

Article

Becoming Part of an Eco-Community: Social and Environmental Activism or Livelihood Strategy?

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Abstract: Studying grassroots initiatives which aim to respond to environmental and social crisis is of renewed importance nowadays, in the aftermath of the 2008-9 financial crisis in southern Europe. This paper studies people's motivations for becoming part of an eco-community in Catalonia, Spain, through interviews with 29 informants. The research is part of a larger study, based on ethnographic data collected between 2013 and 2015 in 27 eco-communities. The paper shows the extent to which people who joined an eco-community were driven by ideological reasons, adopting a livelihood strategy, or by a combination of both factors in the years following the crisis. We argue that the social and economic crisis has had an impact on the factors motivating people to join these communities, with an increase in the number of people driven by materialistic motives, relative to those who joined for ideological reasons.

Keywords: eco-community; rurality; livelihood strategy; social and economic crisis; Catalonia

1. Introduction

Ecological Intentional Communities (EICs, or “eco-communities”) are well known in the literature for promoting an alternative lifestyle based on care for the environment and close human relationships. Traditionally, EICs have been seen as radical models that propose solutions to environmental deterioration (Kasper 2008). They have been conceptualized as social movements, in the sense of “alternatives to development”¹ (Escobar 2010), because they attempt to change the social order through more communal and collaborative forms of property and labour relationships (Schehr 1997). The people inside a community generally have previous experience in social movements and a background in environmental activism (Kirby 2003, p. 327).

Nevertheless, EICs are not isolated from the economic, political and social fluctuations of wider society. In this sense, we wondered whether the recent economic crisis had affected people's motivations for joining an EIC in any way. As Nogué (2012) argued, in relation to neo-rurals in Catalonia, “The rules of the game have changed radically, and it is now possible and feasible for a city person to live in the country without necessarily buying into the full ideology of the original neo-rural movement” (Nogué 2012, p. 39). Does this mean that people who join EICs do so not only from a desire to change the social order, but also as a means to cope with individual hardship? One of our informants told us the following during fieldwork:

Interviewee A-3: The shift was one or two years ago, 2012. With the social and economic crisis the demographic profile of volunteers has changed. Many more local people, from the neighborhood. People from the region who think: “After all, being at home ... looking

¹ Emphasis in original.

for a job, which doesn't exist! Sitting on the sofa and being stuck at home all day long ... I prefer to go there [the community]: at least I don't spend my money".

Interviewer: It wasn't like this before? Where do people come from?

Interviewee A-3: No way! I'm talking about one or two people who wanted to go abroad and used to think: "I'll go to a farm here in my region and afterwards I'll go abroad". What I mean is, before, of the 100 or 120 people per year who came through there were 1 or 2 from Spain. That's 1 or 2 per cent. And nowadays... it's more than half! [Laughs]. So, the issue is that the type of people has changed in these last two years, with the crisis. Many people see it as an opportunity to be a volunteer. They often say: "Given what the city has, I'll come here. I'm better off here". (Interview A-3; February 2014. Male, 41 years old, single).

The informant was the inheritor of approximately 5 hectares of land in the south of Catalonia. When he was 29 years old, after several trips related to social education and having gained experience in this field, he decided to establish a communal project based on environmental education and self-sufficiency, with international volunteers. Each year he received more than 100 volunteers, who stayed for periods ranging from 1 or 2 days to several months. Some of the volunteers became part of the community and stayed indefinitely. He calls his project an "eco-community". In the part of the conversation cited above, he told how the social and economic crisis had affected the type of people who form part of his community. Local people started to think that moving to an EIC could be an opportunity to achieve a better lifestyle. This was how we came to focus our research on the intersection between EICs and the social and economic crisis in Catalonia.

Data from the National Statistics Institute (INE) demonstrates how the aftermath of the social and economic crisis has been felt in Spain and Catalonia since 2010. The effects have included household fuel poverty, increased unemployment, and evictions resulting from mortgage defaults. Spanish and Catalan society has been left in a discouraging situation, particularly for less privileged classes. How have people managed to meet their subsistence needs? What kind of strategies have they developed to cope with this situation?

This article interrogates the extent to which people's motivations for joining EICs have changed as a result of the social and economic crisis. We argue that the aftermath of the social and economic crisis has led to greater emphasis being placed on EICs' instrumental role, in helping inhabitants to make a living, as well as altering the social conception of EICs. In order to understand this phenomenon more fully, we ask how and for what purpose participants got in touch with their community. Is it possible to attribute different demographic profiles to people who are attracted to an EIC? What kinds of lifestyle did they have prior to joining an EIC? What motivations led them to take this step? What role has the social and economic crisis played in these people's lives?

The article is structured as follows. The following section reviews the literature on the factors which have traditionally motivated people to join eco-communities. We focus on the benefits which EICs have for people, as well as the disadvantages. Section three describes the methodology used. We triangulated data from interviews with that gathered through participant observation. Section four presents the results, based on a process of coding and qualitative data analysis. To give a better answer to the questions raised by the article, this analysis is divided into subsections on housing, employment, personal motivations and the effects of the crisis. The balance between social and individual motivations is discussed. The last section discusses the effects of the social and economic crisis on EICs from the Escobar's perspective of alternatives *to* development.

