



# **Intentional Communities as Drivers of Societal Change Towards Sustainability?**

– Understanding Community Advocates' Social Representations of Change

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# Intentional Communities as Drivers of Societal Change Towards Sustainability? – Understanding Community Advocates' Social Representations of Change

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## Abstract

With societies all over the world being faced with severe global environmental crises, profound changes in societal systems are required. Many actors in the field of sustainability transitions attribute an essential role to intentional communities. This study explores how community advocates engaged in intentional communities conceptualize and envision pathways for societal change towards sustainability. Social representations of change held by community advocates from different European countries are investigated. The findings identify two representations of change: One focused on exploring sustainable practices and one centred on facilitating inner change. Community advocates supporting the representation of exploring sustainable practices appear to hold contradicting views, which might result in a lack of action and avoidance of the issue. In comparison, community advocates emphasizing the need for inner change seem to have rather consistent views, which might make it easier for them to engage in community action in practice. Overall, this study contributes to a better understanding of the role of intentional communities as drivers of societal change towards sustainability, and offers valuable insights for transition work.

*Keywords:* societal change, sustainability transitions, intentional communities, social representations, sustainable practices, inner change

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# 1. Introduction

Societies all over the world are faced with severe global environmental problems, among which the anthropogenic climate crisis is one of the biggest challenges (IPCC, 2018). It is widely agreed that the current socio-economic system of global capitalism is the most significant cause of today's environmental crises: Capitalism's inherent drive for accumulating profit puts the focus on continuous growth in global production. Producing goods and services requires the use of natural resources and burning of fossil fuels resulting in environmental degradation and natural resource scarcity (Schnaiberg, 1980). In order to prevent the most severe consequences of climate change and to create sustainable societies where the needs of current generations are met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (WCED, 1987), our current system based on capitalism has to be altered in profound ways (Foster, 2002). Such a societal transition or transformation towards sustainability is understood as a radical, long-term and structural change to a new, alternative system within planetary boundaries (Avelino and Kunze, 2009). It encompasses revolutionary ideas about abolishing capitalism, materialism and consumerism, and supporting sufficiency and community-orientation. Literature on sustainability transitions has differentiated such structural change approaches from ones characterized by incremental change. Concepts of adaptation merely optimise the status quo since they build on and reinforce current systems in society (Kates et al., 2012; Aall et al., 2015), one example being the idea of a ‚green economy‘ that advocates the current capitalistic system (Luederitz et al., 2017). Such concepts reflect a reformist position promoting innovation in terms of environmental standards and consumption of eco-efficient products and services, and thus do not trigger the needed structural changes (Geels et al., 2015).

When looking at ways to realize sustainability transitions focusing on revolutionary ideas of change, an essential role is attributed to civil society (Nations, 1992; Frantzeskaki et al., 2016). In particular, community-based initiatives are widely postulated to be essential drivers of societal transition, both in academic (Middlemiss and Parrish, 2010; van der Schoor and Scholtens, 2015) and applied debates (Hopkins and Heinberg, 2008). Drawing on Seyfang and Smith (2007), Mock et al. (2019, p. 2) define a community-based initiative as "a movement, an informal group, a formal association or an organisation that aims to

contribute to a transition towards sustainability in its respective region through its activities and members' engagement". In doing so, such initiatives develop models of transition, that is to say possible pathways for societal change towards sustainability (Leach et al., 2010; Scoones et al., 2015). With the help of models of transition, the aim is to replace conventional practices and ideas with new belief systems and revolutionize economic, technological, social and cultural structures in society in order to contribute to mainstream sustainability (McAlpine et al., 2015). Especially intentional communities, which belong to community based-initiatives, are seen to be important actors of civil society in pioneering models of transition (Feola, 2020). Such models of transition and related alternative practices, which intentional communities explore, experiment with and implement, can be picked up by other actors, such as policy makers. Hence, intentional communities can contribute to large-scale changes in society by helping to design transition approaches on the macro level (Frantzeskaki et al., 2016). Binay et al. (2020, p. 100) define intentional communities as follows: "Intentional communities comprise five or more people who voluntarily live together and share significant aspects of their lives in order to create structural and cultural alternatives to mainstream society". Many types of communities are considered as intentional communities, such as ecovillages, communes, monasteries, ashrams or cohousing groups (Avelino and Kunze, 2015). The movement of ecologically and climate change oriented intentional communities emerged in the 1980s in response to ecological and social challenges in modern societies (Avelino and Kunze, 2009). Active communities in this field can most commonly be found in post-industrial countries (Forrest and Wiek, 2014), with the United States being the most prominent country followed by European countries, such as Spain (Renau, 2018). Following the aim of finding new sustainable practices, community action focuses on people's needs for electricity, food, housing, mobility, financial means, work, leisure, safety, health, governance and self-determination (Forrest and Wiek, 2014). More concrete examples of such community action would be the implementation of green energy sources, set up of permaculture gardens, building with natural materials, organising of car pools, experimentation with new monetary systems, provision of common possession and shared living spaces, adoption of collective decision-making processes, offer of courses and workshops, facilitation of talking circles, research on trust-building, collaboration with other actors in society, participation in local and regional governments, attendance at demonstrations and raising public awareness (Dawson, 2006).

## 1.1. Problem Formulation

When looking at transition work in Europe, there is a growing interest in the action of community-based initiatives, including intentional communities (Tummers, 2011). The main question has thereby been how such community action can be supported, accelerated, scaled, and in general improved (Nevens et al., 2013; Forrest and Wiek, 2014; Seyfang and Longhurst, 2014). Hence, research has mainly focused on related technical, political and financial matters regarding the introduction of specific alternative practices in broader scales of society.

However, in order to apply approaches of intentional communities in wider society, these approaches need to first be understood in a holistic way. It might not be enough to look at specific activities of community action, which actors in intentional communities consider only as part of the process, but rather at their ideas about entire processes of change, the so-called models of transition underpinning community action. Relatively little attention has so far been given to how people engaging in community action conceptualize and envision models of transition (Penha-Lopes and Henfrey, 2019).

Moreover, community action has been increasingly supported and adopted because it is widely claimed or hoped for by many actors in the field of sustainability transitions that community action can drive societal change towards sustainability (Hopkins and Heinberg, 2008; van der Schoor and Scholtens, 2015). However, the question is whether actors in intentional communities themselves aspire to bring about changes not only in their own community, but also in wider society. And if they aspire to do so, a further question would be whether they are indeed able to foster radical, long-term and structural changes in societal systems through their community action. These assumptions need to be examined in more detail.

Two research themes arise from this. First, a better understanding has to be obtained of how actors in intentional communities conceptualize and envision models of transition that foster societal change towards sustainability. Second, insights are required into the potential transformative power of such models of transition. In order to gain this understanding, community action needs to be understood not only from a technical or political viewpoint but mostly from a social interaction perspective. As actors in intentional communities engaging in community action, in this study referred to as community advocates, are labelled in the literature as pioneers of the civil society in making societal change happen (Seyfang and Smith, 2007; Belz and Schmidt-Riediger, 2010), insights into their meaning-making helps to understand different models of transition. Exploring the perspectives of community advocates is precisely beneficial since their ideas and visions of community action are more developed due to their first-hand experiences (Fischer et al., 2018). Overall, investigating models of transition will contribute to a better understanding of the role of intentional communities in Europe as drivers

of societal change towards sustainability, and add insights to constructive transition work on the macro level aiming to tackle today's environmental crises rapidly and efficiently.

## 1.2. Research Aim and Questions

In order to obtain a better understanding of community advocates' ideas and visions about societal change through community action, social representations theory will be used as a conceptual lens for this study. This theory allows to investigate people's complex meaning-making processes related to a certain phenomenon (Moscovici, 1973). By adopting Buijs et al.'s (2011) distinction between normative, cognitive and affective dimensions of representations, it is possible to map interactions between values, beliefs and emotions that together form a representation. Analysing these interactions can further give insights into people's behaviour.

This study aims to investigate social representations of change through community action as held by community advocates in different European countries. The study focuses on three aspects of social representations of change: First, examining what are representations of change held by community advocates and gaining a better understanding of the structure of these representations by looking at their different dimensions. Second, analysing the interaction between the representations' dimensions and the relationship between distinct representations. And third, exploring the implications of the representations for community advocates' possible behaviour in order to gain insights into the potential transformative power of their models of transition. Consequently, the research questions are:

- RQ 1: What are representations of change held by community advocates?
- RQ 2: How do the representations of change and their dimensions interact?
- RQ 3: What implications might the representations of change have for community advocates' behaviour?

