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Master's thesis

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The Influence of Ecovillages on Regional Socio-Ecological Transformation: Social Innovation Biographies of Two German Ecovillages.

submitted by

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List of Abbreviations

CSA : Community Supported Agriculture

ECG: Economy for the Common Good

EU: European Union.

GEN: Global Ecovillage Network.

IBs : Innovation Biographies

OECD: Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development.

SET : Socio-Ecological Transformations.

SIBs : Social Innovation Biographies.

SIs : Social Innovations.

SoLaWi: Solidarische Landwirtschaft.

TRANSIT: TRANsformative Social Innovation Theory.

Summary

This thesis documents and analyzes the role of ecovillages as laboratories for social innovation (SI) of regional socio-ecological transformations (SET). By applying the methodology of Social Innovation Biographies (SIBs), this study reconstructs and compares the innovation trajectories of two ecovillages participating in the TransRegio II project from the GEN (Global Ecovillage Network) in Germany: Gemeinschaft Sulzbrunn (Bavaria) and Schloss Tonndorf (Thuringia).

This research is based on qualitative methods, which include semi-structured interviews with various actors of the ecovillages and documentary analysis. These methods allow us to analyze in general terms how these ecovillages have been formed and how the process of generating these interactions occurred with external actors. Those involve the state, local businesses, educational institutions, and civil society inside and outside the region. Additionally, this research aimed at identifying interactions that contribute to the sustainability and transition beyond the physical boundaries of the ecovillages.

The results show that both ecovillages function as multi-sectoral hubs of innovation, not only by applying alternative lifestyles, but also by being part of regional networks and co-creating solutions with diverse stakeholders. Despite the few differences in scope and strategies, both cases reinforce the importance of long-term cooperation, trust-based relationships, and partnerships with diverse institutions when scaling up social innovations. Time and resource constraints and bureaucratic barriers are some of the challenges that these communities overcome through creative governance, network support, and cooperative actions.

This master's thesis contributes to the literature on social innovations, social-ecological transitions, and intentional community-based development. It highlights the relevance of ecovillages not only as an alternative housing model but also as strategic stimulants in regional ecological transformation processes.

1. INTRODUCTION

Considering that the climate crisis is the challenge of this century, Ecovillages are practical examples of driving forces acting locally in response to this global crisis (Fischer, 2015). These intentional communities are where people live and work together, sharing property to lead a self-sustainable life – that is, in harmony with the environment and the living beings within it- by applying a holistic reorganization of the planet (Fischer, 2017; Kunze, 2005).

In academic literature, primarily within the field of Sociology, social innovation has been understood in two diverse ways. First, it involves the creation of new social interactions, structures, or patterns of human interaction. Second, it focuses on innovations designed to address specific social market needs or failures and environmental or social issues. (Nicholls & Dees, 2015). The construction of new social relations and new rules to meet societal needs through community action is part of social innovation (Ulug & Horlings, 2019).

Various initiatives aim to contribute to social change towards more resilient, inclusive, and sustainable societies, often responding to current socio-economic challenges (Avelino et al., 2020; Longhurst et al., 2016). For this reason, social innovations are considered to potentially play a significant role in the solution, as they refer to outcomes or methods that introduce innovative approaches to address social needs or problems. Unlike commercial innovation, social innovation faces unique challenges, such as the diffusion of effective transformative innovations and the lack of incentives for investment (Boyer, 2018; Kunze, 2005).

Ecovillages are considered social and grassroots innovations because they apply unique principles in their daily lives that differ from those of neighboring communities, such as sustainable approaches to life, governance, economy, education, and more. It can be said that they are experiments that reflect on a small scale, social aspects of mutual support, and they also seek to integrate solutions that address societal challenges in all areas of daily life. They are multipliers of Social Innovations since their practices are not confined to these communities; (Kunze, 2005) mentions that these innovations can spread in three ways. First, the residents (who typically have lived there for years) transform their lives with more sustainable and collaborative practices. If they move out from there, they bring these practices and knowledge, potentially influencing those around them. Second, larger villages manage educational institutions that not only provide training to the inhabitants but also receive thousands of visitors every year. They offer various courses across

different disciplines, helping to spread this knowledge to society. Third, media interest in these topics has grown in recent years, further amplifying the reach of these innovations (Kunze, 2005).

In recent years, Ecovillages have been recognized as key drivers of transformative innovation, such as in the TRANSIT (TRANsformative Social Innovation Theory) project, a research initiative funded by the EU from 2014 to 2017. Its aim was to develop a theory of informative social innovation, focusing on empowerment and change in society, by learning from 20 empirical case studies of trans-local social innovation networks in Europe and Latin America (IHS, 2015) (J. Wittmayer et al., 2017). This project contributed to the construction of theoretical frameworks for Transformative Social Innovation, including the 3D framework proposed by (Strasser, De Kraker, et al., 2020).

Another example is the “TransRegio II” Project, led by GEN Germany and funded by the Federal Environmental Agency, which supports the development of cooperative networks in four regions of Germany (GEN Deutschland, 2024). Within the context of this thesis, two of these Ecovillages, Schloss Tonndorf, located in the southern Weimarer Land in Thuringia, and Gemeinschaft Sulzbrunn in Bavaria, will be examined as case studies. This project aims to analyze how Ecovillages contribute to socio-ecological practices, transforming their surrounding communities by promoting sustainable practices, enhancing local resilience, and fostering collaboration with local governments and institutions. The findings of this research will help to evaluate the project’s impact in promoting regional sustainable development. They will contribute to a broader understanding of Ecovillages’ role as drivers of socio-ecological change.

Problem statement

Ecovillages participate in grassroots innovation and have the potential to significantly contribute to the social and technological shift towards a more sustainable society (Maniates, 2001; Seyfang and Smith, 2007 (Sherry, 2019). These communities are viewed as environments where the convergence of various practices, ideas, and innovations can be nurtured, tested, and refined before being integrated into broader local economies. (Seyfang & Smith, 2007). They are increasingly emerging as regional centers capable of reshaping their surrounding landscapes, physical infrastructure, governance, population, skills, and cultural aspects. This information can significantly improve the quality of life for both the communities within the Ecovillage and those beyond its borders (Price et al., 2020).

Given the importance of understanding the interaction between Ecovillages and their surroundings, it is crucial to recognize and analyze the activities of the two communities to be analyzed with external actors throughout their existence. Such an analysis will provide a comprehensive understanding of the current situation and identify areas for potential improvement.

Research in various academic journals and papers about social innovations and the capacity of socio-ecological transformations of integral actors, such as ecovillages, has encountered a significant gap regarding their analysis with SIBs. Some scholars have used this methodology to analyze social innovations in specific economic sectors such as tourism (Wirth, Bandi Tanner, et al., 2023), healthcare (Tschumi & Mayer, 2024b, 2024a), and renewable energy (Bruns & Ohlhorst, 2011). Moreover, SIBs have been applied to evaluate the influence of SIs on the economic growth in mountain regions (Stettler & Mayer, 2023) and constrained contexts (Rizzo et al., 2020; Terstriep et al., 2015), knowledge dynamics (Butzin & Widmaier, 2012, 2016), and change agency (Wirth, Tschumi, et al., 2023). Considering that ecovillages are intersectoral and interdisciplinary sustainability stimulators, SIBs provide an understanding of how the interactions involving the ecovillage and the process of building knowledge happen. In this study, we aim to tackle this research gap, which could support further research through the insights gained from applying this method to the two cases analyzed.

This research aims to reconstruct the SIBs, focusing on the interactions between two German ecovillages and their surrounding areas. We have analyzed the interactions as the social innovation itself, through the identification of knowledge dynamics and processes, challenges, and milestones of the initiation and operation stages. Likewise, this analytical process seeks to identify the relevant interactions that include internal and external actors related to the ecovillages. Finally, it aims to compare the findings of each ecovillage and provide feedback to each other to identify their mutual future learning. To achieve these objectives, the following research questions have been formulated: How do Ecovillages influence socio-ecological transformation in their surrounding communities? What key events or initiatives have shaped the relationship between the Ecovillages and neighboring communities? What best practices or successful strategies can each Ecovillage adopt from the other to improve their interactions with external communities?

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Social Innovation Theory

This concept dates to the early 19th century before the popularization of economic and technological innovations (Godin, 2012). From the beginning, SIs were linked to social transformation processes (Godin, 2015). However, this changed at the earlier stages of the 20th century, and social innovation was perceived as the adoption of a new practice or new behavior, including all areas of society such as formal and informal education, gender relations, governance, and quotidian life (Godin, 2012). Social Innovation arises from a need to mitigate the global challenges of modern times. This results from awareness that technological innovations are not enough to solve these problems (Rammert et al., 2016). The new social pressures, such as population growth, globalization, and climate change, require diversified impactful social measures, which is where these innovations take place (Howaldt et al., 2019; Zirngiebl et al., 2023).

Scholars agree that the term 'Social Innovation' is not uniformly conceptualized and tend to recognize complex and diversified meanings (Neumeier, 2012; Phillips et al., 2024). SI can be stated as an emerging body of both theory and practice rooted in various social science disciplines (McGowan & Westley, 2015) and evidenced by new frameworks and approaches (Pel et al., 2020).

Its simplest definition is that it is a composition of innovative ideas that address a social need. Nevertheless, various definitions come from different scholars: New social processes. It is focused on social relations and the respective changes necessary for a rebalancing of power inequalities in society (Nicholls & Dees, 2015). Society must generate new ideas and implement them for an interpersonal reorganization of the activities performed to achieve one or more common goals (Mumford, 2002). Also, (Westley & Antadze, 2010) stated that successful social innovations have durability and broad impact within a complex process. These include introducing new programs, processes, or products that influence basic routines, authority, resource flows, or beliefs of the society in which such innovation is applied. In the provision of vital public goods, Social Innovations are the response to social market failures (Nicholls & Dees, 2015). It may be an existing solution in which the value created is delivered to society as a whole and not to an individual, or it may be a more efficient, effective, and sustainable response to a social problem (Phills, 2009). Unlike economic innovation which exploits new markets or introduces new types of production, social innovation focuses on satisfying emerging

needs not met through typical market mechanisms. Moreover, it stimulates new and more satisfying ways of giving people a role and space in the production process (OECD, 2011).

Some of the areas of application of this concept are Circular Economy (Marchesi & Tweed, 2021), Sustainability, Urban Development (Angelidou & Psaltoglou, 2017), Rural Development (Neumeier, 2012), Energy Transition (Hewitt et al., 2019), Consumption practices (Jaeger-Erben et al., 2015), among others.

Types of innovations

According to (Nicholls & Dees, 2015) there are three types of social innovations that are identified perpendicularly to these two definitions. First, there is *incremental* innovation in services and goods to address social needs more efficiently or effectively. Secondly, there is *institutional* innovation, which aims to remodel or take advantage of existing economic and social structures to generate social innovation. Finally, *disruptive* social innovation seeks to effect changes in systems through political action and is usually driven by social movements that seek to reframe problems for the benefit of groups that would otherwise be disenfranchised.