2. Joining an Ecological Intentional Community

Ecological Intentional Communities (EICs) are heterogeneous settlements which aim to create better social and environmental living conditions for today's society by living together in a group. Traditionally they settle in rural areas (Meijering et al. 2007) in groups of five people or more, from different families (Metcalf 1984), building a set of social norms that reflect their ideology and values. These values are roughly classified in three sets: environmental concerns, communitarian forms of socialization, and ideological commitment to societal transformation (Cf. Ergas 2010).

Numerous studies have described the increase in eco-communities since 1990: the so-called ecovillages “boom”². This expansion is said to be due to the growing number of “adverse effects” associated with the market economy, such as an increasing levels of pollution and the exploitation of underdeveloped countries. Traditionally, eco-communities have been associated with values such as environmental care, or the desire to create a community of people who live together, in opposition to a wider, more individualistic society.

Some authors have argued that the first notion of environmental care comes from British imperialism and the management of environmental resources in India, which then spread to Africa, Australia and Canada (Barton 2001, p. 529; Grove 1990). In the mid-twentieth century, concern about the environment jumped into the political arena. This was the time of the publication of *The Limits to Growth* by the Club of Rome in 1972 (Dunlap 2006, p. 324). Environmental communities started to emerge from this point onwards (Meijering 2006). The spread of “ecovillages” all over the world was one example of this trend. Ecovillages define themselves as “human communities that sustain and regenerate their social and natural environments” (Gen-International 2013, p. 6). With this in mind, the centrality of environmental values in people’s motivations for joining an eco-community is easy to comprehend. In a broader sense, ecological concerns are widespread in today’s society, whether as a form of religion, as Dunlap (2006) claimed, or simply as moral values (Echavarren 2010).

Nevertheless, eco-communities are not just created for ecological goals. As Kirby (2003) noted in his case study of the Ithaca Ecovillage in the USA, *social motivations* outweigh environmental ones by 10 to 3 (Kirby 2003, p. 327). Modern society tends to generate a sense of isolation, disconnection and alienation for individuals, caused by a decrease in levels of association (Putnam 2000) and community bonds in general. Among eco-communities’ objectives is the aspiration to create new human relations (Andreas 2013; Ergas and Clement 2015; Metcalf and Metcalf 1996, among others). Moreover, Kirby noted that people in the eco-community expressed a general concern for “connection with other like-minded individuals and generating the sense of trust and reciprocity that a satisfying community life offers” (Kirby 2003, p. 327).

In a similar vein, Ruiu (2015) argued that entering an eco-community generates an increase in social capital. This social capital acts as a safety net, providing residents with help and security. These communities generate a particularly high level of social capital due to the physical and social aspects of their organization: communal meals, shared laundry and carpooling, to give a few examples. In relation to this, it is interesting to consider the overall social class and purchasing power of eco-communities’ members. Ruiu (2015) claimed that people who want to join an eco-community are required to have at least a medium to high level of purchasing power, due to the lack of public and private financing (Ruiu 2015, p. 640).

As mentioned above, a set of motivations for joining an eco-community discussed in the literature, along with environmental conservation and communitarian relationships, is societal change and social justice (Ergas 2010). Eco-communities present themselves as drivers of global social change, overcoming the dichotomy between nature and culture in Western societies (Kasper 2008). Nevertheless, Fotopoulos (2000) considered the impact of ecovillages to be small, arguing that they do not seem to have any influence on the billions of underprivileged people struggling to survive in the global North or South. He argued that their impact seems to be centred on people who have already solved their survival problems (Fotopoulos 2000, 2006).

Finally, from an individual perspective, eco-communities can also act as a solution to disruptive processes related to identity, such as “processes of separation or divorce that forced some reflection on the position of the individual with respect to their wider social network” (Kirby 2003, p. 327). In Kirby’s case study in the USA, situations like starting a family, having children, and the recognition of aging were also found to motivate people to join eco-communities. As he stated: “Those who are retired feel useful, and those with young families feel supported, while the children benefit from the presence of adult role models and surrogate grandparents” (ibid).

² Ecovillages is the label self-assigned from some eco-communities and represent a particular world-view dominated by Global Ecovillage Network—GEN.

3. Materials and Methods

In order to understand more fully the motivations that led people to be part of an eco-community in Catalonia, we analysed testimonies from 29 informants in 11 different eco-communities. The data collection is detailed below. Image 1 shows the communities distribution used for data collection.



Image 1. Location of EICs where we conducted interviews. The image shows the approximate geographic distribution in Catalonia of the Environmental Intentional Communities used for data collection through interviews. Each red circle symbolizes a community. Source: Prepared by the authors.