To answer these questions, the study draws on empirical findings from semi-structured in-depth interviews with seven community advocates from six different European countries. In order to answer the first research question, the focus is first on each of the representations and its dimensions separately (Section 4.1. and 4.2.). Addressing the second research question, an investigation of the interaction between the representations' dimensions and the relationship between the distinct representations will be presented (Section 4.3.). Based on this, implications for possible behaviour of community advocates will be discussed (Section 5.1.). These insights will further be embedded in the existing literature on transition by outlining the transformative power of the different models of transition, and

recommendations for transition work will be suggested (Section 5.2.). The study ends with a conclusion of the study's findings and a brief proposal for future research (Section 6.).

## 2. Theoretical Framework

In this study, social representations theory is used to structure the analysis. The term social representation was coined by Moscovici who defines it as "a system of values, beliefs and practices" (Moscovici, 1973, p. xiii): Social representations are used by individuals to make sense of, communicate about and act according to their social environment. The aim of this theory is to shed light on the meanings that individuals and groups ascribe to a certain phenomenon. To do so, the theory "conceptualizes the content, production, and circulation" (Buijs et al., 2012, p. 1168-1169) of shared knowledge. With regard to investigating the social construction and sense-giving of sustainability issues, social representations theory has proven to be a fruitful approach. Scholars have applied the theory in the context of sustainability issues, investigating representations of climate change (Whitmarsh et al., 2011; Fischer et al., 2012; Chen, 2019), energy consumption (Batel and Devine-Wright, 2015; Devine-Wright et al., 2017) and grassroots sustainability initiatives (Biddau et al, 2016; Fischer et al. 2018).

As many current approaches on knowledge and meaning acknowledge the social origin of meaning, social representations are argued to be formed through social interaction and are thus contingent on cultural and historical events. Groups develop and share social representations implying that different groups can hold distinct representations (Duveen and Moscovici, 2000). The conception of social representations is very comprehensive since it can act to incorporate various socio-psychological concepts such as values, norms, beliefs and attitudes but also embodied experiences related to a phenomenon (Buijs, 2009).

In order to analyse common sense understanding, Keulartz et al. (2004) differentiate between normative, cognitive and affective elements of such understandings. This differentiation has been applied to the notion of social representations by Buijs et al. (2011). Social representations theory was chosen for the analysis of this study's research data precisely because it enables to explore the different dimensions of social representations that community advocates develop and use to make sense of societal change through community action. It helps to unravel how these dimensions interact and thus gives insight into the complexity of social thought on change. Since questions around societal change are strongly connected to moral issues, it is not sufficient to only look at descriptive beliefs, but normative and emotional aspects need to be taken into account as well. To do so,

the differentiation by Buijs et al. (2011) is adopted in this study. The normative dimension comprises the values associated with community action and visions of how community action ought to be. The cognitive dimension encompasses descriptive beliefs about the reality of current approaches of community action. Lastly, the affective dimension takes into account the emotions associated with community action (Buijs et al., 2011). The focus is on the interaction of the three dimensions of a specific representation to explore possible tensions. When representations are related to one another, the dimensions of the distinct representations might interact in different ways when being combined. Thus, the focus is also on the relationship between distinct representations of change by looking at the interplay between these representations' three dimensions. Unravelling social representations of change and the relationship between them can help to investigate implications for community advocates' behaviour.

According to Castro and Batel (2008), social representations potentially shape actions. They argue that representations can be transcendent, meaning that ideas can exist independently of relevant actions (Harré, 1998; Castro and Batel, 2008). When new ideas are debated and elaborated in a social group as well as through inner dialogue (Marková, 2006; Castro, 2012), the ideas may be appropriated and filled with personal meaning. This meaning-making can shape behavioural intentions and eventually concrete actions that are expected in given social contexts (Grossen and Salazar Orvig, 2011). However, representations cannot be seen as prescriptive of behaviour: In literature on knowledge, attitude and behaviour, gaps between ideas and actions have frequently been identified (Kollmus and Agyeman, 2002; Fischer et al., 2012). New ideas might result in generalized agreement, however, at the level of relevant actions, consensus can be much less due to, for example, complex or contradictory meaning-making processes. This seems to be particularly the case when it comes to complex issues such as global environmental crises (Batel et al., 2016). Analysing social representations may help to understand the performance or lack of certain actions by unravelling contradictions or consistencies in people's views related to a certain phenomenon (Castro and Batel, 2008). Following this, investigating social representations of change can help to explore possible behaviour of community advocates. It can give insights into the reasons for or the lack of certain behaviour in relation to community action. Overall, investigating representations of change and their implications contributes to a better understanding of the role of intentional communities as drivers of societal change towards sustainability.

### 3. Methodology

This study seeks to explore social representations of change through community action in the context of fostering greater sustainability. A qualitative research approach was adopted with the aim of "understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (Creswell and Creswell, 2018, p. 4). This enables to gain an in-depth understanding of representations of change rather than testing a hypothesis or producing generic findings (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). As mentioned before, it is argued that there is a lack of research on how community advocates conceptualize and envision societal change through community action to happen. In order to gain this understanding, the research has a phenomenological character exploring "the lived experiences of individuals about a phenomenon as described by participants" (Creswell and Creswell, 2018, p.13). Social representations theory is used as a conceptual lens to make sense of individuals' experiences, building on the constructivist worldview. This worldview implies the existence of multiple realities that are constructed by individuals through social interaction and historical and cultural processes (Moon and Blackman, 2014). Hence, the participants of this study are considered to be individuals who make sense of their world around them. By looking at their way of talking about societal change through community action it is possible to investigate their sense-making processes in order to uncover social representations (Duveen and Moscovici, 2000). Even though the participants are seen as individuals, it is possible to unravel representations held by several individuals. Referring to Bauer and Gaskell (1999), individuals who form a social group, which is characterized among other things by a so-called common project, can share representations. The participants of this study were chosen to all be community advocates in the movement of intentional communities supporting the common goal of fostering societal change towards sustainability through some form of community action. This does not necessarily imply that they all share the same representation of change, so an exploration of the representations held, and if these differed between potential (sub-)groups, was part of the study. In sum, with the help of a qualitative research design and the social representations theory as a conceptual lens, this study explores social representations of change held by community advocates and implications for community advocates' behaviour.



### 3.1. Data Collection

Following this research design and the aim of exploring social representations related to community action, interviews were conducted with participants who were familiar with the phenomenon of community action, more specifically, who have been experiencing community action themselves. Hence, the selection of participants was based on their membership in intentional communities and their active engagement in the action of these communities with the goal of enacting change towards sustainability through some form of community action.

Looking more closely at the interviewees' roles, all of them had been engaged in several different communities for at least a couple of years, with about 45 years being the longest period of engagement. Furthermore, besides their general participation in community action of their respective intentional community, they all had strong roles not being only involved in action at the local level but also at the regional and even at the global level. For example, all participants were involved in networks facilitating community action on a broader scale such as the Global Ecovillage Network of Europe (GEN of Europe e.V., 2019), the European Network for Community-Led Initiatives on Climate Change and Sustainability (ECOLISE, 2018) or the Transition Network (Transition Network, 2020). More specifically, their roles included being co-founder of an intentional community, council member of GEN Europe, ECOLISE or the Transition Network, organizer of regional and global conferences, facilitator of courses such as the Ecovillage Design Education by Gaia Education, project manager in the field of Erasmus plus and youth volunteering programs such as European Solidarity Corps, communication officer at GEN, researcher in the field of community-based initiatives or organizer of cooperations with other sustainable initiatives and local governments.

In order to explore diverse perspectives and to identify social representations of change that apply across different cultural and social contexts, community advocates were further chosen from different European countries. In total, seven interviews were conducted with community advocates from six European countries, namely France, Italy, Netherlands, Romania, Sweden and Ukraine<sup>1</sup>, whereby two interviews were conducted with Swedish community advocates. The sample of participants is balanced in terms of gender and age. Four interviewees identified themselves with being female and the other three as male. Ages ranged from 28 to 64 years.