Stages of Social Innovations

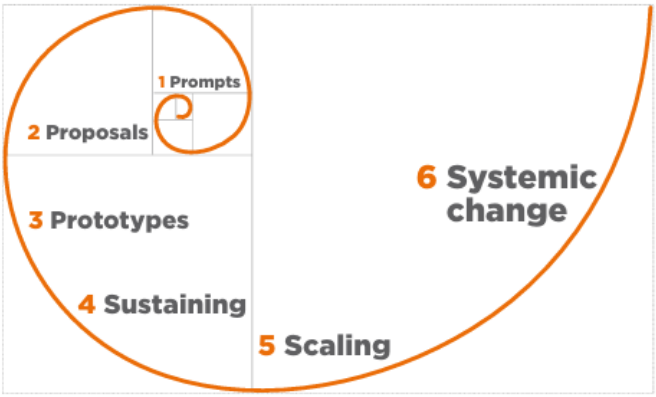

Figure 1. Stages of Social Innovation (Murray et al., 2010)

This framework proposed by (Murray et al., 2010) describes how ideas move from conception to impact. The stages may present a non-sequential order and overlap and feedback on each other. This process may vary according to context; however, it contributes a useful structure for understanding the growth and lasting impact of social innovations (*Figure 1*):

1. Prompts, inspirations, and diagnoses. The needs driving the innovation are identified (cutbacks, crises, performance issues), and the root causes of the problems are diagnosed, not just the symptoms.
2. Proposals and ideas: At this stage, ideas are generated.
3. Prototyping and pilots: Ideas are tested through prototypes, pilots, or controlled trials.
4. Sustaining: Innovation becomes a frequent practice. Ideas are optimized, and revenues are secured for long-term operation.
5. Scalability and diffusion: Innovation expands through different strategies such as franchising, inspiration, federation, or organizational growth.
6. Systemic change: The transformation of entire systems is the ultimate goal. This implies changes in business models, laws, mentalities, and infrastructures, breaking barriers of the established order.

Scaling

Social Innovations can be diffused in a variety of ways, from franchising and organizational growth to organic diffusion and collaboration. Similar to the flow of a liquid (adaptable and modifiable according to the context), the diffusion of social innovations is a complex and dynamic process, which is called generative diffusion, since innovations adapt according to the context instead of replicating themselves exactly. Successful diffusion of innovation requires both effective demand (willingness to pay or adopt it) and effective supply (evidence that it works). Investment in evaluations, adaptation of models, and research to improve efficiency or reduce costs are important to increase supply. On the other hand, awareness, advocacy, and campaigns to promote innovation are required to generate demand (Murray et al., 2010). Without scaling, social innovations would stay as local and small experiments, losing the chance to grow and be replicated and expand to other places (Haxeltine et al., 2016).

The literature describes three types of scaling: “scaling up”, “scaling out”, and “scaling deep”. (Westley et al., 2014) defines “scaling up” as the identification of barriers and opportunities at institutional scales, and the main objective is a change in the system that has created the problem that needs to be solved. “Scaling out” is defined as a strategy that seeks to expand the scope of the innovation to reach more people and cover a larger geographical area. In addition to this, (M.-L. Moore et al., 2015) describes “scaling deep” as a deep impact on the cultural roots of a society, which would imply recognizing the

fundamental role of culture in social transformation and that change depends on people, communities, cultures, and their cultural relations. It is about changing beliefs, mentalities, and norms from within, not just expanding a solution.

Some of the findings of the TRANSIT Project show that SI initiatives value discourse while understanding the power of words and ideas, and they actively work to construct conversations and share new, alternative stories about how the future would look. There is room for additional research on how narratives coming from different SI initiatives can relate, differ, or interact and how these travel between scale levels (local, regional, global) (J. M. Wittmayer et al., 2019)

2.2. Ecovillages as Social Innovations

According to the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN, 2024), "an ecovillage is an intentional, traditional or urban community that is consciously designed through locally owned, participatory processes in all four dimensions of sustainability (social, cultural, ecological and economic) to regenerate their social and natural environments".

Ecovillages originate from the Danish concept called bofællesskab (living communities). This concept of co-housing focuses on empowering residents to live communally while taking responsibility for actively participating in shared elements, practicing environmental sustainability, and creating safer spaces (Chitewere & Taylor, 2010). Ecovillages, a form of co-housing, seek primarily to adopt sustainable lifestyles, which is why they are usually located outside of cities. The origin dates back to the creation of the GEN in 1995, which promotes shared vision, cohesion, and happiness at the geographic and socio-cultural margins (K. T. Litfin, 2014).

(GEN, 2024) identifies three general categories of ecovillages:

1. Urban: Located in the city, these eco-neighborhoods or communities have a common vision of transforming urban life to be more sustainable, collaborative, and participatory.
2. Traditional: Existing rural communities or villages that use participatory processes to combine traditional wisdom and possible innovations decide to design their own path toward the future.
3. Intentional: Created communities by groups of people who share a common vision or purpose.

Ecovillages as Socio-ecological Transformations (SET)

In attempting to address the climate crisis, SETs encompasses cultural, political, and socio-economic changes. It aims to contribute to a social and political strategy to address the present crisis and to provide a holistic understanding of current global climate change (Hackman & St. Clair, 2013). Some consequences of the global crisis are related with exploitation of planetary boundaries that jeopardize global and international justice, and human health (Kristof, 2022). The literature strongly agrees that profound societal changes are necessary to address this crisis (Brand & Wissen, 2017). There are no exact "recipes" in a dynamic and complex world, however, it is possible to identify success factors and typical patterns that help increase the likelihood of success of these transformations (Kristof, 2022).

Ecovillages are described as key components to foster SET in communities and infrastructures at the local level. They actively interact with their environment (M.-L. Moore et al., 2015), through exchanges with local governments and local economies, offer education, and are part of learning centers in the region (Dawson & Lucas, 2006). GEN has played a big role in this process. They state that what was once considered marginal ideas are now part of corporate and political discussions. This shows that ecovillages are not only laboratories of sustainability but also have an important role in the transition to more resilient societies, although their impact depends on their capacity for integration in the regions (Kunze & Avelino, 2015).

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research aims to better understand the scaling strategies of social innovations by examining two SIBs of two ecovillages in Germany. This analysis is part of the supporting research for the TransRegio II project and is being conducted in collaboration with the GEN and the Humboldt University of Berlin during the winter semester of 2024/2025. Gemeinschaft Sulzbrunn and Schloss Tonndorf are two of the four ecovillages participating in the TransRegio II project, which is part of the GEN Germany. This initiative's goal is to enhance the growth of cooperative networks in four regions of Germany (GEN Deutschland, 2024).

3.1. Case Study Description

3.1.1. Gemeinschaft Sulzbrunn e.G.

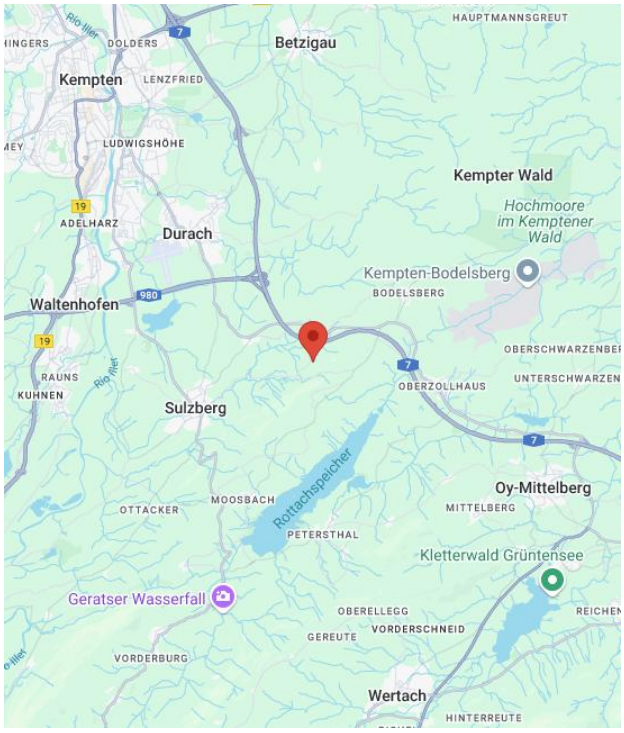

Figure 2. Gemeinschaft Sulzbrunn Location (Grotz, 2020).

Table 1. Gemeinschaft Sulzbrunn General Information (Grotz, 2020; Sulzbrunn, 2025).

Name	Gemeinschaft Sulzbrunn
Setting	Rural
Location	Allgäu Region, Germany
Type	Ecovillage (intentional, Religious or Spiritual) Eco Project (Learning Centre, Permaculture Project)
Status	Established
Founded	2015
Main Language	German
Other Language	English
Current members	70 members (50 adults and 20 children)

Founded in 2015, and located in the Allgäu region (*Figure 2)*, the ecovillage is home to around 70 people (50 adults and 20 children) between the ages of 0 and 80. To make this project happen, the founding community members purchased a former clinic outside the city of Kempten, approximately 11 km by car from the city center to the ecovillage. The

property comprises 15 hectares of land and eight buildings, where many ideas have been and continue to be created and developed (*Table 1*) (Grotz, 2020; Sulzbrunn, 2025).

This group of people decided to live in an intentional, spiritual community beside the mountains and close to nature. Their point of convergence is "people are social creatures," which inspires them to explore and create different future ways of living by enhancing and discovering people's potential. This community presumes that their co-living experience is not like that of normal neighbors but rather a consciously shared relationship, where trust, openness, respect, and mindfulness are key values (Grotz, 2020; Sulzbrunn, 2025).

The Sulzbrunn ecovillage considers itself an example of a community organization based on principles of sustainability, equity, and active participation. The ecovillage is formed as a hybrid organization, which consists of three different types of organizational structures, all founded in 2015:

The Sulzbrunn Foundation (Der Stiftungdfond Sulzbrunn): Has a passive role as legal owner of the land. Its main function is to maintain the property.

Sulzbrunn Community Cooperative eG (Die Gemeinschaft Sulzbrunn eG): It leases the property on a long-term basis from its foundation. Its decision-making structure is based on sociocracy, whereby each member has equal decision-making power, regardless of their financial contribution. It oversees the management of resources and financing of community projects.

Association of Sulzbrunn eV (Der Förverein Sulzbrunn eV): This is a non-profit organization. It finances and organizes charitable local events and projects that are in line with the values of the community. It received funds from the cooperative to implement its projects.