This work is part of a broader research project on EICs that aim to understand the types of communities that exist in Catalonia and their geographical distribution in the region. Data for this article was collected in three phases. In the first, preliminary phase in the summer of 2014, the first author conducted six in-depth interviews in six different communities. The aim of each interview was to collect general data on the demographic profile of the people who live in the community and each individual's current personal network in terms of support and data flow. The interviews lasted for an average of one hour, and were conducted at the community or nearby, depending on the informant's personal preference. In each case, the interview was realized after a few weeks of fieldwork in each community, so the person interviewed had a degree of familiarity with the researcher.

Secondly, in September 2015, we sent a message to a Catalan rural repopulation mailing list to invite people who wanted to change their place of residence and move to the countryside, looking for a better lifestyle within a community, to participate in the study. This list also included people who had already changed their residence in the last three years. We received 20 answers to our email over the following months (October–December 2015) from people, couples and groups who were interested in participating in the research. It is important to note here that we don't know how many people received our message. The email list is linked to a grassroots movement which campaigns for an urban exodus. After getting in touch with those who were interested, we sent them an online questionnaire. The survey was designed to collect information on key parts of their life, such as employment, housing, and similar factors, as well as their level of satisfaction with life before moving to a community. It also referred to the motivations that lead people to join a community and how they get to know about the idea of an urban exodus. We received seven answers to the questionnaires. Three of them were from people living in Barcelona who wanted to change their place of residence

and their lifestyle, and four were from people who had moved to a community in the previous seven years.

After a phase of analysis, in March 2017 we decided to explore participants’ motivations in greater depth. The questionnaires revealed some discontent, related to the crisis, but they also showed us that people’s everyday lives involved a degree of complexity that was difficult to understand over the internet. We therefore contacted the communities participating in the broader research again, either by email or telephone. We explained the idea of conducting semi-structured interviews on the topic of motivations, and asked about the possibility of visiting the communities. We entered into conversations with five of them, which resulted in 16 interviews and a two-day stay in each community. Image 2 shows fieldwork at this stage. This method also allowed us to collect some extra ethnographic material through a field diary and casual conversations focused on motivations. It is also worth noting here that some of the communities we tried to contact had dissolved.

The semi-structured interview was divided into six main sections, with the aim of collecting data on respondents’ life histories, the collective vision shared by their community, their material situation (mainly their job and household situation), and how the social and economic crisis had affected their lives. Additionally, we collected data on changes in their support network, and satisfaction with their daily lives in the eco-community. The average duration of interviews was 40 min. Despite having organized the interviews in advance, in many cases we had to persevere and almost chase each person until he or she found the time. During our stay we noted that there were high levels of activity in the communities. It is worth noting that the semi-structured interviews were conducted around Easter, which is a public holiday in Catalonia, so communities were receiving some visitors.

The 29 testimonies were recorded then transcribed and analysed with RQDA (Huang 2009), open-source software for qualitative data analysis. As a result, a coded list of items was produced, in line with our research interests. Field notes were also coded to complement the interview data.



Image 2. The fieldwork. This photo was taken during one of the semi-structured interviews at one of the Ecological Intentional Communities in north Catalonia. Source: Paula Escribano.

This paper identifies interviews with numbers and letters in order to preserve informants’ and communities’ anonymity. Table 1 summarizes the 29 cases.

Table 1. Organization of the data.

February–July 2014	October–December 2015	March–May 2017
A-1	B-7	C-14
A-2	B-8	C-15
A-3	B-9	C-16
A-4	B-10	C-17
A-5	B-11	C-18
A-6	B-12	C-19
	B-13	C-20

C-21
C-22
C-23
C-24
C-25
C-26
C-27
C-28
C-29

Note: The table shows the distribution of the interviews over the interview periods (columns). The different colours refer to the different communities. White boxes refer to interviews from people who wanted to live in a community but had not changed their place of residence yet.

4. Results

4.1. Demographic Profile of People Who Feel Attracted to Ecological Intentional Communities

We will first describe the demographic data collected on the interviewees. The average age was 34.5 years old ($n = 29$), the youngest person being 19 years old. She was an Indian volunteer who lived in a community for six months. The next youngest person was a 23-year-old Catalan man who intentionally changed his place of residence to a community near Barcelona. The oldest participant was a 48-year-old, single Catalan man who was living in a community near the city of Girona in northern Catalonia. In each of these cases (except for the volunteer whose transitory situation places her at a different level of analysis³) we can observe the homophily phenomenon related to age, that is the tendency to forms groups with people from the same age range.

In terms of sex, nine informants were female and 20 were male. This percentage reflects the distribution in the population of EICs which we observed during fieldwork. One explanation for the difference in representation could be found in the rejection some women expressed of living in a very “masculine environment”, as they called it. However, we found that men also made similar statements, which suggests that this rejection may be associated with one’s personality more than with biological sex:

When we came here the first few times there were six guys living here, and everything here was like ... the meat, the wine ... and so on. There were meetings where there were “big personalities” ... There were levels of testosterone that we couldn’t fit in with. Although, I mean everyone was very loving and we were very comfortable, you know? But we were comfortable, but not, like, to live here. (Interview C-21; May 2017. Male, 47 years old. Married with 3 kids).

