

**Towards an “Embedment” approach to Social Entrepreneurship:  
Insights on class, “movementality” and resource mobilization from  
Tamera ecovillage, Portugal**

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**1. Ecovillages, Social and Solidarity Economy and Social Entrepreneurship**

This article is part of a case study-based project analyzing the contextual factors and processes that prevent the development of decommodified realms of production and exchange from being co-opted by the dynamics of reproduction of capitalism.<sup>1</sup> Tamera, an ecovillage founded in 1995 in the municipality of Odemira, southwestern Alentejo, Portugal, has the goal of becoming a replicable model for sustainable post-capitalist human settlements. In a pamphlet produced for visitors in the summer of 2015, Tamera describes itself as practicing solidarity economy. The basis for such claim is that, since its foundation in 1995, it has been gradually building a decommodified realm of economic activity, based on community building, the reconstruction of the commons and the weaving of sustainable synergies between humans and nature. This article questions Tamera’s self-identification as a solidarity economy initiative. It argues that it represents instead an example of what I hereby define as the “embedment” approach to social entrepreneurship, in which human-nature synergies and social and cultural capital are central assets in the development of a strategy of social and economic sustainability.

**1.1. Ecovillages as “testfields” of radical environmentalism**

Ecovillages have been gaining prominence, since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, as sites of research, demonstration and training on social and environmental technologies that support the development of sustainable human settlements. These initiatives can be defined as communitarian endeavors that seek to integrate human activities with the natural world, as well as gain some measure of control over its resources, in a way that is supportive of lasting human development and environmental sustainability (Gilman, 1991; Dawson, 2006). The concept of ecovillages includes settlements as diverse as villages in developing countries that base their activities on traditional ecological knowledge (e.g. Colufifa, Senegal); farmland communes with sustainable living structures (e.g. Svanhlm, Denmark and Eartheaven, USA); eco-architectural town experiments (e.g. Auroville, India) and spiritual communities with ecological infrastructures (e.g. Damanhur, Italy and Wongsamit Ashram, Thailand) (Kunze and Avelino, 2015). It also includes intentional communities like Tamera, which self-identifies primarily as a training and experiential site whose educational initiatives focus on the social and cultural aspects of intentional community building, as well as on the synergies between

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<sup>1</sup> This project is funded by a postdoctoral research grant from FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia (Portuguese Science and Technology Foundation).

this dimension and the economic, ecological and technological aspects of such process. Despite their diversity, ecovillages share the purpose of being “laboratories for the future”, “testfields” for a structural transition towards a socio-economic systems based on post-carbon technology and the reconstitution of the commons (Berzano, 1998; Minor, 1998; Merrifield, 2006; Thomas and Thomas, 2013; Dregger and Joubert, 2015; Meltzer, 2015). They also share a radical environmental approach, rooted in a holistic cosmivision that regards ecology, community building, science and spirituality as integrated, inseparable fields (Harland and Keepin, 2014).

## **1.2. Social and solidarity economy: Empowerment and “movementality”**

The concept of solidarity economy is used to give visibility to the social dynamics that embed social economy initiatives emerging from grassroots resistance to socio-economic exclusion, as well as the rolling back of labour rights and the welfare state (Estivill, Bernier and Valadou, 1997; Singer, 2002; Amaro, 2010). The social economy comprises a “third sector” of organizations, between the market and the public sector, whose purpose is to increase empowerment and participation in the economy among its members or wider community (Defourny, 2009). It is rooted in practices of economic self-organization and welfare provision from the European labour movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, including a range of institutional forms such as associations, cooperatives and mutualities (Defourny and Borzaga, 2001). In this framework, the delivery of social value is understood as a process that articulates social economy initiatives with the state, the market and civil society (Quintão and Parente, 2015). Solidarity economy promotes forms of economic empowerment and welfare provision, alternative to those promoted by the welfare state, which are based on voluntary and egalitarian links between individuals who recognize each other as bound by an interdependence that is not prescribed nor inherited, (Estivill, Bernier and Valadou, 1997; Laville, 1999). Such interdependence supports practices, based on solidarity and reciprocity, which promote a realm of decommodified economic activity in which the sustainability of economic initiatives becomes more determined by the recognition of social value and support provided by the community, than by efficiency in the allocation of economic resources or maximization of revenue generation (Amaro, 2010). Implicit to the recognition of such interdependence is also the promotion of participatory and inclusive forms of democratic governance, not only within individual economic initiatives, but also in the networks that they are part of (Singer, 2002; Amaro, 2010; RIPESS, 2013). Although the promotion of environmental sustainability is also a core characteristic of solidarity economy, such goal is framed in reference to the promotion of human wellbeing and empowerment (Amaro, 2010). Among such initiatives, one may find traditional social economy organizations, such as production and consumption cooperatives, as well as more innovative frameworks, such as cooperative networks of micro entrepreneurs, grassroots-managed microcredit funds, time banks or barter networks (Cunha and Santos, 2011).