Organizational structure and decision making

Its structure is based on a sociocracy model, which has among its principles shared decision-making based on concurrence, circles of demi-autonomous units, and electing people who have roles and tasks (Eckstein, 2016). This promotes equal participation and a flat hierarchy. Everyone must agree to finalize the decision-making, and all points of view are heard, respected, and considered. There are four working groups (circles), each with their respective responsibilities and tasks:

- Seminar: It oversees managing the Seminar house, where events and activities are organized, and some guests stay.

- Administration: handles financial and administrative matters.
- Infrastructure: In charge of the maintenance and proper functioning of the physical facilities of the community.
- Community building: Promotes the well-being and cohesion of the ecovillage members.

At the internal level of community life, they have weekly meetings in a plenary to discuss personal or community concerns and projects and make the necessary decisions. In this, a culture of open communication is promoted where adequate management of interpersonal conflicts and mutual respect are promoted.

3.1.2. Schloss Tonndorf e.G.

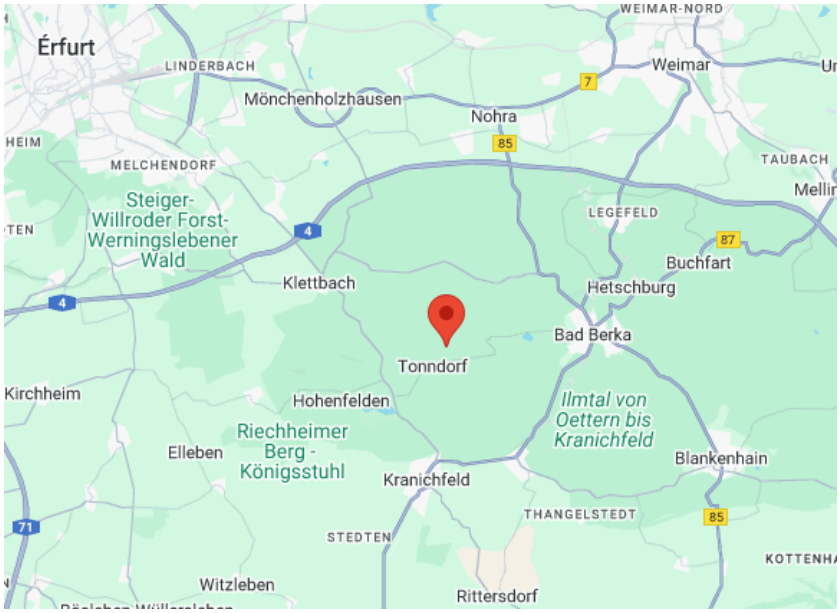

Figure 3. Schloss Tonndorf Location (Schloss Tonndorf, 2017).

Table 2. Schloss Tonndorf General Information (Schloss Tonndorf, 2017; Tonndorf, 2025b)

Name	Schloss Tonndorf
Setting	Rural
Location	Erfurter Tal (Valley of Erfurt), Germany
Type	Ecovillage (Religious or Spiritual)
Status	Established
Founded	2004
Main Language	German
Other Languages	English, Spanish
Current members	65 members (children and adults)

Born in 2004, The Tonndorf Castle ecovillage is home to approximately 65 people (children and adults). From families to single individuals, ranging in age from infancy to their mid-70s, they work together to renovate and revitalize the castle in unity. Members come from diverse backgrounds, but they share a common vision: daily mutual support that promotes human connection in a rich social environment (*Table 2*) (Schloss Tonndorf, 2017; Tonndorf, 2025b).

The community is located on the northern edge of the Thuringian Forest (*Figure 3*), between the cities of Weimar and Erfurt (both approximately 20km away). The property spans around 15 hectares, including the castle, which stands 40 m high, as well as

outbuildings, other residential units, and spaces spread across the landscape among lush meadows, orchards, and patches of forest (Tonndorf, 2025a).

Some of their core goals as a spiritual community in a rural setting include the creating a cross-generational living model within a chosen-family structure; fostering self-responsibility, self-administration, and self-sufficiency across all age groups; and respecting the earth and nature, among others (Schloss Tonndorf, 2017).

The Schloss Tonndorf Ecovillage is composed of two bodies: the cooperative and the non-profit organization.

1. Cooperative: Founded in 2005, is the legal owner of the property, which includes land and buildings. Its main function is to rent out business and private rooms.

Use of income: The community rent is reinvested, especially in the renovations of the buildings and their workforce. In this way, this resource has a cyclic flow within the community.

Decision making: From its foundation, decisions inside the cooperative are taken by consensus, ensuring a high-quality process. The majority rule is not allowed; this also applies to the acceptance of new members. If someone opposes the new members will not be accepted into the community, which generates a secure environment for everyone.

Administrative work: Some of the members of Tonndorf work in the administrative part of the community.

Weekly plenary: These weekly voluntary meetings hold decision-making sessions about the community's development. Topics like building renovations, finance, and festival organizations are discussed. The idea is presented and defended so that everyone agrees to it; this process of decision-making could take a couple of weeks to complete.

Plenary organizing group: They have been in charge of organizing and moderating the plenary for over a year. Every year, new members are selected.

Council of Elders: Their foundation is to assess the community's social environment and to moderate when necessary. They are a bridge to improve communication between members.

Working Committees: There are different teams in charge of managing specific areas such as construction, finance, and catering services.

2. Non-profit organization:

In addition to the Cooperative, there is a non-profit organization that was founded in 2006 and is in charge of managing cultural activities and community projects.

Cultural activities: Events and activities open to people of all ages are organized.

Educational services: Initiatives such as a kindergarten in the forest are included, promoting a connection with nature from childhood.

Conservation projects: Programs are carried out to preserve the natural environment to ensure the sustainability of the territory.

3.2. Introducing Social Innovation Biographies (SIBs)

Ernst Helmstädter, who is the founding father of IBs, placed a major focus on knowledge sharing and innovation processes. This approach was later enriched by Anders Larsson in terms of time-geographical aspects, and SIBs were further developed and applied in a five-year (from 2005 to 2010) European research project called EURODITE. It should be mentioned that this method is still undergoing modifications and development processes by various other researchers (Butzin & Widmaier, 2012).

IBs is a method that facilitates the exploration of the time-space dynamics of knowledge and how knowledge is combined within innovation processes, viewed from a micro-level perspective. It enables the analysis of social relationships, contextual environments, and the cross-sectoral and multi-local dissemination of knowledge within innovative processes. Adopting a time-oriented approach, key research techniques in IBs include narrative interviewing, network analysis, and triangulation (Butzin & Widmaier, 2016). This method is well-suited to this study due to its ability to amplify the focus on the internal dynamics of territorial knowledge by concentrating on specific innovations, their global perspective, and approach to knowledge composition (Butzin & Widmaier, 2012).

This approach has distinct features that enhance the process of evaluating knowledge dynamics. These include the ability to be applied in multi-level research, transcending administrative borders while tracing knowledge flows. Moreover, it allows identifying the actors linked to the innovation through certain interviewing techniques. It is also a valuable tool for gaining first-hand insight into internal knowledge and its connection to external sources of information, from different levels, as well as evolution over time. This method allows us to track the knowledge flow trail and shape it into biographies of innovations, which can be reconstructed by the individuals involved (Butzin & Widmaier, 2012).

(Kleverbeck & Terstriep, 2017) adapted the IBs method to social innovations, providing new alternatives for gathering empirical evidence. The biography of a social innovation is reconstructed by tracing the path of invention at different levels (individual, structural, and contextual). SIB is a detailed biographical-interpretative approach for examining participants' narratives within the broader socio-economic framework. SIBs allow for capturing the innovation process, relationships, contextual settings, and heterogeneous knowledge, providing insight into the evolution and development of SIs (PELKA & MARKMANN, 2015). While analyzing cases of social innovations and processes across three different dimensions (comparatively, vertically, and horizontally). SIBs also address methodological challenges related to ensuring both the quantity and quality of information, reinforcing trust, and providing additional methodological benefits. They offer a comprehensive methodological solution through a step-by-step approach that includes documentary research, narrative interviews, semi-structured interviews, egocentric network analysis, and triangulation, as shown in *Figure 4* (Terstriep et al., 2015).

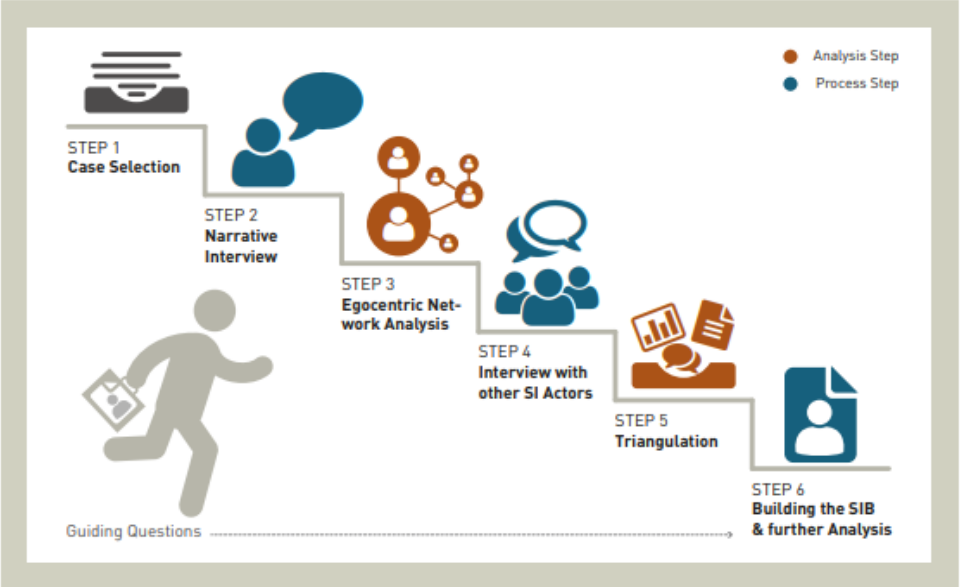

Figure 4. SIBs - Step-by-step Procedure. Source: (Terstriep et al., 2015)

Both IBs and SIBs have been well-fitting tools for documenting and evaluating social innovations. Applied in diverse economic sectors, public and private initiatives, and have been combined with other analytical methods. In the energy sector, for instance, (Bruns & Ohlhorst, 2011) analyzed wind power generation in Germany through a transdisciplinary perspective, using an IB divided into six identified phases of the innovation process. Alongside constellation analysis, this approach examines complex actor constellations from a multidisciplinary perspective. Regarding tourism, (Wirth, Bandi Tanner, et al., 2023) studied the success of SIs in the tourism sector in a Swiss mountain region. In this study they analyzed actors, processes, and tipping points, and structured

the biography by following the three development phases by (Neumeier, 2012) of a SI: problematization, implementation, and operation. In the healthcare sector (Tschumi & Mayer, 2024b), studied how social innovations assist in the improvement of healthcare in remote mountain regions in Switzerland. They distinguished three different knowledge types according to the knowledge base approach: synthetic, analytical, and symbolic. Furthermore, they identified how these types of knowledge are shared and used in different innovations, organizing the IBs using the phases identified by (Neumeier, 2012).