Moving on to consider levels of education, 21 interviewees had been to university (one of them had left university in order to dedicate all of his/her time to the community). One had secondary school studies, two had vocational qualifications and one had completed primary school ($n = 25$). We have no information about the level of education of four cases. When we explored disciplines in more depth, we found a range of subjects of study, but engineering stood out as particularly common. It is also interesting to point out that the informant from interview C-27, who had only completed primary school, is one of the clearest cases of using communities as a means to change one’s course in life. He came to EICs to escape from a life he did not consider appropriate, involving drugs and alcohol.

The place of origin of interviewees included 16 from Catalonia, six from the rest of Spain, three from other European countries and four from South America and India ($n = 29$). All those who were born outside Europe had already been living in Catalonia before moving to the community. For those

³ She is the only volunteer case in the sample. Whenever possible we tried to contact people who lived in the communities on a permanent basis. However, our experience showed us that many of the volunteers are potential residents of the communities.

from Europe the situation was different: in all cases, people (whole families) moved to Spain to enter the communities, having seen on the internet that it was easier to move to an EIC in Spain and Portugal, and so to achieve a more sustainable way of life. One of the families was even organizing trips from the Netherlands to the community to show people how it was possible to live an alternative way of life.

Finally, when analyzing participants' social situation, we were surprised not to find single parent families amongst the families with children in the interview sample. The literature notes that EICs tend to act as networks of mutual support (Ruiu 2016), which often come into play at times of identity disruption, such as during separation or divorce (Kirby 2003). However, 16 of the testimonies came from single people, five from couples (married and unmarried) and the remaining eight were from couples with kids. No other form of family was identified during fieldwork (e.g., three people caring for a child). Nevertheless, we did observe cases of shared responsibility being taken for food and childcare. Examples observed included picking children up from school, spending time with them and feeding them. However, ultimately, responsibility always fell on the parents.

4.2. What Leads People to Join an Eco-Community?

We will now describe people's situations prior to joining the eco-communities, and the motivations which led them to make this move.

4.2.1. Employment and Housing

We found distinct groups within our sample of informants, in terms of their employment and housing situations before moving to the community (four people did not respond). Considering employment, we identified four categories:

- Good economic situation ($n = 8$)

This group of cases included people who'd had a job before moving to the community. The job was characterized by a high salary (identified as such by the informants), a long-term contract and a generally positive evaluation of their work. When the community was close to the informant's work place, they typically continued to carry out their work, while usually reducing the number of working hours. The range of jobs varied from an engineer, a computer assistant and a blacksmith, to teachers and drivers. All of them were working in urban settings, mostly in companies with salaried jobs.

In this group, people typically argued that the aim of moving to an environmental community was to achieve a better lifestyle. They decided to make a "change of life" (*cambio vital*), in their own words, from the starting point of a stable economic position. In these cases, earning money was not a motivation for the change. In the process of decision making, how they would use their time is an important factor. The following interview excerpt illustrates this.

I worked in Barcelona's Provincial Council, giving lessons on Chinese medicine. Then I opened an office on the *Rambla de Catalunya*. My life was so cool! I had finished my studies, I was young ... my wife was also working. Then the children came and also the idea of parenting. You don't see it until you have it. I thought that it wasn't going to happen to me. Sometimes, when I was working and between therapy sessions, I had one or two free hours. Lost hours. And I started to ask myself: What the fuck am I doing here? How much would I pay to be with my child? It'll always be more than I earn. (Interview C-21; May 2017. Male, 47 years old. Married with 3 kids).

- Bad jobs: I have a job, but a "bad" one ($n = 8$)

This group of people had a job before moving to an eco-community, but they valued it as a "bad" job. Most of them left their job once they moved to the community, but they resorted to it at times of need, as one member explains: "A few days ago, I went back to my waitressing job because I did not have any money. I lasted four days. Now I value ploughing the earth or putting quicklime on the walls more" (Interview C-26; May 2017. Female, 26 years old, single).

In some cases, people held two or three jobs at the same time. They said that while working like this it was difficult to have economic stability. The following testimony is one of these cases. The interviewee was able to leave two of his three part-time jobs after moving to the community: "I was working part-time in three positions. It was a little stressful to have to coordinate all the work. As a result, I spent three years without having holidays" (Interview B-12, October 2015, Male, 35 years old, Single). The levels of precarity suffered by informants varied from total instability, to having a low income with no sense of job security, to higher levels of social protection. However, the element that united them was their lack of satisfaction with their job.

- Unemployed ($n = 8$)

This group did not have a job before moving to the community. In some cases, they had arrived just after a migratory process within Europe. They had been working abroad and decided to come back. There were also cases of people who had been travelling for pleasure, mostly in South America, and had come back with the intention of making a life in a community. This kind of people didn't want to look for a job. They preferred to try to create a communal economy inside the community. This group also included young people who couldn't find a job after their studies.