The interviews were in-depth and of semi-structured style. By having broad and open-ended questions with a flexible order, a natural flow of the conversation was ensured and it enabled the participants to reflect upon all emerging notions and

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<sup>1</sup> Interview sources of quotes are labelled with the country code of the participant's home country and the participant's age. The country codes are as followed: FR – France; IT – Italy; NL – Netherlands; RO – Romania; SE – Sweden; UA – Ukraine.

speak freely about their experiences. The interviewees also received a consent form beforehand where they were informed that the data was going to be anonymized, in order to, *inter alia*, facilitate more authentic responses (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). The interviews were conducted in English and took place via video between March and June 2020. The length varied from one hour to two hours.

## 3.2. Data Analysis

The approach for analysing the data combined iterative and theory-led analysis. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were analysed in an exploratory fashion which allowed themes to emerge out of the data. Since social representations theory was used as a conceptual lens, a coding scheme was developed based on the recurrent themes in relation to normative, descriptive and affective elements (Buijs et al., 2011). This process was of iterative nature meaning that the codes were repeatedly compared with the data and refined if necessary. This reflexivity enhanced the validity of the findings in comparison to more linear approaches of analysis (Barnett-Page and Thomas, 2009). The qualitative data analysis software NVivo was used to code the material (QSR International Pty Ltd., 2020).

## 3.3. Methodological Reflections

When reflecting about methodological choices, an additional method of data collection could have been participant observation. This might have added valuable insights, especially in regard to community advocates' behaviour. However, this would have exceeded the scope of this research in terms of available time and resources. The researcher decided to focus on one method and thus chose in-depth individual interviews since they offer rich information about complex meaning-making processes (Creswell and Creswell, 2018).

Regarding the number of interviews, having more interviews might have enabled to explore the emerging representations in more depth or investigate other social representations of change in the context of community action. This might have enhanced the robustness and validity of the study's results but would have been at the cost of not having enough time available for a thorough iterative analysis process. Even though the study includes only seven interviews it could already give insights into broader representations in the movement of intentional communities. As community advocates from six different European countries participated in this study, the findings are based on diverse perspectives in terms of cultural and social differences.

Referring to the constructivist worldview, this research cannot be understood as the presentation of some objective truth but rather of subjective understandings related to the investigated phenomenon. Consequently, the researcher is aware of bringing subjective values into the study (Moon and Blackman, 2014). Similar to many scholars in the discipline of Environmental Communication, the researcher is not only involved in academic work on social and environmental issues but also proactively engaging in grassroots organizations and projects with the aim of enacting change. The researcher had prior knowledge about and experiences of intentional communities, which influenced the data collection and interpretation. On the one hand, this turned out to be beneficial for the study. Due to personal contacts it was easier to find interested participants with whom trust could be built up quickly. Further, it became evident that the participants were quite openly and authentically talking about their views since the researcher articulated her own involvement by, for example, using their particular jargon. On the other hand, the researcher's prior engagement with the phenomenon made a neutral interpretation more difficult. Using the theoretical lens of social representations should enable the researcher to look at the data from a more objective point of view, however, unconscious subjectivity could not be avoided and shapes this study to a great extent.

## 4. Findings

Drawing on the material from interviews with seven community advocates, two social representations of change through community action were identified. The first representation focuses on the *exploration and implementation of sustainable practices*. The second representation focuses on the *facilitation of inner change* through the implementation of social tools and creation of safe spaces. The representations were formed by normative, cognitive and affective elements (Table 1). Two elements emerged out of the data that structured the normative dimension: First, interviewees' visions of how community action ought to be in order to foster societal change towards greater sustainability, and second, the values that framed the interviewees' normative views about community action. The cognitive dimension was also comprised of two elements: On the one hand, interviewees' beliefs about the current contribution of community action to societal change, and on the other hand, their beliefs about whether it is possible for intentional communities to contribute more to societal change, and if so, under which conditions this could be possible. Lastly, the affective dimension encompassed only one element, namely the emotions interviewees associated with the broad issue of change through community action.

The focus of the analysis was on the interaction between the three dimensions of a representation as well as the relationship between the two representations. This led to the findings that the two representations were not exclusive of each other, but that some interviewees held a combined version of the two representations. The other interviewees held only the representation of exploring sustainable practices. In the following, the two representations of change (Section 4.1. and Section 4.2.) and the relationship between them (Section 4.3.) will be presented in more detail.

SR of Change		Exploring Sustainable Practices	Facilitating Inner Change
Normative Dimension	Visions of community action	Exploration of and experimentation with sustainable practices Transmission of generated insights Implementation of practices on a large scale through cooperation	Support of individuals and groups to experience inner change through the creation of safe spaces Implementation of social tools and creation of safe spaces on a large scale through cooperation
	Values associated with community action	Solidarity, localisation, resilience	Unity, compassion, trust
Cognitive Dimension	Current contribution to societal change	Contribution locally on a small scale No real contribution on a large scale	Contribution locally on a small scale No real contribution on a large scale yet
	Possible contribution to societal change	Greater contribution is possible if mainstream society gets involved, otherwise contribution remains marginal Greater contribution is not possible because environmental crises are too severe	Contribution will be greater because people who have experienced inner change will inspire change in others and people are more open for inner work nowadays
Affective Dimension	Associated emotions	Negative emotions (frustration, concern) outweigh positive emotions (enthusiasm)	Positive emotions (confidence, optimism) outweigh negative emotions (scepticism)

Table 1: Overview of social representations of change through community action

## 4.1. Social Representation of Exploring Sustainable Practices

### 4.1.1. The Normative Dimension

#### *Visions of Community Action*

All community advocates who were interviewed for this study portrayed community action in highly normative terms. This means that they mostly talked about how community action ought to be. Interviewees holding the representation of exploring sustainable practices seemed to all have the same vision. This vision implied that community action ought to explore and experiment with sustainable practices. Such practices ought to then be implemented on a large scale in society in order to foster societal change towards sustainability.

To begin with, a need for change was explicitly or implicitly expressed by all community advocates. Many interviewees mentioned that community action started with questioning and understanding the complex problems society was faced with:

"When you're living in a community, you have different people trying to approach different problems, you start to understand the complexity of the problems in society." (IT-29)

Based on that understanding, community action ought to explore and experiment with sustainable practices tackling today's problems in a holistic way by "taking into account ecology, economy, the social aspect, and the cultural aspect" (RO-29). In doing so, the interviewees envisioned the "finding [of] solutions, methodologies and techniques to work with nature and not against it" (RO-29). In order to discover visions and alternative practices, the idea "to bring people [...] together and see how transformation can be done now" (SE-64) was also prevalent.

The next step all community advocates pictured was the transmission of the generated insights and knowledge by reaching out to people. It was highlighted that, when doing so, they do not want to impose the insights on others but rather offer them:

"I think ecovillages have a role of harvesting these solutions and offering them to the world." (NL-29)

"We also need to share it, to invite people so that they can get to learn about it, but in a way that is not frightening, that is more like giving a gift we want to share with more people because we believe in this." (SE-57)

In order to not only convey information about sustainable practices but putting them into practice, the vision of implementing them in many parts in society was apparent:

"Gathering best practices and then the idea would be to implement them on a larger scale." (NL-29)

To achieve this, all interviewees referred to cooperation with, for example, governmental authorities, companies, organizations and also between intentional communities. They portrayed a picture of a wide multiplication effect:

"This is a huge movement growing and now in times of a crisis, we could see this localisation popping up everywhere, suddenly we could have cooperation of localisation and then we could see a process of transformation in society." (SE-64)

In order to create real change towards sustainability, all of the community advocates highlighted that it was necessary to work on the local, regional and global level. Since tackling legal structures was seen as most impactful to foster changes on all levels, the importance of political action was stressed:

"That's more about policy making and trying to influence policy. So it's about connecting the work of ecovillages and trying to put it into the policymaking." (SE-57)

In summary, community advocates holding this representation conceptualized the right way of doing community action as exploring and implementing sustainable practices on a large scale in order to foster societal change.

