and collective evolution. At the same time, the collective environment is continuously shaped and reshaped by the individuals who inhabit it, illustrating a dynamic interplay between the individual and collective levels.

Within these dynamics of inner and outer transformations, inner work plays a pivotal role in the process of overcoming prevailing systems and paradigms. To challenge and transcend these entrenched systems, individuals must undergo a process of inner change, which involves becoming aware of and transforming internalized patterns, values, beliefs, and behaviors that perpetuate disconnection from oneself, others, and the natural world. By engaging in this inner work, individuals not only transform themselves but also contribute to cultivating more conscious and meaningful relationships, both within their communities and with the environment.

The blueprint that the ecovillage of Los Portales gives us for addressing the pressing challenges of our time reminds us that genuine sustainability is as much about transforming our inner landscapes as it is about reshaping our external systems. By drawing inspiration from the ecovillage model, we are invited to envision a world where sustainability is woven into the very fabric of our existence, where inner and outer transformations work in harmony to forge a more resilient and prosperous future.

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