After finishing my studies in environmental sciences, I was looking for a job related to my field, but I did not find anything. Everything I found was environmental education (an area that I do not want to dedicate myself to). I did some occasional work that did not satisfy me. I did a Permaculture course and I started to work as a course coordinator in a self-sufficiency laboratory. I did not like it. I decided to travel to Australia, where I was doing WWOOF⁴ (volunteering on farms in exchange for food) and I decided there that on my return I would start my own project. (Interview B-11; October 2015, Female, 27 years old, single).

- Job choice ($n = 2$)

There were two cases which were difficult to place in the other groups. As well-educated people, with large personal networks, both of the cases had the potential to get a good job, but they had decided from the beginning not to do this. These two cases had jobs in order to earn some money that would enable them to achieve their community goals. They had multiple skills and when they needed money they had worked as electricians, computer technicians and gardeners, among other occupations. They had even refused good job offers because of their ideological commitment. We will explore these cases further later, in relation to the impacts of the economic crisis.

In summary, the eco-communities' members had multiple labour situations, as Figure 1 shows. An initial reading would suggest that people with a good job will not use EICs for instrumental reasons, and that only people with either a "bad" job or without one will need the material support of these communities. Nevertheless, if we observe what people say about the impact of the social and economic crisis, in some cases the working conditions (salaries, working hours, etc.) of people in "good" jobs worsened with the crisis. In other cases, people without jobs are not necessarily lacking employment because of the crisis. In some cases their lifestyles do not fit closely with stable employment, and consequently they argue that they have not felt the consequences of the crisis. These cases did not join the community to change their lives, but to keep the same lifestyle.

⁴ World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms

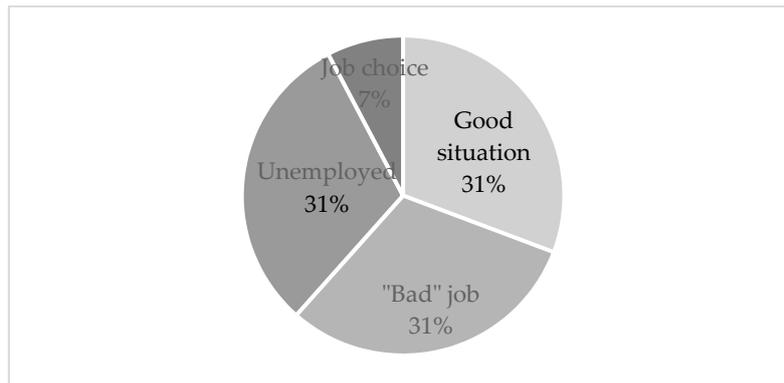


Figure 1. Chart showing employment before moving to an eco-community. Source: Prepared by the authors.

Apart from work, housing is another crucial element in making the decision to move to an eco-community. Upon analysing the testimonies in relation to housing conditions, we were able to distinguish three main groups.

- Have their own place to live ($n = 20$)

This group includes people who had their own place to live before moving to the community. It excludes parents' homes, which form an autonomous group. Amongst those who had housing, we were able to differentiate two clear sub-groups. In the first sub-group the majority were people who paid rent or a mortgage for living there ($n = 15$). This information is crucial to help us understand if moving to an EIC causes an increase or decrease in the costs of living. The amount of rent paid varied depending on location, size of the housing and other circumstances. For this group of people, moving to an eco-community meant an economic saving. When talking about saving, an informant at the community commented that: "Living in the community reduces living expenses. You make a meal for everyone. If you turn on the living-room light, seven or eleven people enjoy it. Everybody pays for this light" (Interview C-23. May 2017. Male, 42 years old. Single). Of course, the extent to which this is the case depends on the model of the community in terms of cohabitation structure and human organization.

The second sub-group is made up of people who didn't pay for their housing ($n = 5$), including people who were squatting and some who had inherited from family. For these people, excluding squatting communities, changing their residence generally supposed an increase in the cost of living. Testimony C-26 focused on this issue, but this case justified the change in terms of quality of living. "In Barcelona all of my food was recycled [leftover food given away for free] from ecological stores. Usually people are happier, but life has become more expensive for me. Now I pay €150 and I get around by car ... but I have gained in quality [of life]" (Interview C-26; May 2017. Female, 26 years old, single). As the informant pointed out in her testimony, using a car is also an extra expense due to the geographical location of eco-communities. A vision the two sub-categories share is the idea of living close to nature, with increased levels of self-sufficiency and reduced living expenses.

- Living in the parents' home ($n = 5$)

This group was made up of people who were living at their parents' house before moving to the community. Although in most cases they were young people who had moved out of the family home for the first time when they moved to the EIC, there was one case who had undergone family reunification due to his economic situation before joining the community. This case returned to his parents' home with his wife and their daughter. The couple shared the desire to leave the family home. Young people consider EICs—particularly the politically-oriented ones—a good opportunity to live with similar people in a less expensive way than in the city (Escribano et al. forthcoming).