#### *Values associated with Community Action*

The most prevalent values embedded in community advocates' associations with community action were solidarity, localisation and resilience. All of the interviewees expressed that one of the core values community action was built on is **solidarity**. They valued the idea of sharing resources, time and energy for the reasons of being a morally right action and enabling greater achievements together:

"The idea of ecovillages is that you share. And once you have ecovillages starting to cooperate with people in a collective in the city, then you would have a sign of solidarity." (SE-64)

Another value underpinning community action that was often brought up was **localisation**. All of the community advocates valued the idea of moving away from global production and distribution and instead building up local networks. This was highly valued since it would substantially reduce energy consumption for transportation and contribute to a fairer share of wealth:

"If people would grow more and eat more and live more of what is local, there would automatically be a fairer share around the world." (SE-57)

Lastly, **resilience** was described as valuable. Many interviewees argued that through solidarity and localisation, a community could evolve into "a sustainable, robust and resilient system" (IT-29). This ensured safety and thus enhanced people's well-being:

"More resilience when it comes to food and generally the things that we consume [...] to improve the quality of life of citizens." (NL-29)

These values framed the interviewees' normative views about community action as exploring and implementing sustainable practices to work for societal change.

### 4.1.2. The Cognitive Dimension

#### *Current Contribution to Societal Change*

When the interviewees talked in cognitive terms about what was currently happening, they portrayed the contribution of community action to societal change as "happening on various levels in different countries" (NL-29). However, it

became apparent that the impact was so far limited to a small scale on the local level. Many interviewees saw intentional communities as places of new and creative ideas where sustainable practices were being explored and experimented with. Some interviewees put the focus on alternative approaches for local food production whereby permaculture and plant-based food were talked about frequently. Other interviews stressed experimentation with new governance or economic systems:

"Communities are experimenting with different governance models such as sociocracy or holocracy, all kinds of government systems. And communities are experimenting with different monetary systems based on trust or based on more sustainability." (NL-29)

Several interviewees argued that through experimentation, community advocates could identify the most fruitful approaches and "gather best practices" (NL-29). This enabled them to "focus on the transmission of their knowledge" (NL-29). To do so, communities had applied different strategies. Most frequently mentioned was offering educational programs:

"We have lots of courses held. [...] So in that sense we contribute by educating people, transmitting the knowledge that was gathered in ecovillages." (NL-29)

Many interviewees also mentioned that they invited people from outside of the community to experience community action themselves. They accommodated short and long-term volunteers or organized open house days:

"We also receive volunteers [...] And the volunteers should be able to try out how we live, to try out as many things as possible and work with us and be encouraged to take initiative to do things here." (SE-57)

"We also have open house days when people can come here. [...] So then we guide them around and tell them about how we live and eat, about our lifestyle." (SE-57)

Besides organizing events where people could meet in person, many interviewees also highlighted that they had engaged in social media outreach. The main goal was described as raising awareness about the urgency of tackling today's environmental crises and ways how to adopt more sustainable practices. To gain impact on the regional or global level, communities had cooperated with other actors. Several interviewees referred to cooperations with non-governmental organizations, environmental groups, universities and other intentional communities. Furthermore, several interviewees mentioned that they had participated in political action such as demonstrations or collaborations with local governments to work on regional issues:

"Communities are in direct contact with their local governments to change ways of working." (NL-29)



As a conclusion, several interviewees seemed confident that community action contributed to societal change on a small scale. As evidence, some referred to new projects and communities being initiated. However, many acknowledged that only communities that did outreach had an impact. It was argued that communities that were focused inward had no or only a marginal impact:

"So you can really see that this sort of influences the culture, like proving that this is possible and then you see like little mushrooms they start popping up." (NL-29)

"Many communities are rather inwards, they want to focus on themselves and the personal growth, on the personal environment of the community. So those are even less impactful, less physical in the political scene, in the environmental scene." (UA-30)

Only very rarely mentioned was that community action might have a negative impact. The argument that was given was that communities reinforced the cliché people had about community life as being improper and untidy. This could lead to discouraging people to try out a sustainable lifestyle:

"I can also see negative impacts, like that girl from Ukraine, she has an enormous stigma about us like 'All these guys walking barefoot and they look weird and they probably don't take a shower every day'." (UA-30)

However, talking about contribution on a larger scale, all interviewees raised strong doubts. It was stated that proposed practices of communities had not been introduced on a broader scale. And the belief that communities' impact was not visible in regards to the current unsustainable activities in mainstream society was very prevalent:

"I would say that we are very minor players, like as minor as it can be.[...] Things are just getting worse." (UA-30)

This shows that outward focused communities had realized their normative visions to some extent. They explored sustainable practices and formed cooperations. However, there was a great difference between what the community advocates thought ought to happen on a large scale and what they thought actually happens.

### *Possible Contribution to Societal Change*

When discussing the possibility of contributing to societal change, all community advocates expressed the dependency on society's activities. Many interviewees had the strong belief that a greater contribution was only possible if mainstream society acknowledged the urgency of tackling today's crises and got involved. If this did not happen, the communities' impact would remain insignificantly small:

"I cannot give the responsibilities to ecovillages about what happens outside. I think it's the responsibility of individuals to look at ecovillages and say 'Hey, that's what we need'. [...] It's up to society, politics and economics to decide to follow that route." (IT-29)

A few interviewees indicated their strong conviction that society would not start questioning current activities and shift towards sustainability. According to them, today's crises would escalate in the near future:

"I would like to have a big drastic change and I wish it would be done peacefully and voluntarily, but that will not happen. I have a strong belief in that we are not going to do a conscious shift." (UA-30)

Two interviewees also expressed their belief that community action would not contribute to societal change. Communities could not play a role because environmental crises were too severe and communities were powerless in comparison. It was highlighted that there was no time left to avoid irreversible changes:

"The ecovillage would be maybe a sort of rescue boat, but the rescue boat will be filled, all the friends of the ecovillage will jump on the rescue boat and then the rescue boat will sink. The ecovillage will not have much of importance in that way." (SE-64)

"It's a transition period but the sad thing is that we have no time for transition. IPCC reports are saying, backed up by the most impactful scientists and most trustful ones, that we have barely 10 years left before we will face irreversible changes. We have no time." (UA-30)

In sum, two conflicting beliefs emerged out of the conversations. First, greater contribution is possible if mainstream society gets involved. Second, greater contribution is not possible because environmental crises are too severe to be tackled. This shows that there were contradictions between different beliefs at the cognitive level. Moreover, the findings suggest that there were tensions between the normative and the cognitive dimension of this representation. Many interviewees portrayed a picture of the world that according to their beliefs will never occur. Their cognitive beliefs and normative views seemed to disaccord.

### 4.1.3. The Affective Dimension

When deliberating on community action for societal change, the interviewees expressed three types of emotions, namely frustration, concern and enthusiasm. Most prevalent among many interviewees was the feeling of *frustration* about the inaction in mainstream society to acknowledge the urgency of today's crises and support the change intentional communities had tried to create:

"I don't think it will happen just by our personal efforts, it should also go from the top down. So that the state and the institutions will recognize us as important actors of the future transition or the current transition. [...] But society doesn't get it." (UA-30)

Moreover, *concern* and *fear* that action was not powerful enough to tackle today's crises was shown. This concern was claimed by some interviewees to be so strong that they avoided engagement with the issue:

"I sense that this way of life will be just impossible to continue. There is no way on earth to do it sustainably. [...] If I'm thinking about it, it's scary, but you don't want to think about it on a daily basis." (UA-30)

However, several interviewees also expressed *enthusiasm* that intentional communities had the potential to show people that action was needed and that there were ways to create change:

"The purpose of ecovillages is saying 'Hey, you don't need to wait for a crises. [...] We are laying down the foundation that you can follow if you want'. So this is the true power of ecovillages, helping people, in my opinion, to avoid reaching the bottom of the pit before finding that some change is needed." (IT-29)

"I think communities are very creative spaces. So once anybody has like a half an hour of time, it's very easy to invent a million ideas that could be implemented." (NL-29)

In conclusion, affective elements often conveyed negative emotions. Thereby, cognitive aspects entailing the pessimistic belief that change towards sustainability might not happen were highlighted. In sum, the affective dimension strengthened the cognitive dimension of this representation and thus affirmed community advocates' negative views on change through community action. In the next section, the second representation of change, which was identified in this study, will be presented with also the focus on its three dimensions.