The construction of economic practices based on perceived interdependence is connected to the recognition of physical and social proximity between individuals, which indicates that embedment in place-based dynamics of collective action is a central feature of solidarity economy (Laville, 2009: 25; Defourny, 2001). Rakopoulos (2015) identifies such embedment with what he calls “movementality”. This can be defined as a transformative learning process that links the material and moral aspects of production, commercialization and consumption with social mobilization and political education. Such process is grounded in a Marxist political economy outlook, focusing on the power structures and dynamics that underlie the material conditions of production and the reproduction of everyday life. The core orientation of “movementality” is the raising of consciousness about such structures and dynamics, as well as the envisioning of alternatives to the status quo that entail a democratic participation in economic activity and a fairer distribution of resources. It also implies the mobilization of the community to implement them through immediate action in a form of direct democracy, leading to the emergence of economic initiatives coordinated by the logic of reciprocity and the common good, instead of private interest.

Ecovillages share core characteristics of solidarity economy, namely the promotion of a realm of decommodified economic activity based on the recognition of interdependence, which is at the heart of intentional community-building. The promotion of transformative learning processes is also a core aspect of their mission. However, it is questionable if such processes can be identified as a form of “movementality”. The core purpose of ecovillages is not to increase participation in the economy, facilitate access to welfare provision or even improve human welfare “per se”. Their radical environmental outlook and focus on the embedment of human activities in the natural world implies a vision of sustainability and social transformation in which the promotion of such synergies is given priority over the tackling of material and symbolic inequalities.

### **1.3. More than “business methods” and social innovation**

Ecovillages may be identified as a form of social entrepreneurship, given their core mission of promoting social and environmental sustainability. Social entrepreneurship is generally defined as the process of seizing opportunities to shift economic resources out of an area of lower and into an area of higher efficiency, so as to deliver, in an innovative and superior manner, social value in a way that has transformative and lasting social impact (Leadebeater, 1996; Bornstein, 2007; Elkington and Hartigan, 2008; Quintão and Parente, 2015: 56-7). Still, existing approaches to social entrepreneurship are too limited to properly define the form of social entrepreneurship promoted by ecovillages. One may identify a ‘business methods’ approach to social entrepreneurship, which borrows from the outlook and methods of market-driven enterprises (Peredo and McLean, 2006: 58; Quintão and Parente, 2015: 56). It defines social entrepreneurship as an “innovative approach to the mission of delivering community services” which maximizes “revenue generation from programs by applying principles from for-profit businesses without neglecting the core mission” (Pomerantz, 2003:

26). One may also identify an “innovation-centred” approach, anchored in Schumpeter’s theories of entrepreneurship and social change, which focuses on the social entrepreneur’s capacity to produce fundamental changes in the social sector by promoting innovative strategies for addressing the causes of societal problems (Quintão and Parente, 2015: 58). Both approaches are limited by a neo-classical conceptual bias that neglects the socio-economic and institutional context in which such process takes place (Amaro, 2015: 12; Estivill, 2015: 24-25; Quintão and Parente, 2015: 54-6). Such limitation calls for “multidimensional” perspectives on social entrepreneurship (Mort, Weerawardena and Carnegie, 2003). I hereby suggest an “embedding” approach, which contextualizes initiatives in a framework that connects ecology, the political and institutional dimension and the social and cultural capital of stakeholders the actors that take part in them. Such approach focuses on the role such connections plays in the development of strategies of economic and social sustainability. Economic sustainability is hereby defined as the capacity to mobilize the material and financial resources necessary for the organization to sustain the structure and dynamics necessary for the pursuit of its mission. Social sustainability is conceptualized as the capacity to balance the interests of multiple stakeholders, human and non-human and further the social purpose of the organization in the face of complexity (Op.cit, Amaro, 2010).

#### **1.4. Ecovillages and the post-materialist “habitus” of postmodernity**

The multiplication of ecovillages in recent decades can be interpreted as the result of the emergence, among sectors of the upper and middle classes of industrialized countries, of a set of post-materialist values which indicate a changing “habitus”, resulting from what Inglehart (1997) calls a process of “postmodernization”. The author claims that, as modernization helped industrialized societies move from poverty to economic security, this led to a shift in life goals from survival and material security towards self-actualization and quality of life. Inglehart found these values to be most prevalent, and cross-nationally consistent, among the more highly educated, more articulate generations that grew up with affluence and choice in Western Europe and North America during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. The experience of being socialized into material affluence and high cultural capital, while confronted with mounting evidence of undesirable social and environmental side effects, contributes significantly to a shift in priorities from purely material goals towards self-actualization (Berman, 1988; Tibbs, 2011). It also tends to promote a mistrust of traditional sources of spiritual, political and cultural authority, as well as an alignment of consumer and lifestyle choices with progressive, ecological and anti-big business values (Ray and Anderson, 2000). Recent research on consumer behaviour in the industrialized world found that these social sectors are also characterized by cosmopolitanism and concerns for the impact of consumer choices on environmental sustainability, intersectional equity and economic justice. They also tend to be at ease in the use of communication technologies and social networks (Carfagna et al., 2014). Implicit in this changing “habitus” is the search for a worldview and action model that represents an alternative to the logics of instrumentality