- Without a place to live ($n = 4$)

This group refers to people who did not have a place to live before moving to the community. They were living as nomads—as they self-identify—or staying at friends' homes. For them, finding a community provided a solution to a difficult situation. As seen in interview C-18, eco-communities are generally more able and willing to include people than conventional communities. They are open to exchanging a place to live and even food, in return for work. Their structural conditions (ibid) enable them to do this.

I think it's a place [an EIC] where the tolerance and acceptance of different ideas is higher than average and ... I also think they are like organizations that are not looking to [charge] rent and sell a meal. They think more about human resources that can give something of an injection of ... energy to work. Ideas, projects, organizing or cleaning. So, I believe that in this type of community there's less of a vision of profit in relation to people. It is easier to establish exchanges. I'll give you my labor, you just feed me. (Interview C-18; April 2017, Male, 39 years old, single).

In his case it was this level of tolerance in the EIC which made him move from a nomadic life to a stable one, at least for a while.

Figure 2 summarizes the informants' housing conditions. Our initial impression might be similar to when we first considered employment: people without housing will need the communities more. But again, some participants were nomads or in continuous movement due to their lifestyle, and on the other hand, there were people who had been renting a house but, because of changes in their employment conditions, their thoughts about housing had also changed. The Spanish Constitution recognizes housing and employment as two of society's basic needs, so analysing these key factors allows us to better understand the different types of people who feel attracted toward eco-communities. Although this group is not homogeneous, at least two patterns can be identified: people who came to EICs because they wanted to change their lifestyle and people who felt attracted to them in order to maintain their lifestyles. This makes it clear that apart from ideology and values, there are different material situations that can help trigger the move to join an eco-community.

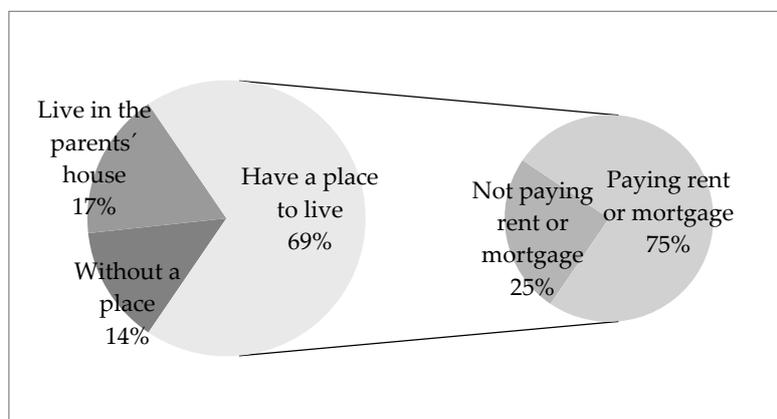


Figure 2. Chart showing housing before moving to an eco-community. Source: Prepared by the authors.

4.2.2. Links between the Social and Economic Crisis and the Motivations of People Joining EICs

When we asked people directly about the topic of the economic crisis, responses were very diverse. There were those whose employment had been negatively affected by the crisis, and people who had not experienced this, because their situation was not as dependent on market fluctuations. Moreover, we believe it is important to observe not only people's perceptions of how the crisis has affected them, but also how the crisis has helped change their ideological position in relation to EICs. In this sense, the various reactions could be divided into two main tendencies. The first group included people who felt that their social motivations and interest in living in a "different way" (as

they often said) originated a long time before the crisis. They had been involved in social movements and activism, and when the crisis came it intensified their belief in the current social system's failure.

The second group consists of people who recognized that the crisis affected their way of thinking. In the aftermath of the crisis, they began to value their way of life differently. As the following testimony exemplifies, the shift usually implied recognizing the worth of "living with less":

We no longer think of living in a capricious way. Our hope is to be able to live in an austere way, but without having to suffer or starve. Because with the crisis we have discovered that we do not need much more than the basics to live. And for us, quality of life means forests, good people to have fun with, and lots of love (Interview B-7; October 2017, Male, 28 years old, married with one child).

As we observed during the analysis of housing and employment, groups with different characteristics appear: those who continued with their lifestyle and those who changed their way of thinking. We argue that the consequences of the financial crisis have contributed toward a change of lifestyle in the second group: those whose way of thinking changed. This group of people who were newly attracted to the communities had different motivations to the group that was already there, at least at the time of joining the community.

These differences relate to the relative import of social and individual motivations, as we will see below.

4.3. *What Is Sought in an Eco-Community?*

When asking people why they would like to move to an eco-community, or why they made the move, a smile normally appeared on their faces. With a wistful look, their personal story began:

We would like to change our way of life because we want to be more self-sufficient, more free. We want to self-manage all aspects of everyday life: from food, energy, health to education. We cannot do all this alone. We would like to share all of this, find a community which shares and makes decisions in an open and democratic way. We would like to live in Catalonia, near the mountains. With people who like to live in a group and communicate feelings and ideas. People who dedicate their time to the community and care (Interview B-7; October 2017, Male, 28 years old, married with 1 child).