## 4.2. Social Representation of Facilitating Inner Change

### 4.2.1. The Normative Dimension

#### *Visions of Community Action*

The representation of facilitating inner change was strongly constituted by normative components. For all interviewees these normative elements were of high importance. Thus, they expressed a clear view on how community action ought to be and articulated what for them is right or wrong related to the issue. Community advocates holding this representation envisioned community action as supporting individuals and groups to experience inner change through the creation of safe spaces.

Many interviewees tended to argue that societal change started with the individual. People needed to change inside because the outer world was seen to be a reflection of what was happening in people's mental worlds:

"So probably we cannot really talk about a bigger change if we don't start with the inside. So the inside and the outside are really linked. [...] So for me it starts from the person somehow." (FR-28)

All interviewees holding this representation stressed that we had lost contact to ourselves, other beings and nature. The cause, they argued, was capitalism. It became evident that they considered capitalism as wrong since it taught us about competitiveness:

"At some point in society a click happened in our collective mind, and it was called capitalism. That moment changed our consciousness to 'I have to do it alone, everybody is against me'." (RO-29)

Hence, they expressed the moral imperative that this had to change and that we "have to develop into yourself and not develop out there" (SE-64). In order to rebuild the relationship to ourselves and others, many interviewees stated that people ought to become more intimate with themselves and be open to feel vulnerable in front of others. For this to happen, people needed to "have the will and the courage to step out into the unknown, people say 'outside the comfort zone'" (IT-29). Many interviewees stated that due to our competitive mindsets, we were traumatized to show our vulnerable sides. However, this constituted an invitation for connection:

"When I open myself to my own human vulnerability, something also melts in the other and allows also the other to see me." (RO-29)

Further, all interviewees holding this representation of facilitating inner change proposed that in order for individuals to allow vulnerability "a safe space to experiment" (IT-29) was necessary:

"In order to step away from masks and self-defense mechanisms that we have built, we need to be in a space where we can explore our vulnerability and know that our peers are not going to stab us in the eyes, just because we lower the defense a little bit." (IT-29)

It was frequently expressed that community action ought to focus on creating such safe spaces with the help of social tools:

"It's places where people can be with themselves and explore different tools to connect with other people." (FR-28)

It was described that through the confrontation with one's traumas and building intimacy to oneself, people would experience inner change. When the interviewees talked about inner change, they meant overcoming "the internalized competitiveness, dualism" (IT-29) and "realizing that we are all one and we are all

interconnected" (RO-29). According to them, this led to a new "perception of the reality"(FR-28) where others were recognized as "brother and sister" (RO-29):

"I become an ally with you, against our fears. Whilst in normal society, I am allied with my fear so I go against you." (IT-29)

For an "evolution of consciousness" (IT-29), many people needed to be able to experience inner change. Hence, community advocates holding this representation advocated community action that also focused on supporting groups to experience collective change. Further, they envisioned the creation of safe spaces and the implementation of social tools in many parts in society to foster change on a larger level. For realizing that, they endeavoured collaboration between communities and outside actors such as non-governmental organizations and companies:

"What is important in those places is the experience and the tools and there are so many things that you can apply to many different places. For example, doing a sharing circle in an enterprise once a week that would be completely transformative." (FR-28)

For societal change to happen, many interviewees argued that "it takes all of us" (RO-29) and not only specific political parties or grassroot organizations. Everyone who experienced some inner change would contribute to societal change:

"I think the ideal is that we really come together and be part of this transformation that is needed. [...] living in a system where you are participating." (SE-64)

Overall, this representation essentially encapsulated the idea that, in order to tackle today's crises in a holistic way, mental models needed to be addressed from the inside.

#### *Values associated with Community Action*

The values that were most prevalent in community advocates' associations with community action were unity, compassion and trust. When talking about facilitating inner change, it became visible that they all aspired "to find the **unity**" (IT-29). Unity was described as a valuable "space of oneness" (RO-29) where people felt connected to each other and feelings such as fear dissolved:

"I can feel that I am in a place where I feel really connected and that we are not afraid of each other somehow." (FR-28)

Another value of community action that was pointed to often was **compassion**. Many interviewees argued that through realizing that everything was interconnected, people would develop an attitude towards life that was based on compassion for every other being:

"And I can only have my open heart and compassion to everything that has happened that shaped and formed you of who you are today." (RO-29)

Lastly, the value of *trust* was embedded in their normative views of community action. Several interviewees expressed that it was valuable to " co-create together with everybody a space of safety and trust" (RO-29). Thereby, trust played a decisive role in making people feel safe and allowing them to open up to one another. Overall, these embedded values highly shaped the community advocates' framing of what community action ought to foster.

#### 4.2.2. The Cognitive Dimension

##### *Current Contribution to Societal Change*

All interviewees holding the representation of facilitating inner change expressed that intentional communities already constituted a nurturing ground for inner change. Through community action, safe spaces were being created with the help of social tools:

"I think that all the tools that you can find in ecovillages are really helping, for example, the sharing circle or the forum [...] to see what is really happening." (FR-28)

The interviewees described that many individuals and groups who took part in such activities experienced inner change. They depicted their own realizations as world-changing:

"I changed a lot my worldview these last two years and for me once you opened this kind of perception you feel part of nature." (FR-28)

"The thing is that the deeper I go, the more I realize that everything is so intricate and interconnected." (RO-29)

Further, many interviewees outlined that for many people, effects were visible already after a very short while:

"Places where you can go even just a week, sometimes just a week can already open so many doors inside you that you never thought about." (FR-28)

Moreover, it was said that community action already contributed to the creation of transformative spaces in many parts of society. Community advocates, for example, organized community gardens, healing circles, workshops and youth exchanges through cooperation with other actors:

"There is really this wish to find bridges with society on different levels." (FR-28)

This showed that community action had contributed to societal change on a local level to a certain extent. However, many interviewees tended to see the impact as dependent on the community's stance. Communities that were open to invite people and hold spaces for others seemed to have a much larger impact than the ones that only focused on their own community members:

"It really depends. [...] They're also more communities that are just secluded, they're just looking for themselves." (RO-29)

When talking about contributions on a larger scale, all interviewees holding this representation expressed that the impact was not visible yet. They described it as "a process of transformation" (SE-64) that took time. It was compared to a growing process under the soil or a rippling effect on the surface of the water: Even if the seeds and nutrients are there, it takes time for plants to grow. Similarly, community action was seen to be laying a foundation for people to experience inner change. But for people to heal from traumas, incorporate their changed worldviews and inspire change in others, time was needed. Hence, according to them, change would unfold and become visible over time:

"If you would then see it as development of mushrooms, and that there is something growing, nutrients are growing underneath the ground, then it looks like that only some mushrooms are popping up but in reality there is a process." (SE-64)

"I think to quantify and measure the impact that ecovillages have is a bit difficult because for me, it's a lot like a ripple effect. You put a drop into water and then it spreads." (RO-29)

In conclusion, beliefs about what is happening at the moment were strongly connected to their normative views about how community action ought to be. Hence, the normative dimension fed the cognitive dimension of this representation.

### *Possible Contribution to Societal Change*

Since the interviewees holding this representation stated that community action currently contributed to societal change, they also believed that it was possible that community action would contribute to societal change in the future. Different reasons were stated for this.

First, some interviewees mentioned their opinion that every person had the capacity for inner change. To strengthen this claim, they pointed to the phenomenon of falling in love: Most people can experience this which shows that they have the capacity of opening up for love and compassion towards others:

"And I have a feeling that we all know. I believe in collective wisdom, human consciousness. And I believe that behind those eyes, inside of you, you know." (RO-29)

"Yes and I think you also had it and it's called falling in love. Having your heart open and your mind open to love." (RO-29)

Many interviewees continued by arguing that the insights people gained through inner change were similar. Regardless of social or cultural circumstances, the realization that all beings were connected would be the same for all humans. According to that, people would unite behind the goal of caring for other beings and nature:

"Even though we have completely different upbringings and cultural contexts, the solutions that we find together are basically the same, because we are realizing that human essence is the same." (RO-29)

Further, interviewees' conviction was also built on the belief that inner change was real. Many people had experienced it already, and they automatically had changed their attitudes and behaviour towards other beings. By doing so, they would also inspire change in others who would then in turn change their worldviews as well:

"Because once the understanding is fully integrated, then the manifestation of the change happens without any effort. It's just you shift your mindset, you shift your culture, and everything you do is part of the new culture. You don't even have to name it." (IT-29)

Lastly, some interviewees also reasoned that the younger generation was more open for inner work nowadays. It was stated that they had a stronger desire and courage to escape the capitalistic system. Thus, the openness of many people was there and built the foundation for change in society:

"I feel that our generation is maybe not carrying the same fears and also is looking for lots of meaning in their life. Before I think people were also looking for it, but maybe we have a bigger comfort to be able to explore it." (FR-28)

As the previous section already showed, the findings on the cognitive dimension indicated that the normative and the cognitive dimension of this representation were very closely related. What community advocates thought ought to happen resembled what they believed will happen in reality. Hence, cognitive and normative elements strengthened and reinforced each other.