and domination that underlie modernity (Buell, 2001; Tibbs, 2011). However, there is evidence that even in economic spaces that consciously attempt to create social relations that reject dominant logics of hierarchy and power, the presence of a large cohort of individuals who share such “habitus” reproduces inequalities existing in the larger macro-economy, as they tend to be recruited through their social connections or through information available on the internet (Schor et al, 2016).

## **2. Tamera: Community building and ecosystem regeneration**

### **2.1. Internal governance: The role of “Selbstdarstellung” Forum**

The core social technology used in Tamera for internal governance is the “Selbstdarstellung Forum” (Self Expression or SD Forum), partially based on Wilhelm Reich’s “body armor” theory (Richter, 1990). The goal of SD Forum is to promote trust and transparency among community members, through a process of “de-privatization” of issues related with personal identity, human relationships, emotions, power and competition (*Op. cit.*). That happens through the inclusion of individuals in dialogical circles, in which intimacy and cooperation is created around these topics. Through this method, participants combine reasoning-based verbal communication and spontaneous physical and emotional performance through song, talk, gesture or mime to convey social situations, as well as thoughts, emotions, attitudes and steps of inner development. The Forum facilitator moderates the process and contributes with information that synthesizes what has been previously shared in the middle and supports the performer in taking new steps in inner growth, trying new roles or solving a conflict situation (*Op. cit.*). The performer is given tools and encouragement to step out of personal identification with the issue being performed and represent it as an aspect of a “global phenomenon” of which the specific situation is part. The other participants are then invited to provide “mirrors”, in which they express aspects of the situation they saw that might not be conscious to the person performing it. However, as they give feedback, they should step out of personal identification with the situation being performed, as well as with the relationship they might have with the performer. The role of Forum facilitator is attributed to people recognized as having accumulated significant experience and skills in the handling of human questions.

The purpose of this social technology is to promote dynamics of mutual witnessing and accountability through individual and collective self-reflexivity on everyday lived experience. Its aim is to make inner questions and social situations transparent, so that they can be worked on collectively. SD Forum also serves as a methodology for individual and collective self-reflective research and learning about the embodied, everyday experience of living in community. Besides, it sustains decision-making processes by giving all members the opportunity to contribute directly, as well as clarifying and solving inherent human conflicts. This process prevents the formation of a psychological and social “shadow”, as community members have the incentive to make transparent aspects of their inner and social lives that, according to the norms of mainstream society, as well as of Tamera, would be detrimental to their reputation and social standing. Part of this process implies becoming public about inner

tendencies and social situations that may contain elements of deception, distorted communication, competition, jealousy, hierarchy, hoarding or free riding. This is done in a way aimed at neutralizing the potential for conflict within the inner question or social situation, turning it into an opportunity for collective learning and for the strengthening of social cohesion. The ultimate goal is to bring subconscious motivations to the conscious level, so that conscious reasoning may guide individual and collective decision-making.

Despite such claims, it was not clear whether the self-revelation and the individual and collective “shadow work” that takes place in the Forum contains or reinforces the informal hierarchies within the community. When addressing this topic with community members, whether in the framework of interviews, in informal conversations or in public events, I was often told that the role of the Forum is exactly to be a “protected space” where those topics can be made public and worked. Further research is necessary in order to assess the degree to which Forum leaders may manipulate performances and “mirrors” to serve personal or collective goals, as well as that to which people may resort to self-censorship in order to protect or promote their standing.

### **3. Economic sustainability through embedment in a global post-materialist community**

During a public discussion round that took place in September 2015, a source from the financial team indicated that the total expenses of Tamera amounted to an average of one million Euros per year. Such expenses are covered by a need-oriented financial strategy that combines for-profit and non-profit aspects. Over 60% of the expenses are covered by the revenues from the educational and training programs of the community, seconded by donations raised among an international “Support Circle”. The core field of identification and recruitment of funders is the education and training offer of Tamera. All the programs include lectures and ‘study times’ in which the issue of fundraising for Tamera is framed as a contribution to the transition towards a post-carbon and post-capitalist economic system. The section of Tamera’s website dedicated to the “Support Circle” claims that its members are granted the status of “(...) guardians of the dream of Tamera and co-carriers of the global peace vision.”<sup>2</sup> Instead of interest or profit, the funders of Tamera see their financial investment multiplied in the form of social and symbolic capital, which includes a sense of belonging to the community.”