People's motivations are not usually unidimensional. As we saw in interview B-7, the aspiration for freedom, self-management and self-sufficiency is combined with a desire for nature, living near to the mountains and sharing with a group of people. In the remainder of this section, we will explore each of these motivations in greater depth.

- Living in nature

Cited in all of the testimonies, the desire to live near to "nature" was one of the strongest motivations leading respondents to change their place of residence. But what did informants understand by nature? What concepts are associated with this term?

When we explore the testimonies, the opposition between nature and city becomes very clear. Elements like noise, visual overload, stress, and the quality of food are associated with complexity, lack of mental and physical health, not taking care of themselves, losing control of time and loneliness. Conversely, forests, mountains and rural life are associated with calm, happiness, cooperation, and a sense of having time. This belief changes depending on whether the respondent had been living in a big city, had moved from the city to the countryside a while ago, or had grown up in a medium-sized town or small village. People's prior experiences were also important influences. Those who expressed the largest number of positive categories related to rural living, in opposition to negative urban ones, were people who had come from big cities. Furthermore, people who had been living in rural areas for some years recognized that there were higher levels of stress in the community than they had expected: "The truth is that I feel more stressed than I thought, but this is because we have started a business, not because it is in the countryside" (Interview B-11;

October 2015. Female, 27 years old, single). This suggests that respondents idealized their future lifestyles in the countryside, and thought that if they changed their place of residence, the pace of their life would also change.

- Communitarian way of life

The other element common to all the discourses is the desire to share this experience with other human beings, but not with just any group of people. The group should share some values; in their own terms, “the core values” of the person who is planning to move. Of these, cooperation, communication, willingness to share, empathy and care for nature are the values which are cross-sectional across all types of EICs. Values like spirituality, love for children and being politically active are specific to some communities.

The tendency to idealize social relationships is present in most of the testimonies. With more shared time, “good relationships” are thought to develop in the countryside. In contrast, relationships in the city are full of negative connotations: characterized by adjectives like solitary, empty, stressful, competitive, and individual, among others:

Well, observing the panorama that is all around us. When you see so much competitiveness, so much individualism, you miss being surrounded by your people. By your closest people. Nowadays this is everything ... right? Even family is not close. I believe it is natural in humans. We are beings ... we are made to live with [each other]... We are social beings, living in a community or ... living with, or being close to other humans, establishing horizontal relationships, co-existing well. All of this has gone ... Socially, historically it has been transformed. The situation that we can observe today is so negative, right? (Interview C-29; April 2017, Male, 38 years old, married with a child).

Together with the polarized notion of personal relationships in the city versus those in the countryside, informants repeatedly expressed this idea of social relationships having been transformed from the past to the present. The idea is that humans need social relations, but *good* ones, which foster co-existence based on non-hierarchical ties. These good relationships were located by participants in the past, and with the coming of neoliberalism (this did not appear in the C-29 interview extract, but is present in the general discourse), social relations have been perverted, especially in cities. Based on this idea, EICs appear as spaces to recreate and recover these types of relationships.

- Having a child

Our research supported Kirby (2003)’s observation that having a child is a turning point which influences the process of deciding to move to an eco-community. We can make a distinction between people whose reasons for moving into a community were related to their children’s education; those who sought the social support of other families in raising their children (in this case the support is for the parents); and people who didn’t have a home before coming to the EIC and were looking for a stable place to live because of maternity/ paternity.

- Downsizing: “Living with less”

As interview B-7 demonstrates at the beginning of this section, being more self-sufficient and having more freedom as a result was one of people’s motives for moving to an eco-community. Living in an eco-community was associated with a simpler and more human lifestyle, lived out on a smaller scale. We often observed people from outside of the communities—sometimes visitors, and sometimes participants of the activities offered by one community—comment on how good community members’ lifestyle was. But, compared to what? An alternative to what?

At this point it is worth mentioning the collective conception of eco-communities as an island (Andreas 2013), they are envisaged as if their inhabitants did not have relations of dependence with the rest of society, particularly in the economic field. Nevertheless, self-sufficiency and self-management are related to economic savings: to lower levels of dependence, more work in the community and less externalization of activities. A sense of sharing is also related to this idea of

saving. Interview C-24 referred to that idea when she talked about the geographical location of the community, food production and shared costs.

We share our energy. In a sense ... being far from the village also minimalizes your consumption so much. Because you're here, you fancy a croissant, but I'm not going to make the trip down. You think about it three times before you go out. And also you realize ... you need fewer and fewer things, everything, all the accessories. You do not have the direct stimulus here all the time. We buy food together and eat very well. And theoretically from the garden: if it works out well, we will save a lot. I would not have a vegetable garden by myself. I'm sure my partner would have his garden. I wouldn't do it alone. (Interview C-24; April 2017, Female, 35 years old, living in a couple with a child).