IBs and SIBs have also been applied in EU-funded projects such as the Sixth Framework Program EURODITE (2005-2010). This aimed to address the lack of understanding of the nature of the knowledge economy and composition by examining the dynamics of knowledge in the economies of European regions. Approximately 60 IBs were documented, characterizing knowledge generation to inform policy-making institutions interested in contributing to Europe's transition towards a knowledge-based society (Butzin & Widmaier, 2012; CORDIS, 2010). This experience showed that IBs are applicable not only in social innovations but also in organizational, product, process, and service innovations, as well as in failed innovations (Butzin & Widmaier, 2012). Similarly, SIMPACT (2014-2016) used 36 SIBs and 26 Business Case Studies. They identified the importance of social innovations as agents of transformation towards the re(inclusion) and empowerment of marginalized and vulnerable groups. This was achieved through developing new concepts, models, and instruments to benefit innovators, investors, intermediaries, and policymakers (CORDIS, 2017; Rizzo et al., 2020).

However, this method may present several limitations, starting with the difficulty of case selection, as it is not possible to know in advance which cases might be relevant for analysis. Continuing with finding individuals willing to be interviewed, especially challenging in cases of failed innovations. Moreover, the quality and quantity of the information depend on how openly and clearly people express themselves. This can also complicate the identification of the beginning or end of the innovation process. Furthermore, interviews may limit the narrative to the perspective of the interviewee; thus, the careful selection of additional participants is important. Finally, the method focuses primarily on the innovation process itself and not on other external factors, such as the influence of institutions on it (Butzin, 2014; Kleverbeck & Terstriep, 2017).

3.3. Data Collection & Analysis

By combining narrative techniques, triangulation, and network analysis, it is possible to reconstruct innovation processes from their inception as an idea to their implementation (Kleverbeck & Terstriep, 2017).

Table 3. Summary of the Applied SIB Framework.

Step of the SIB	Description
Step 1 - Case Selection	TransRegio II Project participants.
Step 2 - Narrative interview	Semi-structured narrative interviews were conducted with key actors.
Step 3 - Egocentric Network Analysis	Collaboration with key actors in the Network Analysis.
Step 4 - Interview with other SI actors	Refined and semi-structured interviews conducted with the other SI actors.
Step 5 - Triangulation	Desktop research was done to complement necessary information and to further construct the biographies.
Step 6 - Building the SIB & Further analysis	

The application of the SIB methodology from *Figure 4* was the core framework of this study which was adapted as follows (*Table* 3): After selecting the cases which were volunteer participants from the TransRegio II project (Step 1: Case Selection), desktop research was conducted to develop the interviews questionnaires for both key actors (Regional Directors of the project in each case) and other SI actors (other participants, allies, supporters). These questionnaires were based on and adapted from the SIB Guiding Questions by (Terstriep et al., 2015), and two drafts were made accordingly, for both key and other participant actors involved in the innovation.

On the next stage, semi-structured narrative interviews were conducted with key actors involved in the TransRegio II project from the ecovillages (Step 2: Narrative Interviews). These key actors collaborated in Step 3: Egocentric Network Analysis by making an internal call of volunteers to participate in the interviews, ensuring that they were involved in the interactions of interest (a process that can be defined as a snowball sampling approach (Noy, 2008)). Once the 12 Actors (Table 4) involved in various interactions agreed to participate, the drafts were refined and applied in semi-structured interviews, enabling Step 4 (Interview with other SI Actors). Subsequently, extensive

desktop research of newspaper articles, websites, scientific papers, and field notes complemented the necessary information for the biography construction.

All interviewed participants were informed about the purpose of this study and agreed to participate by signing an informed consent (*see APPENDIX D*). In this document, they decided about consent regarding personal data, anonymity, and gave authorization for audio recording and subsequent transcription, as well as being photographed. Finally, they were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time.

The interview data were transcribed using Microsoft Word (*see APPENDIX B*Interviews Transcriptions) and analyzed and coded through Qualitative Content analysis using the MAXQDA software, following three rounds of coding. The first coding round followed the structure of the SIBs proposed by (Terstriep et al., 2015) Including the following sections: (0) Introductory, (1) Context and framework, (2) Problem addressed, (3) Motivation and Core Solution, (4) Resources and strategy, (5) The Network - Governance, Support & Obstacles, (6) Results: Outcomes & Obstacles, and (7) Measurement. In the second round of coding, key terms were identified and tagged based on the subsections and content of the SIBs defined by (Terstriep et al., 2015), such as: Milestones, Foundation Context/Process, Learnings, Motivation, Challenges, Skills, Grants/Funding, Resources, Actors, Support/Allies, Expected Outcomes, Media/Social Media, and Success in Cooperation. The third and final coding round involved the identification of the interactions of each of the ecovillages.

One recurring word in this document is the word “interaction(s)”, which according to (Cambridge University, 2025) means: *“an occasion when two or more people or things communicate with or react to each other”.* In addition to this definition, in the current study, this term also encompasses activities, events, projects, or connections. These are executed by the ecovillage or its members in cooperation with people from outside the community membership.

Table 4. Participant Interviewees

Ecovillage	No.	Interviewee	Interactions involved
Gemeinschaft Sulzbrunn e.G. /Förderverein Gemeinschaft Sulzbrunn e.V. /Gemeinwohl-Gesellschaft e.V.	1	Ecovillage member 1	First interactions, Gemeinwohl Ökonomie (Economy for the Common Good, ECG), Interaction with academic institutions, Bureaucratic interactions.
	2	Ecovillage member 2	Gemeinwohl Ökonomie (Economy for the Common Good, ECG), Allgäu Fairnetzt; GEN-Germany, Rebels of peace.
	3	Ecovillage member 3	Seminar house, GEN, Founding member; first interactions.
	4	Ally & Supporter	TransRegio II Supporter.
	5	Ecovillage member 4	Seminar house (founder).
	6	Seminar house Employee	Seminar house (administrative staff).
Schloss Tonndorf e.G. /Talvolk e.V. /Gemeinwohl im Tal e.G.	1	Ecovillage member 1	Founding member, GEN, Free School, CSA, TransRegio II project.
	2	Talvolk member	Community islands, Free school, CSA, daily life interactions.
	3	Ecovillage member 2	Tree Pruning, Seminars, daily life interactions, CSA, Waldkindergarten Grashüpfer.
	4	Ecovillage member 3	Catering service, Tree pruning, daily life interactions.
	5	Social entrepreneur & Supporter	Founding member, Cultural interactions, daily life interactions.
	6	Ecovillage member 4	Cultural interactions, daily life interactions.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Identified Interactions in the Gemeinschaft Sulzbrunn e.G.

Table 5 provides a summary of the identified interactions concerning their respective Community Sectors to Reach Targets and Agents of Change (KU, 2025), along with the key actors involved and the direction of the interactions. In the "Direction" column, the arrows represent how the interaction was initiated: interactions originating from the ecovillage and directed toward the respective actor are indicated with a right-sided arrow (→); interactions initiated by external actors and directed toward the ecovillage are represented with a left-side arrow (←), and interactions that developed mutually from both sides are marked with a two-sided arrow (↔).

Table 5. Summary of Interactions in the Sulzbrunn Ecovillage with their Respective Community Sectors Provided by (KU, 2025).

Interaction	**Starting point of interaction**	**Community Sectors Involved**	**Key Actors involved**	**Direction**	**Description**
Pre-Interaction: Foundation of Ecovillage	2015	Government, Human Services	Mayor and local council.	→	This pre-interaction involves the foundation process of the ecovillage, where two groups of people come together to present the project to the landowners and government to make it possible.
		Human Services	Founding members, ecovillage cooperative (legal representative of the ecovillage).	↔	
		Business	Landowners	→	
		Human services	Schloss Tempelhof	↔	

First Interactions	2015	Community Activist and Volunteer Groups	Community (internal and external from the ecovillage).	→	The first group of ecovillage members reached out to neighbors, friends, and others to introduce the facilities, their ideas, and their way of life while attracting more people to join the community and establish relationships with neighbors.
Daily basis interactions	2015 - Ongoing	Government	Authorities, local council Ecovillage members, cooperative (legal representative of the ecovillage).	↔	Ecovillage members participate in diverse activities outside the village. Which include: • Bureaucratic: paperwork-related issues for legal and financial matters of the ecovillage and the members' private matters. • External employment: To sustain their livelihood and contribute to personal income, some members commute daily to their jobs in nearby cities. • Business: With a focus on ethical consumption, the community strives to maintain a close relationship with suppliers who provide the essential products for their livelihood and development. • Educational: They cooperate with researchers from local universities and they enroll ecovillage children into a nearby free school.
		Business	Suppliers Ecovillage members	↔	
			Co-workers, Ecovillage members	↔	
		Education	Local university, schools, Ecovillage children and parents	↔	
		Culture	Local choir, others. Ecovillage members	→	

					• Cultural: Some ecovillage members participate in diverse local cultural groups, such as the local choir.
GEN Germany	Apprentice: 2016-2018 Active member: 2018-Ongoing	Community Activist and Volunteer Groups; Human Services.	GEN (members and specialists) Ecovillage representatives for GEN	↔	By being part of the network, Sulzbrunn benefits from collaboration and knowledge exchange between ecovillages and specialists.
TransRegio II	2023-2025	Community Activist and Volunteer Groups	Regional neighboring initiatives. Ecovillage TransRegio II representatives.	→	This project brings people together to promote regional cooperation and exchange ideas. The first meetings took place in 2024 in Sulzbrunn, where participants met every two weeks to converse about their ideas and perspectives. Via visits to each other's homes, farms, and workplaces, they created a network for those interested in communal living. Main activities: Projektschilde and Begegnungsräume.
Seminar house (Seminar house)	2016-Ongoing	Education. Human Services. Culture.	Seminar leaders (main organizers). Seminar house Staff (Seminar house working group).	→	The Ecovillage has an ecological seminar house where events organized by both community members and external participants take place. These events are diverse and aligned with the principles and values applied in the ecovillage. The purpose of the Seminar house is to provide a space for activities that attract people from