A source from the community’s Guest Office indicated that Tamera was visited by circa 3500 people during 2015, of which more than two-thirds were participants in educational and training programs.<sup>3</sup> Although it was not possible to obtain quantitative data on the nationality of visitors during fieldwork, I noticed, during my daily interactions with other guests, that the vast majority of participants in Tamera’s educational and training initiatives

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.tamera.org/what-is-tamera/articles/idea-of-the-support-circle/> (last retrieved March 14, 2016)

<sup>3</sup> At the time of fieldwork, Tamera didn’t have publicly available quantitative data that could discriminate between visitors and participants in educational and training programs, as well as indicate the total amount of participants in each program, either in 2015 or the previous years.

came from Germany, Austria and Switzerland, followed by North America and Israel. Community members who work in Tamera's Guest Office confirmed that this tendency has been constant for more than a decade. Most of these visitors were people whose financial standing, stage in the life cycle or professional life provided them with the financial ease and availability of time necessary to travel to Tamera and stay there for extended periods of time. The most frequent profile of visitor was that of a person experiencing a life transition, taking time off to expand horizons and think about the next step in life after ending a cycle of education, leaving an unsatisfactory job, ending an intimate relationship or entering retirement. Most of these people found out about Tamera from their own social networks, or when searching for information about intentional communities and permaculture on the internet. The second most frequent profile was that of members of intentional communities or permaculture and education projects that had close contact with Tamera.

The few Portuguese visitors had a middle-class professional background and came mostly from the metropolitan areas of Lisbon, Oporto or Coimbra. The predominance of this profile can be partially explained by the prices of the education and training programs. In 2015, participants of "Practical Work in Ecology" were required to pay 20 Euros per day to participate in the program, which corresponds to 600 or 620 Euros for a whole month. The daily rate was reduced to 15 Euros for Portuguese people. The course "Love, Sexuality and Partnership" had a seminar fee of 600 Euros, as well as a daily rate of 30 Euros for food and accommodation. For Portuguese people, the fee was reduced to 400 Euros and the daily rate to 20 Euros. The "Community Course" implied the payment of a course fee of 750 Euros, as well as a daily rate of 30 Euros for food and board. For Portuguese participants, the fee was reduced to 500 Euros and the daily rate to 20 Euros. New "joiners" pay 18 Euros a day, regardless of nationality, during the period in which they are "in education". According to data published by Instituto Nacional de Estatística (National Institute of Statistics), in 2013 about 20% of the Portuguese population lived with less than 411 Euro a month. Besides, only 4% of the people under 35 earned more than 900 Euros a month, which indicates that only a small minority of Portuguese people can afford the process.

## **Conclusion**

The radical environmental outlook that inspires the core mission of Tamera renders its self-classification as a solidarity economy initiative problematic, given the identification of this field with a Marxist and anthropocentric vision of social transformation. Instead, it is proposed that this case represents what is hereby defined as an "embedment" approach to social entrepreneurship. The economic model of Tamera shares characteristics of the "business methods" and "innovation-centred" approaches to social entrepreneurship. It combines for-profit and non-profit aspects in its need-oriented financial strategy, based on the building of an international community of like-minded supporters. Besides, it uses on-site experimentation on permaculture and renewable technologies to support the emergence of commons. However, the centrality of community-building and decommodification through

sustainable human-natural synergies indicates a distinct approach to social entrepreneurship, one that is supported by embedment in ecological and social dynamics. The social goal of this ecovillage is sustained by two factors. One of them is the abundance of sunshine and rainwater in the region, which supports soil regeneration and autonomy in water management and energy production. The other is the “postmodernizing habitus” of its supporters, drawn from sectors of the upper and middle classes of the industrialized world. Further research is necessary to understand if this approach is a trend among ecovillages or if it is specific to Tamera.

Further research is also necessary in order to assess the extent to which the governance institutions and social technologies developed in Tamera properly address issues of power dynamics and structural inequality. Their stated purpose is to undermine the formation of hierarchies and promote inclusive and participatory governance. However, the data collected indicates the presence of an informal hierarchy based on seniority and reputation. It also indicates that access to Tamera’s educational programmes, and to the community itself, is strongly dependent upon having a position within the capitalist economy that allows oneself the disposable time and income to dedicate to such purpose. These factors indicate that further avenues for research and intervention on processes of “commoning” within radical environmental initiatives should be theoretically anchored in political economy. They should also combine participant observation with a demographic and life history approaches, so as to better grasp how structural and symbolic inequalities determine participation in processes of “commoning”.

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