What is common to all of these motivations? While recognizing the heterogeneity within EICs and their inhabitants' varying degree of opposition to 'mainstream' society (Metcalf 1984), we found that there was something missing from the 29 testimonies analysed (at least to the degree that is reflected in the international literature): the desire to change the world, and the search for utopia. We do not want to conclude without reflecting on this point. We contend that the severe economic crisis led to a shift from a desire to change the social order to wanting to "change *my* lifestyle" (authors' emphasis).

Personal Interests and Social Causes

Analysing motivations in terms of the tension between personal interests and social causes is not a simple matter. During conversations with the communities' inhabitants it was common to talk about both types of motive at the same time. However, when looking at the testimonies in greater depth, a few significant factors emerged. During analysis of testimonies in relation to the question, "how does the EIC's objective (living in a more sustainable way) relate to the quality of life of their inhabitants?" we saw that 25 out of 29 testimonies stressed the need to improve their quality of life. "I could no longer live in the city, without finding work, my bad relationship with my partner: it was a turning point" (Interview B-11; October 2015, Female, 27 years old, single); "I do not like the noise, the overload of visual, sound and information stimuli in the cities" (Interview B-9; October 2017, Female, 39 years old, single); "I knew that I did not like living in a flat or in the city because I feel that it absorbs me and I stop taking care of myself, having time for myself and enjoying other living things" (Interview B-10; October 2017, Female, 25 years old, single); "I was looking for a place nearer to nature, a small village ... I was really fed up with the city, with relationships with people in the city" (Interview C-19; April 2017, Female, 27 years old, living with a partner); "We have improved our quality of life totally, completely. And then, at the level of human relationships ... the fact that we're living with close neighbours and sharing spaces and working together ... Well, it's also a joy" (Interview C-29; April 2017, Male, 28 years old, married with a child).

These are just some examples. Except for the five cases of social activists who did not mind experiencing precarity or a lower quality of life in order to achieve social and environmental aims, the rest of the discourses were centred on increasing personal quality of life. It was no coincidence that these five cases are people who had been involved in social movements before joining EICs: they argued that the crisis had not affected their ideology, because their social motivations came from earlier times. Additionally, they had not experienced the negative effects of the crisis because they were somehow out of its reach during that period. Nevertheless, they had been exposed to the crisis through its impact on their acquaintances or relatives. Their quality of life was not improved by joining an EIC, but actually decreased, as shown in interviews A-4 and B-13, with informants who had rejected jobs and left education in order to join the community.

5. Conclusions

Ecological intentional communities—EICs or eco-communities—are well known in the literature for promoting a change to the social order through implementing a more sustainable model of coexistence, which is meant to be widely spread (Kirby 2003, p. 324). They were also created to narrow

the gap between humans and nature (Andreas and Wagner 2012; Ergas and Clement 2015). Eco-communities' focus, for the case of Catalonia, varies between activism and political action, and environmental care (Escribano et al. forthcoming), but they were conceived as drivers of change "in the sense that they are attempting to change the social order in the areas of property and labor relationships into more communal and collaborative orientations" (Schehr 1997; Ergas 2010, p. 35).

In this paper we have analysed the testimonies of 29 people who moved to an eco-community, taking into account when and for what purpose they felt attracted to this "alternative" way of life, as they called it. We have argued that the aftermath of the financial crisis in Catalonia from 2008–9 onwards has had an impact on people's motivations for joining eco-communities. Our study shows that the motivations of improving or maintaining "quality of life" are predominant, which marks a shift from previous periods. Most interestingly, the phenomenon of moving to EICs occurs primarily among highly educated individuals (21 of the 29 respondents had university-level education) which leads us to reflect on whether the population of eco-communities is a socio-economically heterogeneous group, as Ruiiu (2015) proposed, or conversely, as Fotopoulos (2000) suggested, a class movement.

We have shown that the way eco-communities are perceived has changed in the period following the crisis: from ideological projects to additionally acting as a means to make a living. This coexistence between people who are less politically active with others who are ideologically driven implies a fundamental change in the social organization of eco-communities. During fieldwork we sensed that this shift was associated with a change in internal dynamics, and the increasing institutionalization of communities. Due to the scope of this project, this observation will have to be explored in depth in future research. The diversification of strategies observed here in response to the aftermath of the crisis (Pahl 1935), has also been felt in other sectors, such as the social economy (Molina et al. 2017).

Rural spaces are used by EICs as a means to create an ideal society. As Metcalf argued, "During the nineteenth century, a flurry of people theorized and wrote about utopianism, imagining how to create intentional communities to solve a wide range of social, economic, and political problems resulting from rapid industrialization" (Metcalf 2012, p. 23). This framework of new opportunities is not disconnected from wider society and broader social changes in financial markets or other forces that currently drive social phenomena. As researchers, we should formulate research with the same degree of complexity with which we approach contemporary societies.

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