			Seminar attendees, visitors, and guests.		across Germany, the region, and the world. These activities include seminars, discussions, and events on diverse topics like permaculture and water retention. This one generates jobs for both members and non-members of the ecovillage.
Zeamad Goht's	2019, 2023	Community Activist and Volunteer Groups Environment	Conference staff. Conference attendees. Conference presenters. Sulzbrunn Verein (Association).	→	This Symposium, organized and financed by the Verein (association) of the Ecovillage invited people and organizations from across the region to present and share their ideas about sustainable transition efforts. The main outcome of this conference was the regional initiative called "Allgäu Fairnetzt"
Allgäu Fairnetzt (fair network of Allgäu)	2019-Ongoing	Community Activist and Volunteer Groups	Network members. Network experts. Ecovillage representatives.	←	This loosely structured network of people and organizations is committed to creating fairer ways and establishing a regional-level network.
Gemeinwohl Ökonomie – Economy for the Common Good (ECG)	Certified in 2022	Business (common good economy); Education (universities).	Common good economy Allgäu members. Ecovillage representatives. Local Universities. Ecovillage representatives.	→	This international movement with over 362 registered members in the region (EconGood Germany, 2024), promotes an economic system that prioritizes people and the planet over profits. To become a member, organizations must obtain certification by following the movement's values and standards. This certification is granted once the company, community, or educational institution evaluates

					its day-to-day practices through a Common Good Balance Sheet (EconGood, 2024). Sulzbrunn received its certification in 2022, and ecovillage members involved in the movement, also cooperate with a small university in Kempten, working with students on Common Good Economy certifications.
Solawi - Solidarische Landwirtschaft (Community Supported Agriculture, CSA)	2018-Ongoing	Environment (organic agriculture); Human Services (cooperation, healthy food).	Gardeners. Consumers. Farmers. Ecovillage members (Infrastructure working group).	→	Crops grown on ecovillage land are their own CSA, fostering cooperation between producers, gardeners, farmers, and consumers, all members of the intentional community. Its harvest is distributed among all the ecovillage members, and the surplus is used in the seminar house kitchen.
Other interactions					
Kindergarten	2020-Ongoing	Education	Children. Parents. Caretakers. Ecovillage participants.	↔	Encouraged by the Sulzbrunn Foundation and open to the public, the Kita strives to teach children the values of the ecovillage while providing a childhood experience closely connected to nature. Some of the ecovillage members work here.
Zukunfbündis Allgäu	2023-Ongoing	Environment	Association members. Workshop attendees.	↔	Association of regional initiatives focused on climate change protection, creating spaces for raising awareness through workshops, networking, and planning climate mitigation projects.

			Ecovillage representatives.		
Cultural events	2015-Ongoing	Culture	Visitors Ecovillage members	→	The land and buildings of the ecovillage serve as a venue for several cultural events in the town, such as festivals, film screenings, concerts, and more.

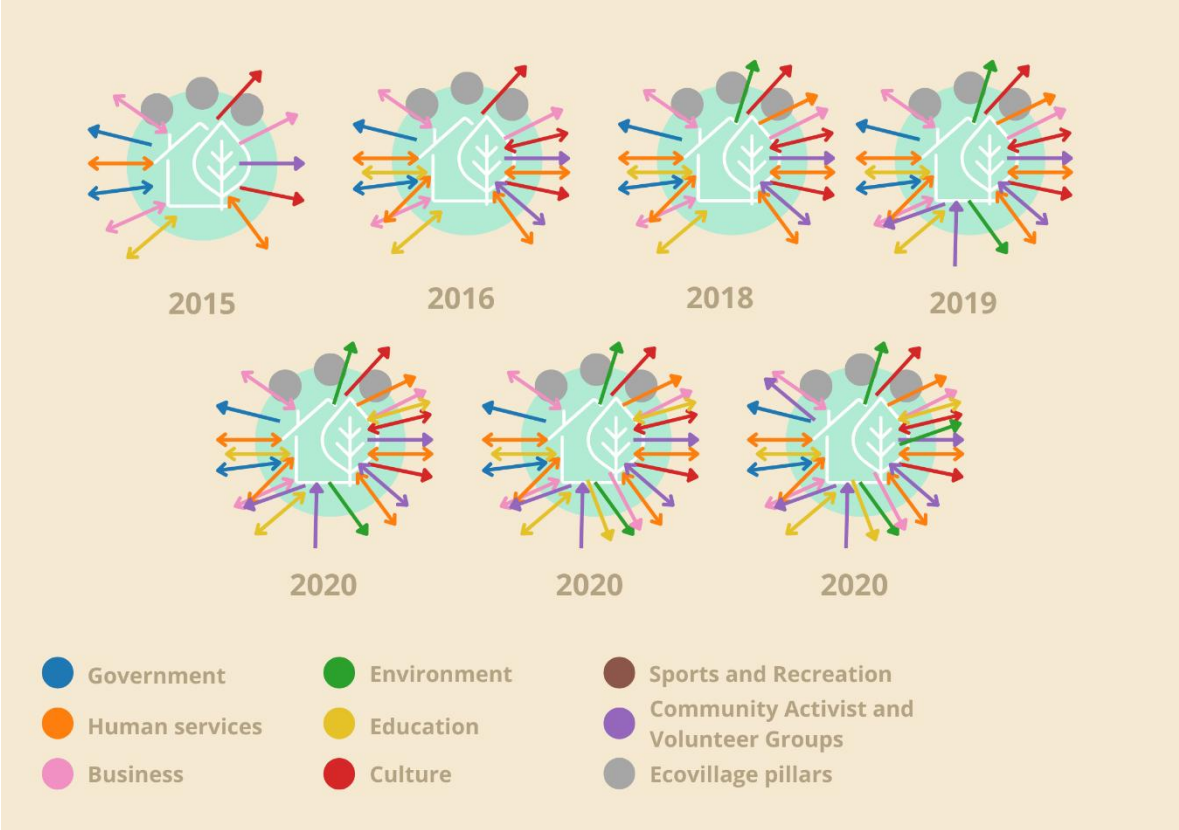

Figure 5. Evolution of the interactions' initiation approach between the Sulzbrunn ecovillage and outside community sectors (adapted from (Kleverbeck & Terstriep, 2017)).

Figure 5 adapted from (Kleverbeck & Terstriep, 2017), represents the evolution of interactions and the direction of contact between the ecovillage and the key sectors identified for each interaction. This period from 2015 to 2023 starts with the formulation and initiation of the ecovillage itself and ends with the last relevant interaction identified. The house icon inside the circle symbolizes the ecovillage, while the small grey circles represent its core pillars, and the arrows indicate the direction in which cooperation was initiated between the sectors and the ecovillage. Unilateral arrows pointing from the ecovillage to outside of the circle represent interactions that originated from within the community. Bidirectional arrows indicate interactions that emerged as an initiative of both sectors. Finally, unilateral arrows pointing inside the circle symbolize interactions that have come as invitations from sectors outside the ecovillage.

4.2. Social Innovation Biography – Gemeinschaft Sulzbrunn e.G.

The following results are based on and adapted to the structures of the SIBs from (Terstriep et al., 2015).

4.2.1. Context and framework conditions

Ecovillage member 3 was one of the founders of the Ecovillage and has lived there with his family since 2015. Three years before founding Sulzbrunn, Ecovillage member 3 tried to establish another Ecovillage but was unsuccessful. A few years later, by chance, a group of like-minded people came across a flyer from his first attempt and contacted him to use this flyer as inspiration, which led him to join this new project in the Allgäu region. These people envisioned what used to be a non-operational rehabilitation center to be an intentional community project. Initially, it was planned to be an elderly-care house. However, once Ecovillage member 3 joined the project, it was redirected toward creating an Ecovillage. He and seven others contacted the Schloss Tempelhof community, which became their common meeting point while looking for community initiatives. Seeing this as a common meeting point, they took the opportunity to team up.

The Ecovillage demonstrates that good living is possible without the need for great material luxuries, excessive consumption habits, or regular travel to distant destinations. One of the objectives of this Ecovillage is to serve as an inspiration and example for outsiders, showing that it is possible to live differently from the “common” way. This should be achieved through help, support, collaboration, and care for both the surrounding nature and the people. Additionally, some of the first members who joined during the initial phases were inhabitants of the local population, which helped in the process of adaptation of the ecovillage in the region.

Most initiatives originate from members of the Ecovillage community. Ideas are directed to the relevant working group based on their topic. There is no official procedure, but members of the Ecovillage can propose initiatives in diverse ways. One way is when a group seeks ideas for upcoming events and announces this in the plenum. Another way is for individuals outside the group to present their ideas directly, without formalities. An example of these interactions is the Seminar house. One of the first community members, recalls that in Sulzbrunn’s early days, they were considering the use of each building. When they came across a unique structure, they envisioned a greater purpose for it. They decided that the Seminar house should serve as a hub for sharing knowledge and connecting the Ecovillage with the outside

world by hosting projects and individuals to foster innovative ideas. Organizing an event at the Seminar house requires a Seminar Leader, who may be a community member or an external participant responsible for event preparation. The staff manages venue bookings and provides essential services such as cleaning, food, and technical support. The Seminar house team verifies if this leader shares the values of the Ecovillage; otherwise, they would not be allowed to use the venue.

4.2.2. Idea and Problem Addressed.

The community does not seek to solve specific problems but aims to be an inspiration for a better quality of life and a more sustainable lifestyle. Many perspectives worldwide are limited and do not consider today's complex general picture, which could be improved with cooperation. There is a lack of communication between people which can lead to extreme individualism, and many do not realize that the solution could be in their neighborhood. This is addressed in the TransRegio II project, where one of their initiatives is called Project Leader, a space to present ideas and problems and get solutions for them. The variety of people, contexts, and mindsets can attract participants in similar situations who may have already faced these challenges or participants with fresh ideas who can offer different or innovative solutions.

Many of the initiatives or interactions conducted by or with the Ecovillage have been primarily the ideas of people in the community and then have been extended outward. Once externalized, they usually receive support from outsiders. Considering that the current organizational structure of the Ecovillage is consolidated, there are well-established channels for the formation of interactions. Expressing interest in initiating an interaction within the community gives freedom to its members to share it, either in the plenum or at any other time. Then, if this idea is approved, it goes to the appropriate circle for planning and execution.

4.2.3. Motivation and Core Solution

The community’s main motivation is to set an example and act where needed. Although they could live comfortably within their established boundaries, their goal is to reach people outside of them. This is being achieved with interactions such as the Seminar house and the Welfare Economy initiative. This suggests that members from both the community and the network want to raise awareness about the unfairness of the modern economy. They aim to

inform as many people as possible about the alternative economic models and management methods that exist and are not applied.

Another motivation for these interactions- whether through GEN meetings, the TransRegio II project, the Seminar house, or the village executive committee- is to realize they are not alone in facing challenges. Connecting with other communities, institutions, and individuals allows them to exchange support and find solutions together. Exchanging ideas and knowledge fosters mutual enrichment, bringing a sense of peace and satisfaction.

4.2.4. Resources and Strategies

Strategies to attract individuals and establish links.