#### 4.2.3. The Affective Dimension

When the interviewees related to affective elements, they usually did so in a positive manner. First, many interviewees frequently expressed their *confidence* that intentional communities endorsed the right values and acted according to them:

"I was hooked, it got me crazy. I realized, this is what I was looking for. These are the principles that I want to abide my life by." (RO-29)

"This is one of the most important movements." (SE-64)



Further, *optimism* was often shown, supporting their strong belief that community action had a high potential to facilitate change:

"If we speak only of potential, I think the potential is very high. I'm very optimistic." (RO-29)

Only a few interviewees briefly voiced rather negative emotions. These entailed *scepticism* that fostering inner change implied a change that happened slowly. It became apparent that they were sceptical since the change that was needed today ought to happen fast. Whenever they expressed their scepticism, they however quickly turned to positive expressions again. Some, for example, pointed out the benefits that a slow change brought with it:

"I picture a very slow growth that has to do with internal healing. And I don't believe on infinite growth on a finite planet. I'm very sceptical of things that grow very fast, that's just not sustainable." (RO-29)

"If we really want to change we need a radical change. [...] So I will say yes to radical change but not to do it radically. Because I feel sometimes when we go radically we forget about all our human parts." (FR-28)

To conclude, the findings suggest that positive emotions constituted a large part of the affective dimension. By expressing positive emotions, community advocates gave emphasis to their positive beliefs that community action was contributing and would contribute to societal change in a fruitful way. Thus, the affective dimension reinforced the cognitive dimension of this representation.

### 4.3. Relationships between the Social Representations

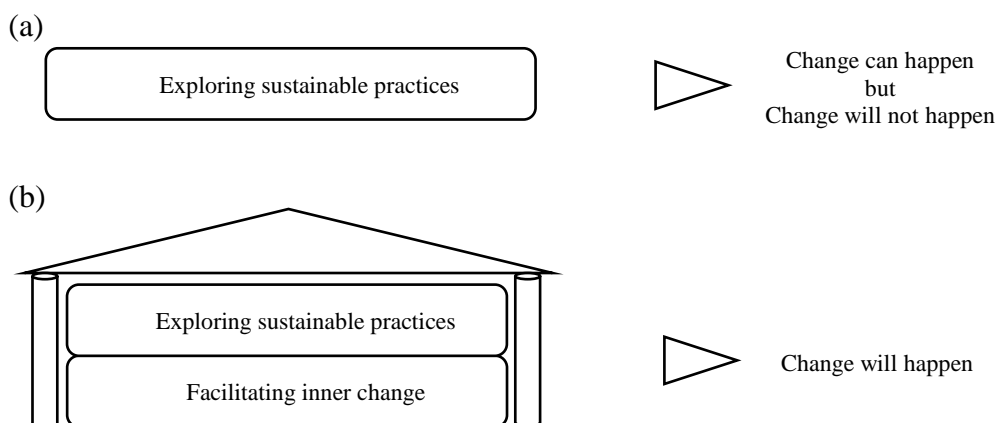


Figure 1: Two models of representations found in the data: (a) Representation of exploring sustainable practices as the only representation (b) Representation of exploring sustainable practices built on representation of facilitating inner change

The interaction of the representations' dimensions as well as the relationship between the two representations can provide insights into tensions within community advocates' representations. The data analysis showed that there were two models of representations. The first one was constituted by a focus on the exploration of sustainable practices (Figure 1a). Three out of the seven interviewees were exclusively expressing this representation. The second model was centred on the facilitation of inner change, which then seemed to provide a basis for the representation focusing on the exploration of sustainable practices (Figure 1b). Four out of the seven interviewees were holding both these representations combined.

To begin with the first model, the representation of exploring sustainable practices was characterized by substantial tensions. As shown in the findings, there were tensions between the normative dimension on the one hand, and the two other dimensions on the other hand. This could be traced to the mismatch between the interviewees' strong norms and the lack of corresponding beliefs and emotions: Their ideals did not match with what they thought is happening and will happen in reality. Moreover, tensions were found at the affective level. On the one hand, the interviewees raised negative emotions, namely frustration, concern and fear, underlining the view that change was not and could not happen through community action. And on the other hand, they expressed the positive emotion of enthusiasm that intentional communities had the potential to create change. Lastly, there were contradictions between different beliefs at the cognitive level. On the one hand, the belief was expressed that it was possible that community action contributed to societal change if mainstream society got involved. On the other hand, the belief was stated that environmental crises were too severe to be tackled. These tensions might have emerged due to the difficulty to assess what is happening in mainstream society as well as the complex nature of and interaction with today's environmental crises:

"And I think we need to demarginalize but it will never happen. I don't think it will happen just by our personal efforts, it should also go from the top down. So that the state and the institutions will recognize us as important actors of the future transition or the current transition. [...] I'm not saying that the way we live is good enough. Even if everybody will shift, will downscale to community life and basically resemble us, there is very little hope still. It's a transition period but the sad thing is that we have no time for transition." (UA-30)

These tensions arising within and between the normative, cognitive and affective dimension seemed to result in an inherent conflict. Community advocates holding the representation of exploring sustainable practices thought that change could happen, but at the same time they also believed that change would not happen (Figure 1a).

Turning to the second model, the representation of exploring sustainable practices was built on the representation of facilitating inner change. Interviewees holding both representations believed that due to inner change, people would

change their worldviews towards compassion for all beings. These people would then automatically support the exploration and implementation of sustainable practices since unsustainable practices harmed all beings. Hence, the interviewees referred to sustainable practices as a result of inner change:

"For so many people I think that's a big change to realize that I am not a separate self and I'm connected to everything. For me this is already a big change that happens on the individual level somehow and has a huge effect on how we perceive the reality. [...] And then from that point, I think you kind of see the next level which is the group. From that connection that is more I would say heart centered, inside us, then we can relate differently with the others. I have this wish that from this expression, there will be more wish for solidarity, cooperation, connection. So to create more local systems that are based more on solidarity and cooperation and authenticity also." (FR-28)

"We come back to a space of oneness. [...] And I can only have my open heart and compassion to everything that has happened that shaped and formed you of who you are today. And then from there, we can say 'Okay, let's make a garden together'. But firstly is our power of connection." (RO-29)

"The change that society needs [...] needs to go through personal growth to understand the deep value of reconnecting with nature. [...] Because once the understanding is fully integrated, then the manifestation of the change happens without any effort. It's just you shift your mindset, you shift your culture, and everything you do is part of the new culture. You don't even have to name it." (IT-29)

Looking at the representation of facilitating inner change as such, the findings showed that there were no substantial tensions within or between the dimensions. The normative, cognitive and affective elements fed off each other. The interviewees had the moral view and the cognitive belief that societal change through community action should and would happen. At the affective level, conflicting elements were found, but these appeared to not result in an inherent conflict within the interviewees' representation. Positive emotions such as confidence and optimism mostly constituted the affective dimension. These emotions underlined the view that change would happen and that the approach of inner change was beneficial for making their vision become reality. However, the negative emotion of scepticism was also mentioned. The interviewees were sceptical of the approach of inner change because it took time, though the change towards sustainability required today needs to happen fast. However, it became apparent that they succeeded in finding ways to deal with this arising tension. It has been argued that positive feelings and strong consistent cognitive and normative beliefs might work as a buffer against negative feelings (Mock et al., 2019). This might have been the case for some interviewees since they mentioned their scepticism in a rather negative way, however quickly turned to positive expressions again. Their values, ideas and positive emotions associated with the belief that societal change will happen might have prevailed over their scepticism making it not a decisive factor. Other interviewees voiced such scepticism in more positive

terms. Their way of coping with this tension appeared to be acceptance: Their strong belief that taking time is an inherent part of inner change made them accept it. According to them, inner change cannot happen very rapidly since for people to heal from traumas and to change their worldviews, time was needed. Without time change would simply not happen and therefore the interviewees related to the factor of time in a positive way. In conclusion, the overcoming of the tension arising at the affective level helped the interviewees to resolve a possibly emerging conflict. Hence, the representation of facilitating inner change was of consistent nature implying that societal change through community action should and would happen.