Some of their tactics to attract new individuals in the early days of the Ecovillage operation consisted of digital platforms for individuals looking for communities. By setting up their website and inviting people to visit them, they introduce them to the community facilities and present life in the community. Another way to introduce the locality is through volunteer work that individuals can perform, whether at events, at CSA, or in construction. The most effective method to attract the interest of local authorities is to maintain constant personal communication with them. They always seek to keep them informed about their activities, attend meetings and events, invite them to the village, and explore how collaborations could be formed as a team.

In the beginning phases of the TransRegio II project, involving new participants was cumbersome, as they thought it was simply another project among many. Nevertheless, once participants understood the idea, they were much more receptive to it.

Challenges

One of the most significant challenges at the early stages of the Ecovillage was the skepticism of the local council and residents, as they had never witnessed or experienced a similar initiative before. However, as they began to get to know the community members, they realized that this was not an issue of concern, instead, a positive opportunity for the region. To overcome this skepticism, informal gatherings were held over coffee and cake, inviting individuals from the region to discover and learn about the Ecovillage, as well as those who wished to join.

Another common drawback is the short duration of the projects in which they are involved. For example, the TransRegio II project has a duration of two years, and, in its conclusion, a new similar project must start over, causing a loss of resources and money. In terms of bureaucracy, some procedures can be slow, which could hinder the progress of certain community projects.

One of the main constraints to engaging in interactions is the scarcity of resources, such as time. People already occupy their time with their daily tasks. In early October 2024, a GEN Germany meeting was held on the premises of the Ecovillage, with most participants being elderly or retired people. The reason for that was that other members were unable to participate, due to family, work, or internal community priorities.

Financing

Finding financial resources for certain projects or the Ecovillage is another constraint, since there is no capacity to assign someone exclusively to the search for such opportunities for their activities. Applying for funds requires time to research opportunities, fill out forms, and collect the necessary documents. There is no person with sufficient time for this task. Additionally, these funds are often for short periods, which is demotivating as it involves restarting the process multiple times. In general, they have not applied for many funding offers, nevertheless, there are some small funds for approximately €5000 for internal activities within the Ecovillage, such as gardening and agriculture.

Events organized internally by the community and held at the Seminar house are funded by the association. There have been cases of events jointly organized with outsiders where the government has funded a fraction of the costs, as in the case with the symposium on a new aging culture in 2020. However, this part of the ecovillage aims to be self-sufficient, creating jobs for both community members and individuals from outside the ecovillage. Most events are organized by outside seminar leaders, making it a source of income for both the Seminar house and the community. The Verein gets its funds from the private incomes of its members, through the purchase of shares, rents, and events held in the Seminar house.

4.2.5. The Network – Governance, Support & Obstacles

Actors

Depending on the interaction, the actors involved vary. They are usually individuals or organizations involved in the various projects, events, and activities in which the Ecovillage, or its members, actively participate. Being involved in several of the regional initiatives, these interactions are numerous, nevertheless, some of the most mentioned were Allgäu fairnetzt, the TransRegio II project, GEN, Gemeinwohl-Ökonomie, the local authorities, people involved in the organization, and attendants of seminars, among others.

Relations with the community and authorities

In the early days of the ecovillage, some current and former community members were originally from the region, which has been very useful for the Sulzbrunn community, since these participants generate confidence in other inhabitants of the area, provide knowledge about suppliers, and have contacts that can be useful for the Ecovillage.

Another close relationship maintained by the community is with local farmers and various suppliers (of food consumed and the materials needed for the infrastructure), with whom they practice ethical and conscious consumption. There is also a constant relation with the local government. One of the community members is currently a member of the municipal council. This institution has been very attentive to the community since the beginning of the ecovillage, reminding and advising them regarding laws and permissions when appropriate.

Growth and development

Most of the interactions, including the founding of the Ecovillage, were initiated by ecovillage members themselves. Rarely do ideas or initiatives come from the outside. One exception is the kindergarten on the village grounds, which was founded in conjunction with parents from the region. They are working on a project to create a private school.

Support and collaboration networks.

GEN has played a key role as a platform of support for this Ecovillage, specifically its “fraternal” Ecovillage Schloss Tempelhof (approximately 200 km apart), as this was a meeting point for the founders of Sulzbrunn. Additionally, nowadays members of Sulzbrunn also go to trainings and workshops in Schloss Tempelhof. They maintain a close relationship where the

“older” village advises the newer one, and vice versa. This exchange happens in the GEN Germany meetings twice a year, where the villages share their ideas and present their problems and solve them based on the experiences of the other villages. The TransRegio II project has also created a local support network between the participants of the project and members of the Sulzbrunn community. The project provides a space in which local concerns or problems are raised, and feedback is given to all parties.

The community is also part of the regional network Allgäu Fairnetzt, formed after the first Zeamad Goht’s symposium organized by the Ecovillage in 2019. This network has seven lines of action aimed at a sustainable transformation of the region. Another ally is the Hochschule Kempten, with whom they collaborate to apply the common good balance sheet in companies, communities, or educational institutions in the region. Furthermore, as the main promoter of the TransRegio II project in the region, they manage its two main components: the first one is Projektschilde. In this program, initiatives or people with ideas present their projects and challenges and later receive advice from the rest and come up with existing or new solutions. This generates a continuous flow of cooperation and ideas in the region. The second component is Begegnungsräume. It is a format where people who do not share the same opinions are invited to communicate constructively and in a different setting than they normally do.

4.2.6. Expected outcomes & Impact

The community decided not to be isolated and intends to contact other people to exchange ideas, knowledge, and practices. This will help them to multiply key messages for a sustainable transformation through the seminars and the networks. “Promote transition through cooperation or encourage people to cooperate, and in a way, get stronger by cooperation” – Sulzbrunn Ally & supporter.

In the seminars, attendees are usually expected to take away the knowledge gained from the experts on the topics presented. Nonetheless, something unexpected that sometimes happens is the visitors becoming interested in the living conditions in the village while taking a tour and eventually taking those ideas with them as well. As a result of the seminars and meetings with the other networks, constructive talks are also sought, and the community tries to implement as much as possible of what has been agreed upon, promoting this constant flow of knowledge. Within the meetings held with GEN, the main objective is to

provide feedback to each other and collaborate to solve problems, explore solutions, and share innovative ideas, among others. In this network, there is the support of specialists in fields such as construction and infrastructure renovation, IT, aging processes, and power distribution, supporting Ecovillages in their development and future. Some of the Ecovillage's events have also resulted in new sustainable initiatives or networks, such as the Allgäu Fairnetzt, where people from the region meet to discuss different initiatives on climate activism and transformation toward sustainability.

Media / Social Media

The Ecovillage promotes all its events, including seminars and cultural events, through local newspapers, magazines, and its website, which features a monthly newsletter exclusively about events in the Seminar house. The community has active Instagram and Facebook accounts for both the Seminar house and the Ecovillage, and they have also appeared in some films that have provided them with brief exposure. Sulzbrunn is also present on the websites of networks and initiatives in which they are members or participants, such as GEN, TransRegio II, Allgäu Fairnetzt, ECG Allgäu, and Zukunftbüdnis Allgäu.

4.2.7. Measurement

In general, there are not many strategies for measurement; however, recently, the working groups at the Ecovillage have set priorities for the coming years and developed a system to assess their fulfillment. In terms of visibility and recognition, their presence on social media is minimal, and people have little awareness of how current platforms function. Therefore, measuring the reach of these digital media is difficult. Even if awareness were higher, there is no strategy to monitor the actual reach, impact, or awareness gained from reading news or posts about the ecovillage. Currently, the only measurable interaction initiated and executed directly by the ecovillage is through the Seminar house, which has its own website, newsletter, database, and software. These tools allow to document of data on bookings, accommodations, conference spaces, past events, and guests, thus facilitating their tracking and enabling potential improvements.

4.3. Identified Interactions in the Schloss Tonndorf e.G.

Table 6 provides summary of the identified interactions concerning their respective Community Sectors to Reach Targets and Agents of Change (KU, 2025), along with the key actors involved and the direction of the interactions. In the "Direction" column, the arrows represent how interaction the interaction was initiated: interactions originating from the ecovillage and directed toward the respective actor are indicated with a right-sided arrow (→); interactions initiated by external actors and directed toward the ecovillage are represented with a left-side arrow (←), and interactions that developed mutually from both sides are marked with a two-sided arrow (↔).

Table 6. Summary of Interactions in the Ecovillage Schloss Tonndorf with their respective Community Sectors provided by (KU, 2025).

Interaction	**Starting point of interaction**	**Community Sectors Involved**	**Key Actors involved**	**Direction**	**Description**
Pre-Interaction: Foundation of Ecovillage	2004-2006	Government	Local authorities	→	To establish an intentional living ecovillage, the founding group strategized negotiations with both the landowner and local administration. After successfully coming into an agreement the Gemeinschaftsprojekt aus Schloss Tonndorf (Community project in the Tonndorf Castle) was established, followed by the creation of the Castle Cooperative (2005), and the non-profit organization of the ecovillage (2005).
		Human Services	Founding members; Tonndorf Castle Cooperative;	↔	
		Business	Landowners	→	
First Interactions	2006	Government	Local authorities	→	The first major interaction with neighbors and the outside community was an alternative Christmas market in 2006. This event offered

		Community Activist and Volunteer Groups	Visitors / Volunteers; Castle Community		cultural activities and provided a platform for local entrepreneurs to showcase and sell their products. Despite the castle community having just moved in, they managed to attract around 2,000 visitors from across the region in a single weekend. Since then, the event has become an annual tradition, welcoming around 1000 per day during the Christmas market.
Daily basis interactions	2006 - ongoing	Government	Administrative bodies; Ecovillage cooperative.	↔	Ecovillage members participate in different daily private and community interactions outside of the Castle. These interactions include: • Bureaucratic: for such personal and community matters involving the administrative bodies of the region or the financial institutions as needed. • Educational: Children, teenagers, and members of the ecovillage attend the nearby high schools and universities. • Business: Some members commute to nearby cities for work to sustain their personal incomes. • Cultural and sports: Ecovillage members actively participate in regional cultural and sports groups, including football teams.
		Education	High School, University; Ecovillage members	↔	
		Business	Co-workers; Eco-village members; Suppliers of the ecovillage.	→	
		Culture and sports	Local cultural groups, local sports teams; ecovillage members	→	