Interestingly, where the representation of exploring sustainable practices was built on the premise of inner change, there seemed to be no tensions between the two representations of change. The tensions within and between the two dimensions of the representation of exploring sustainable practices appeared to not lead to any tensions between the two representations. This was the case since the underlying assumptions of the representation of facilitating inner change constituted the fundament for both representations. Interviewees believed that people who had experienced inner change fundamentally changed their worldviews and supported sustainable practices. These people, in turn, would inspire others to change and so on. This process would lead to societal change even if mainstream society did not get involved in implementing sustainable practices or if environmental crises were thought to be too severe to tackle. The interviewees strongly believed that a process of inner change in society would automatically lead to an end of further environmental degradation and would make it possible to address some of the existing crises to a certain extent. Several interviewees also highlighted that people who implemented sustainable practices without them having experienced inner change might not actually foster change. For societal change to happen, it was not enough that people understood today's problems. They claimed that inner change was a precondition for societal change to happen:

"You can have all the ecological solutions but if you don't know how to live together, you're not gonna go anywhere. [...] you can be in the garden but if you have a big conflict with the person with whom you're in the garden, it's not even sustainable for the seeds that you're planting." (FR-28)

"The focus is learning through the process, the values and the virtues of doing it together this way, so that you learn how to be a good communitarian in a way and that's much more valuable than the result itself. Because you can repeat the experience and in my opinion, it's more important that we can repeat the experience of a six-month project compared to having solar panels on the roof. Because if you have solar panels on the roof, but in the meantime, you lost half the team, okay good for you for the panels, but when they break, you're gonna throw them in the truck because nobody's willing to listen to you to repair them." (IT-29)

The strong underlying assumptions of the representation of facilitating inner change seemed to resolve the inherent conflict within the representation of exploring

sustainable practices when both were combined. Hence, the second model appeared to constitute a powerful combination of the two representations. Since there were no substantial tensions, this model of representation was characterized by consistency implying that change would happen (Figure 1b). In sum, the two models of representations differed in terms of existing tensions. The model entailing the representation of exploring sustainable practices was characterized by substantial tensions, whereas the model including both representations combined did not show tensions.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. Interpreting the Findings: Implications for Community Advocates' Possible Behaviour

The findings of this study presented an investigation of social representations of change through community action that were formed by cognitive, normative and affective dimensions. Referring to the first research question, namely what are representations of change held by community advocates, two representations were identified. First, the representation of exploring sustainable practices and, second, the representation of facilitating inner change (Table 1). These two representations were found to form two distinct models of representations community advocates are drawing on (Figure 1). In order to answer the second research question, the interaction of the representations' dimensions and the relationship between the two representations were analysed. The representation of exploring sustainable practices was found to be characterized by substantial tensions, whereas the representation of facilitating inner change did not show tensions. When both representations were combined in the second model of representations, the tensions existing in the representation of exploring sustainable practices appeared to be resolved (Section 4.3.). In order to answer the third research question, the following section explores implications for community advocates' possible behaviour by analysing the existence and non-existence of tensions within the models of representations. This can shed light on the reasons for or the lack of certain behaviour in relation to community action. The interpretation of implications rests on evidence found in the research data and is backed up by relevant literature. Nevertheless, this interpretation needs to be understood as exploratory, and further research is needed to substantiate these explorations.

As shown in the findings, the two models of representations differed in terms of existing tensions. Since tensions in people's views can affect how they relate to relevant behaviour (see Section 2.), the implications for possible behaviour also vary between the two models. To begin with the first model, it entailed the representation of exploring sustainable practices that was characterized by substantial tensions between the normative dimension and the two other dimensions

as well as within the cognitive and the affective dimension. Community advocates holding this model were thus confronted with an inherent conflict. In the social psychological literature, such conflicting cognitive and normative views have been argued to lead to psychological discomfort (Festinger, 1957; Elliot and Devine, 1994). Scholars have been extensively studying behaviour of people who hold conflicting cognitive and normative views (Awa and Nwuche, 2010; Martinez, 2018; Dhanda, 2020). A well known theory, introduced by Festinger (1957), is cognitive dissonance. It is understood as a psychological phenomenon where individuals try to resolve psychological discomfort through achieving adjustment between their conflicting views and their behaviour. This means that they alter their views or behaviour regarding a certain social object (Festinger, 1957). In the context of social representations theory, Moscovici developed an alternative psychological concept for how people treat conflicting elements of their representations: Cognitive polyphasia describes a state in which an individual holds multiple rationalities that are utilized depending on the social environment (Moscovici, 1984). According to Martinez (2018), these two concepts are not contradicting each other, but can be seen as complementary: Individuals might employ the two approaches differently based on the situation and their individual differences such as the level of tolerance of dissonant information or the level of self-consciousness for discovering normative and cognitive discrepancies. Following this, the interviewees of this study might also employ both approaches depending on their specific situation and individual differences. The concept of cognitive polyphasia can explain why the interviewees holding the representation of exploring sustainable practices articulated contradictory beliefs and norms. They retained multiple rationalities which they could employ in different social settings. For example, an interviewee explicitly mentioned that his views differed depending on whether he was interacting with other community advocates in intentional communities or with people in mainstream society. He stated that he keeps being optimistic regarding societal change when interacting within the intentional community because he can see improvements happening through community action. On the other hand, he expressed that he is very pessimistic when engaging in mainstream society since environmental and social problems seem to only get worse. Hence, cognitive polyphasia might be a coping strategy of community advocates in order to deal with inconsistent elements of their representation of change. However, if the inherent conflict between one's own beliefs and norms becomes too strong, coping strategies involving the change of behaviour, as described in cognitive dissonance theory, seem to be common (Festinger, 1957). As stated in literature, lack of action and avoidance of engagement with the issue have been frequently observed to be a common behaviour, especially in the context of complex environmental problems (Norgaard, 2006; Lorenzoni et al., 2007; Fischer et al., 2012). Taking this argument further in an exploratory fashion, a

coping strategy of community advocates who are confronted with an inherent conflict between their cognitive and normative views might result in a lack of action. Interviewees holding the representation of exploring sustainable practices implicitly mentioned doubts whether their action can bring them closer to their overall vision of societal change. Consequently, they might not have beliefs that support them sufficiently in why they are doing their action. This lack of intention can lead to inaction. The interviewees also touched upon the feeling of disturbance and paralysis highlighting the possibility of them stopping their participation at some point. Their frustration and concern might, furthermore, turn out to be so strong that they resign and completely avoid engagement with the issue, as uncovered in other relevant studies (Binder and Blankenberg, 2016; Mock et al., 2019). In conclusion, community advocates holding the representation of exploring sustainable practices were confronted with an inherent conflict. In order to cope with their conflicting norms, beliefs and emotions, it seems to be likely that they employ different strategies related to cognitive polyphasia and cognitive dissonance. Their behaviour might be characterized by the usage of different rationalities depending on their social environment or a lack of action and avoidance of the issue.

In the second model of representations presented in the findings, the representation of exploring sustainable practices was built on the representation of facilitating inner change. This combined version of the two representations did not show any substantial tensions between its constitutive elements. Community advocates holding this combined representation did not have conflicting cognitive and normative views for which they had to find ways to cope with. Referring to cognitive polyphasia, they did not have to employ different rationalities when being in different settings. Interviewees expressed a consistent argumentation of their visions and beliefs about community action which they seem to make use of in a consequent way. They appeared to consistently spread their approach in diverse settings. Regarding coping strategies proposed by cognitive dissonance, inaction and avoidance of engagement with the issue seemed also to be very unlikely. Due to the consistent nature of norms and beliefs, the interviewees appeared to have strong motivational forces to stay active in making their vision of societal change become reality. They articulated that community action based on facilitating inner change is their long-term mission which gives them meaning in life. In conclusion, community advocates holding both representations combined were not faced with an inherent conflict, which might make it easier for them to keep being proactively engaged.