GEN	2014 - ongoing	Community Activist and Volunteer Groups; Human Services	GEN (members and specialists); ecovillage representatives for GEN	↔	Schloss Tonndorf was one of the founding ecovillages of the network and remains one of its 23 current members. These ecovillages support each other through internal knowledge exchange, addressing common challenges, sharing solutions, and collaboration on sustainability projects.
TransRegio II Project	2023-2025	Community Activist and Volunteer Groups	Talvolk members; Ecovillage members.	→	The ecovillage has strong ties with its surrounding communities, which have led to joining projects such as the free school, the traveling café, and the regional initiative Talvolk.
		Business	Traveling café staff; Traveling café; participants/volunteers; ecovillage members.	↔	
Freie Talschule Tonndorf	2021- Ongoing	Government	Education Ministry of Germany; German Chancellor	→	Run by the Talvolk association, which invested approximately 1.5 million euros in its development, this school welcomes children from across the valley. Its goal is to provide local education, allowing children to reach school on foot or by bike, rather than traveling long distances to institutions in nearby cities. Currently, 54 children from grades 1st to 6th attend the school. Until they reach 10th grade, they will not have to leave the Valley for their education. The school has become not only an
		Education	School's staff.	↔	
		Human Services	Talvolk association; Ecovillage members; Parents; children		
		Environment	School's surroundings		

					educational space for children but also a community hub for adults, hosting most of the Talvolk meetings and other activities. It offers its rooms as venues for external events and has also generated new job opportunities in the region.
Talvolk (People of the Valley)	2017-Ongoing	Community Activist and Volunteer Groups	Valley people (participants, volunteers); Ecovillage members, representatives.	→	Founded by a member of the ecovillage, this is a citizens' initiative focused on sustainable regional development and fostering good coexistence. The valley consists of eight villages working together to regenerate the region through projects such as the reconstruction of multi-generational farms and the revival of village commerce. Every two weeks, "Valley Rounds" meetings are held at the free school, where willing residents discuss local projects and concerns. One key project is the Housing Project, which aims to develop new housing spaces for new families relocating into the region.
		Business	Suppliers	↔	
		Environment	Nature	↔	
		Housing and Development	Housing project participants, and executers.	↔	
Solawi Tonndorf (Community Supported Agriculture, CSA)	2023-Ongoing	Environment (sustainable agriculture); Human Services (food, distribution).	Natures' provisions	→	This CSA operates on 2,000 hectares with seven valley residents, three of whom are permanent employees. They work to produce food for 70 households in the valley. The CSA was founded in 2021, and the ecovillage became a member in 2023.

		Human services	Gardeners, farmers, volunteers. Ecovillage members participants.	→	
Catering service	2008-Ongoing	Business & Human Services	Catering staff (ecovillage members); Costumers	→	The castle's former kitchen was transformed into a vegetarian, organic, and regional catering service that provides fresh, seasonal, and locally sourced meals. It serves both the free school and the forest kindergarten and offers seminars and workshops on healthy cooking practices.
		Education	Workshop attendees; Catering staff (ecovillage members)	→	
Seminars	2008-Ongoing	Education	Seminar organizers (sometimes these are ecovillage members); visitors, attendees.	→	The castle has two well-equipped seminar rooms available for rent. Workshops cover a range of topics, including herbal knowledge, fruit tree pruning, regenerative agriculture, and basket weaving. In the past, several seminars have focused on community building and ecovillage development.
		Business	Seminar organizers (Sometimes these are ecovillage members)	↔	
Academia cooperation	2009-Ongoing	Education	Academic staff, students, ecovillage representatives	↔	Professors have been invited to visit the valley to explore its projects and discuss how students from various disciplines can contribute to the region's transformation. Some ecovillage members are also invited to university classes and workshops to share their experiences and sustainable practices.

Other interactions					
Waldkindergarten Grashüpfer	2010-Ongoing	Education	Kita staff (some are ecovillage members)	→	Founded by the ecovillage's non-profit association, this kindergarten, located in the forest next to the castle, accommodates 15 children from the valley. It provides fresh, healthy meals from the castle's kitchen (Schloss Tonndorf, 2024d).
		Human Services	Parents; catering service (ecovillage members);	→	
Café Hier & Jetzt	2024-Ongoing	Business & Tourism	Café Staff (ecovillage members); suppliers (some are ecovillage members); visitors.	→	Open on weekends, the café offers a small menu of savory dishes and pastries made with regional ingredients. Its picturesque view over the valley has made it a popular destination for visitors (Schloss Tonndorf, 2024a).
Schloss Milch	2013-Ongoing	Business & Human Services	Staff (ecovillage members); clients	→	A small farm within the castle grounds holds three dairy cows. Their milk is processed on-site to produce fresh milk, yogurt, and quark (Schloss Tonndorf, 2024b).
Castle-Schlossmkerei	2006-Ongoing	Business	Staff (ecovillage members); clients	→	A certified organic beekeeping business has been operating on the castle's land since 2009. It is part of the association of professional beekeepers (Schloss Tonndorf, 2024c).

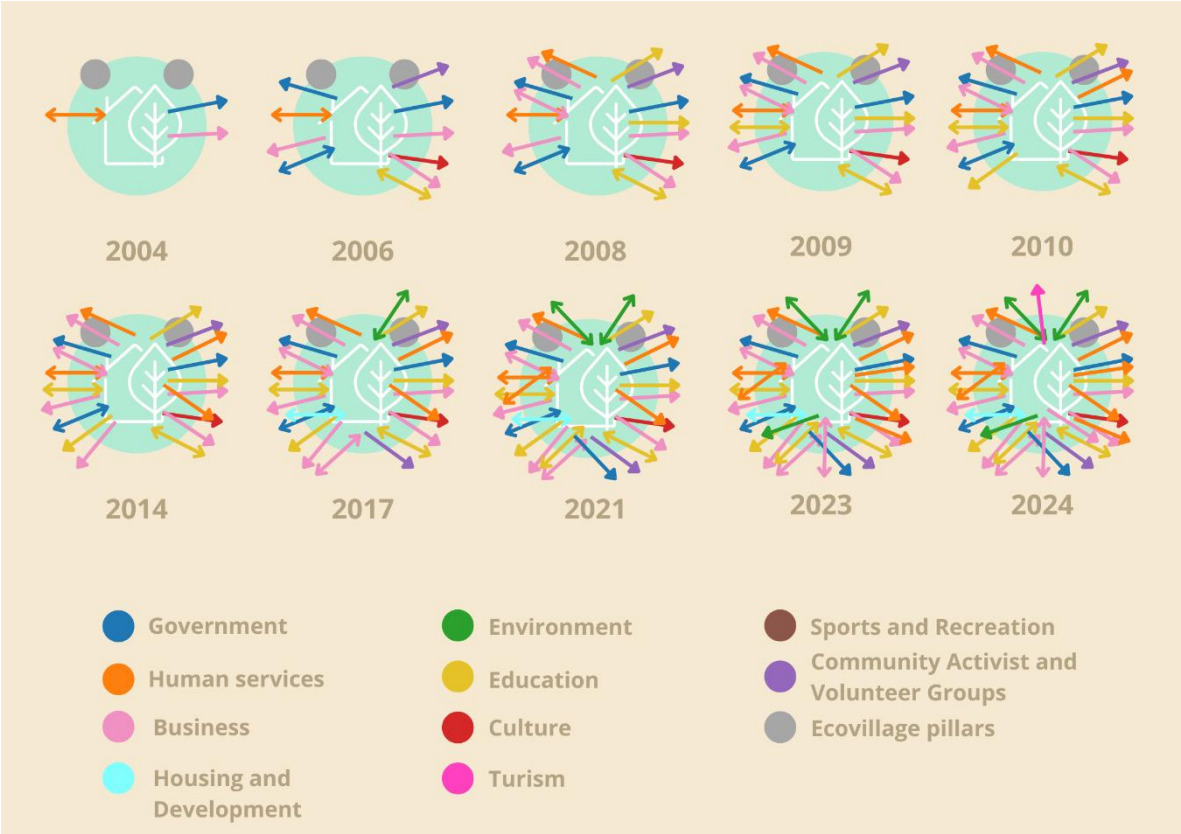

Figure 6. Evolution of the interactions' initiation approach between Schloss Tonndorf ecovillage and outside community sectors (adapted from (Kleverbeck & Terstriep, 2017)).

Figure 6 adapted from (Kleverbeck & Terstriep, 2017), represents the evolution of interactions and the direction of contact between the ecovillage and the key sectors identified for each interaction. This period from 2004 to 2024 starts in the formulation and initiation of the ecovillage itself and ends with the last relevant interaction identified. The house icon inside the circle symbolizes the ecovillage, while the small grey circles represent its core pillars, and the arrows indicate the direction in which cooperation was initiated between the sectors and the ecovillage. Unilateral arrows pointing from the ecovillage to outside of the circle represent interactions that originated from within the community. Bidirectional arrows with two indicate interactions that emerged as an initiative of both sectors. Finally, unilateral arrows pointing inside the circle symbolize interactions that have come as invitations from sectors outside the ecovillage.

4.4. Social Innovation Biography - Schloss Tonndorf e.G.

The following results are based on and adapted to the structures of the SIBs from (Terstriep et al., 2015).

4.4.1. Context and framework conditions

One part of the founding group already knew each other from establishing a free school in Erfurt before the idea of the ecovillage arose. They had experience with social transformation processes and knew how to finance similar projects. During a hike in the nearby valley, they spotted the empty castle, which seemed ideal for an intentional community project. They decided to negotiate the purchase of the property with the owner, The Red Cross, who was previously running a nursing home in this castle. However, their idea and funding proposal were insufficient, and after several attempts, they abandoned the project. Later, one of the co-founders (and current member) arrived, becoming one of the voices initiating the current project idea. Among his partners, they contacted the first group that attempted to form an intentional community and merged as one group. He used his knowledge in project development from other communities where he worked on the proposal for this new project. After negotiations about the idea and purchasing of the property, they signed a contract in which they were required to develop their Cooperative and raise the necessary funds for a construction permit within four months. They succeeded and founded the Ecovillage Cooperative.

At the very beginning, the village council of Tonndorf showed some skepticism about so many people sharing a property; nevertheless, they soon realized that this would be attractive to young families, not only refreshing the town's population but also increasing it. Moreover, this would make it more feasible for the local administration to apply for state subsidies for the village expenses. Another strategy used by the founding team to overcome skepticism leveraged their expertise. They shared success stories from other ecovillages with longer histories and personal experiences in these. Some had been there before, visiting, collaborating with them, or living there temporarily. Additionally, they also shared their visions and goals for the project using appropriate language related to cooperative living and intentional communities. In the first months, some neighbors were curious about the ecovillage since this was a new and different initiative for them. In response, the first members of the ecovillage organized events and guided tours to introduce them to the community's values and lifestyles.

The process of initiating an interaction that somehow involves community members, or the Ecovillage does not have a standardized approach. This applies to both outsiders and

internal members. These ideas have several ways of being presented: by emailing the responsible leader of the circle, writing them down formally, or discussing them in person, either in the plenum (for members of the community) or at any available time. The plenum will approve or deny this idea, and since opinions are important and validated when an idea is not approved, the proposer or group of people can defend their idea and negotiate with the plenum if necessary.