It is worth pointing out that this present study can be distinguished from other research on social representations theory in terms of the demarcation of representations. Scholars have typically conceptualized complexity as existing within one single social representation (Moscovici, 1973; Duveen and Moscovici,



2000; Buijs et al., 2012). This research study showed that different representations, which each can in principle stand alone, can be built on each other to represent complex issues. This study can thus contribute to the conceptualization of social representation and possible dynamics between distinct representations.

## 5.2. Adding Insights to the Transition Literature: Facilitating Inner Change as a Model of Transition

This empirical study offers insights into community advocates' representations of change and takes the understanding of models of transition fostered by intentional communities a step further. Looking at behavioural implications of these models might also help to better understand their transformative power in terms of contributing to societal change towards sustainability.

Linking the gathered insights to the transition literature shows that the representation of exploring sustainable practices corresponds with the transition model that is frequently described relating to community-based initiatives. This common model states that community-based initiatives, including intentional communities, form niches where alternative practices are experimented with (Geels, 2010; Seyfang and Smith, 2007). More specifically, community-based initiatives are "developing new ideas and practices, experimenting with new systems of provision, [and] enabling people to express 'alternative' green and progressive values" (Seyfang and Haxeltine, 2010, p. 384). It is argued that, in doing so, they develop innovative practices that can be established on a large scale through replication, scaling-up, and translation of particular alternative practices. This may cause changes to mainstream institutions leading to societal change (Seyfang and Haxeltine, 2010). It became evident that this common model of transition resembles the model based on the representation of exploring sustainable practices expressed by community advocates who participated in this study. Since the interviewees were from different European countries, and they were drawing on the same model despite their diverse social and cultural contexts, the findings suggest that this model is considered as a common model in different settings and is widely applied. In conclusion, this study underscores the literature on the common model of transition and highlights its transformative power in terms of wide applicability. But the study also shows new insights on the common model's possible limitations. As shown in the findings, community advocates expressed conflicting normative and cognitive views. Again, despite coming from different countries in Europe with different social structures the interviewees all mentioned these conflicting views which shows that such tensions might arise in a wide range of settings. The study suggested that community advocates need to cope with these tensions resulting in possible behaviour of lack of action and avoidance of the issue.

In case of community advocates stopping their engagement, sustainable practices would not get explored nor implemented in wider society. Hence, potential processes of change would be stopped at the very first step. Based on these aspects, this model's transformative power is potentially limited.

Looking at the model from a broader view, its transformative power might be affected by other factors as well. To state a prevalent example mentioned by the interviewees, the model appeared to be very dependent on the involvement of other actors outside of intentional communities in order to spread and implement sustainable ideas and practices. As all community advocates raised strong doubts about other actors picking up their practices, changes on larger scales in the near future could be very much hindered, which might further limit the model's transformative power.

In contrast, the second model of transition presented in this study, which is based on the facilitation of inner change, has received very little attention in research on sustainability thus far (Bäckstrand and Lövbrand, 2019). Only recently, sustainability scholars have considered that change has to come from the inside out in order to lead to long-lasting and profound changes (Horlings, 2015). The realization of people that all life is of interconnected nature is seen as a shift towards a deep ecological consciousness (Macy and Brown, 1998). This is argued to be a prerequisite to bring about the changes in worldview and value systems that are needed for a societal change towards sustainability (Sefa Dei, 2016). However, only a fraction of this work has been explicitly related to sustainability. Pisters et al. (2020), as some of the only scholars, have reasoned that community-based initiatives constitute places where people learn to incorporate an awareness of interconnection. This fosters compassion and creativity to change ways of living towards sustainability (Pisters et al., 2019). The present study showed that the interviewees saw inner change as the foundation of creating change, which was followed by the exploration of sustainable practices. Hence, the study suggests that the model based on facilitating inner change and exploring sustainable practices can be seen as a distinct model of transition. Regarding its applicability, this approach might be feasible to apply in society at large and in different social and cultural contexts. Despite the interviewees' social and cultural differences, they all believed in the universal applicability of this approach. They mentioned that every person had the capacity for inner change and that regardless of social or cultural circumstances, the realization that all beings were connected would be the same for all humans. Moreover, the study adds insights on the model's transformative power in terms of community advocates' possible behaviour. As presented in the findings, community advocates were not confronted with an inherent conflict. Their behaviour is likely to be characterized by continuous and consistent engagement. In regards to these aspects, the transformative power of this model might not be crucially limited in contributing to changes in society.

Looking at the transformative power of this model from a broader view, the dependency on other actors in society getting involved in the action seemed to be much lower in comparison to the common model of transition. Community advocates strongly believed that people who had experienced inner change would inspire change in others and spread ideas about sustainable lifestyles outside of intentional communities. This would eventually result in a ripple effect on large scales in society. This factor might add to the model's transformative power. However, several interviewees raised that such profound changes based on the approach of inner change were time-consuming. This means that the model might not be sufficiently effective at meeting the timescales required, for example, by the stipulations of the Paris Agreement (Rogeli et al., 2016). In conclusion, the model based on facilitating inner change is potentially limited in its transformative power in the short term.

A recommendation for transition work results from this. Taking community advocates' perspectives on how societal change can happen into account might be helpful both in transition research and at the practical level, especially for environmental policy and governance. The models of transition underpinning community action can offer fruitful ideas and critical observations to other transition measures on the macro level. Limitations of approaches, such as the ones of the common model based on exploring sustainable practices uncovered in this study, can point to improving ways of working. Moreover, models that have not been covered sufficiently, such as the model based on facilitating inner change found in this study, can potentially add innovative insights to the debate.

## 6. Conclusion

This study explored the role of intentional communities as drivers of societal change towards sustainability. It contributes to a better understanding of community action in several ways. First, the findings demonstrate that community advocates' ideas and visions about societal change differ and that multiple social representations of change exist. By drawing on semi-structured in-depth interviews with seven community advocates from six different European countries, two representations were identified: a representation focusing on exploring sustainable practices and a representation highlighting the facilitation of inner change. Moreover, the findings show that community advocates relate to and cope with challenges that they face in their action in different ways. It was found that community advocates holding the first representation appeared to hold contradicting views; a possible way of coping with them might be lack of action and avoidance of the issue. In comparison, community advocates emphasizing the need for inner change seemed to have rather consistent views, which might make it easier for them to engage in community action in practice. Overall, insights into approaches of community action might add critical considerations to the debate on sustainability transitions and the development of transition approaches on the macro level. On the one hand, taking community advocates' perspectives on how societal change can happen into account might be helpful in developing holistic transition approaches. On the other hand, looking at challenges people engaged in transition work are faced with and resulting possible behaviour can show strengths and weaknesses of different approaches regarding their transformative power to foster structural changes in society.

From a methodological perspective, the study illustrates the usefulness of social representations theory as a conceptual lens. The theory proved to be suitable to explore community advocates' different approaches of community action, as it enabled to uncover the interviewees' complex normative, cognitive and affective views and inconsistencies between them.

Looking ahead, some suggestions for future research can be made, based on the findings and limitations of this study. Since the movement of intentional communities is broad and composed by many individuals drawing on a wide range of complex social representations, the study's findings are limited in terms of comprehensiveness and depth. A more in-depth investigation of the identified

social representations as well as other representations that might be prevalent in the intentional community movement might add more valuable insights to the debate on effective approaches for societal change. Furthermore, more research is required on the topic of community advocates' behaviour since this study needs to be understood as only an exploration of possible behaviour. For example, with the help of behavioural theories it might be able to uncover psychological challenges and examine behavioural patterns in more detail. This knowledge might be useful in finding approaches that take such challenges into consideration and help to stimulate action. Lastly, while this study only very briefly touches upon potential strengths and weaknesses of different approaches of community action, it could be interesting to critically investigate their wider transformative power. Qualitative case studies as well as quantitative studies measuring the impact of community action might help to make sense of their power in fostering large-scale, radical and structural changes in society towards sustainable futures.

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