Another relevant interaction is the Talvolk, which was an idea initiated by Ecovillage member 1 eight years ago (2016). They made an open invitation where 20 people from 4 nearby villages joined the initial meeting, and together they talked about a vision for the valley and their contributions to its transformation. A variety of people came along, and there were different perspectives and ideas, such as a school in the valley, support for pensioners, self-sufficiency in food, among others. From this initiative, programs like the housing project or the "community islands" began due to the willingness of several people to be part of it, and to move into the regional community project led by the Castle. Old, abandoned houses are the foundation buildings for these islands; these are bought and rebuilt with local materials by local people for local people. The ideas coming from valley residents can be presented during the "valley rounds" part of the Talvolk initiative, held every other week in the free school, where everyone is invited to participate. After the idea is presented and approved, small work teams are formed to make it possible.

4.4.2. Idea and Problem Addressed.

Similar rural areas have a variety of problems that are related to the global challenges, such as climate change. Agriculture and forest management have become big industries, generating very limited jobs for only some, and present-day practices are depleting the land and soil, reducing biodiversity, and polluting the water. Solitude in villages and big cities is also an issue that is being addressed in the ecovillage by living in a safe social environment with a considerable number of people who share the same values. There is trust to share, engage, and have closer relations than neighbors usually have nowadays. This enhances the well-being of the members by sharing their co-living experiences in the regular meetings organized inside the ecovillage, as well as in the Talvolk meetings, where they are open to talk about concerns and make plans.

The lack of a sense of belonging among people of the region and in general in the world is also a problem that needs to be addressed, and that could bring more consciousness into the present social and ecological problems. Some activities, like the village cinema sessions, encourage people to be more aware of latent social and ecological problems and

to discuss them after watching these films. The demand for inhabiting the valley has risen, and for this reason, the valley initiative looked for opportunities to expand. That is why one of their projects is buying available houses in the village and making them part of the community.

Everyone is open to sharing their ideas about the transformation of the Valley; many of these interactions have been inspired by projects done in other regions of Germany and even the world. Most of these ideas have been born from team cooperation in these free-speech spaces. The people of the Valley know what their missing elements are, which means that they have a good understanding of what the region is lacking for transformation.

4.4.3. Motivation and Core Solution

One of the main motivations to engage in the ecovillage and its interactions is to reconnect with nature and to improve quality of life with a slower pace and less consumption. They aim to undertake more aware and friendlier production by reconnecting with other living beings and learning from one another, and from nature. Witnessing projects that work towards transformation and regeneration in other regions inspires the community, raising their awareness that their problems have solutions. They have already done this with the water cycle and soil fertility regeneration in the valley . This has been made possible based on a similar project in another region in Thuringia, whose report served as a base for the Tonndorf community.

The various interactions have brought up multiple learnings for community members. Particularly they have realized that they need to divide tasks and projects and avoid concentrating all energy, resources, and people into one big project; new people in the community bring new and fresh ideas; healthy relationships are important for the developing projects and the communities; it is important to include a sense of interconnectedness in all of their projects; there is no perfect ecovillage- each has its achievements and failures, and not feeling alone in this experience is encouraging; being open-minded; Inviting all sorts of people to the initiatives, as one never knows who might join; and having regional projects is more manageable than bigger scale ones.

4.4.4. Resources and Strategies

Challenges

Lack of resources (time, human resources, materials, financial resources)

One of the most persistent challenges is to find time to work on the different projects planned in the community. Members of the community have "normal" lives with jobs, families, and friends, which makes it challenging for them to become active participants in the current or future projects. Some projects, like the Free School, have required and still need considerable energy and attention, occupying the limited number of people available for these tasks. Additional people have to support other upcoming projects, not only to make them possible but also to develop them faster. Besides time, members' unknown capacities, expectations, desired ways of living, and adaptability to community living can also be challenging. Moreover, there is uncertainty regarding the time required to achieve project goals, e.g., improving the condition of the buildings in the community houses project. It was decided that instead of requesting a bank loan, they would obtain materials and resources from local suppliers and carry out the construction work themselves. This approach makes them aware that the total reconstruction of the building can take more time than initially expected.

The magnitude of the population of older generations compared to younger generations is also a concern for community members. They are conscious that new generations need to be more involved in the projects and activities of the community, and they actively encourage their participation.

About coming together and unifying their goal & adapting to an intentional community

During the founding of the ecovillage, one of the existing challenges was to unify all the founders' visions, as they came from diverse backgrounds and personalities. At the beginning of co-living, there was initially harmony, but soon this was disrupted by conflicts, some of them generational, and disagreements about different topics. Personalities clashed, and some former members could not handle the first-time experience in an intentional community and decided to move on from the ecovillage. Nowadays, they have designated members to mediate these conflicts and find the best possible ways to overcome them. Another challenge they faced was that there were many elements or facilities not functioning at full capacity (e.g., bathrooms, heating, roofs) since the building had not been inhabited for seven years before they purchased it. This was

another reason why people left the community, but nowadays they have managed to rebuild and renew numerous spaces of the building.

Climate anxiety and other worries are also latent factors among community members. The weight of "saving the world" is heavy and sometimes overwhelming. In the weekly plenary sessions, they express all kinds of topics, including their concerns, allowing members to show their support and awareness that small steps can also have an influence. Additionally, two or three times a year, there is an external coach who helps overcome fears and concerns. Achieving the proper communication methods to involve more people from the region is also challenging. Most people involved in the transition projects are those who have moved into the region, with very few original inhabitants of the Valley. This is why at the beginning of the regional initiative, there was an open invitation to join Talvolk, but out of approximately 1500 residents, only 20 joined the initiative.

About bureaucracy

The initial idea of starting the school involved renting some unused public buildings in the valley. Nevertheless, a person from the regional administration insisted on influencing the pedagogical concept of the school to make this possible. In the end, the founding group of the school managed to buy the building where the town's old school was located, and this is where the Free School operates nowadays. After several months of working with the Ministry of Education, they received new demands about the project just weeks before the school's inauguration. The organizing group found this shocking, as it was an extensive list of points to achieve, and feared the project would fail. However, after receiving support from the chancellor and making several phone calls, they overcame this obstacle.

Grants/funds

As a community, they applied for a funding scheme by the German Government around the time they started the ecovillage project. This initiative consisted of encouraging people to buy cooperative shares for some years, receiving back around 2 % or 3 % of their value from the government. Later, when they started developing concrete projects, they could apply for more of these initiatives, such as in the catering kitchen, which was supported by a European leader. Within the project framework, around 35% of the total reconstruction costs were covered, which was extremely helpful for the community. The adaptation of the castle café, which required the reconstruction of some rooms, was also funded by a political leader, covering 70% of the total cost. The castle bridge reconstruction received € 10,000 from the county. Nevertheless, they estimate that

around 80% of the total investments made in the past 19 years have come from reinvestment of rent payments and revenue from organized events. Some projects, like the community housing project, are self-funded. They state that applying for external grants or funds could make them dependent on other institutions, and they would rather be part of their community's economic cycle.

To enhance the local economy, Talvolk is about to implement a regional fund starting in 2025, where participants will contribute a portion of their net income to the fund, starting at 4% and increasing yearly until reaching 100% after 25 years. The funds will be divided into three parts: solidarity income exchange, investment in cooperative projects, and sharing money with less-resourced regions. Participants will have 50% of their income left for daily use and need to adopt a more modest lifestyle to contribute to sustainability.

Resources

Financial resources of the ecovillage come from the private incomes of its members, used to pay their respective rents. Some of these income sources are the businesses located in the Castle, such as the dairy business, beekeeping, catering services, and seminars.

People themselves are seen as a resource; therefore, it is important to create spaces, formats, and networks that facilitate knowledge exchange. One such space is the round table discussions with the Talvolk community, where conversations about the future and strategies for transition take place, aiming to create a better future for children and future generations. Making connections and acknowledging each other's contributions is another important factor that makes sure everyone feels appreciated for their contributions to the regional projects. The Travel Café, a mobile café car that travels between valley villages, was a result of this sense of community. Every month, it relocated to a different village, providing an opportunity to meet changemakers, supporters, and allies involved in the valley's transformation and regeneration. The initiative fosters the exchange of experiences, life stories, motivations, contributions, and plans (Talvolk, 2024).

One of the most difficult resources to obtain is the consciousness that sustainability can only be achieved by considering global unity, interdisciplinarity, and solidarity. That is why individuals involved in these transition initiatives should count on diverse skills such as clear, good communication, open-mindedness, dreaming, envisioning things, understanding the current state of the world, facing existing problems, finding the resources (human, financial, material) implementing the changes, learning from mistakes, finding alliances with others, and learning and inspire.

They also see support from other actors, like politicians and researchers, as a resource that they have frequently received in their projects. The community also draws inspiration from other regions and parts of the world, which occasionally serve as references to produce ideas or solutions.

4.4.5. The Network – Governance, Support & Obstacles

Actors

The actors participating in the interactions are diverse. Nevertheless, some of the most important ones are the citizens who are part of the initiative, people from various villages from the Valley, the administration (local politicians like the mayor), academia (research institutes of social-ecological and landscape transformations), local businesses, outside initiatives that inspire them and could also interact with them, other communities and ecovillages, international or national organizations providing support and funding, and last but not least, federal politicians.

For Tonndorf, networks work better if there is a friendship relationship. Therefore, there is a sincere effort to get to know each other on deeper levels, especially in the local initiative (Talvolk) and, of course, inside the ecovillage. They aim to achieve this through their regular meetings, as well as with the travel café project that emerged as a result of the TransRegio II project.

Relationship with local authorities

Some of the members of the community are part of the village council. This has inspired the creation of a sustainability council initiative in the village, and more young people and women were also encouraged to join it, aiming to diversify this public body. There are good relationships with the mayor of the village, and some other village mayors are part of the Talvolk. Many federal politicians have also visited the ecovillage, including the chancellor, and are willing to help whenever needed, e.g., during the creation process of the Free School.

"Politicians have understood that a community like ours brings inspiration for regenerative, sustainable changes in rural environments, and that is why they come, visit, and support". - Ecovillage member 1.

Foundation and ecovillage awareness

The founding group of the Castle initiative already had experience with community living, which led them to come together and consolidate this idea through a snowball effect.

Some members already had similar experiences before joining the Tonndorf community. These included attending scout summer camps and living in ecovillages in other countries, which has led to discovering the Castle initiative.

4.4.6. Expected outcomes & Impact

They have made clear that one of their main goals is to be an inspiration for other regions inside and outside Germany and to be a role model of transformation. The community looks forward to collaborating with other communities and drawing inspiration from them, showcasing the example they achieve from being part of the networks. For them, this inspiration would also come with raising awareness and working towards being good individuals for themselves and others. In their expected overall vision, which they aspire to achieve in approximately 25 years, some of their goals are: enhancing agri-biodiversity by having enough small-scale farms to produce sufficiently diverse food for the region and for nearby cities; including and taking care of elders and children in all activities; planting agroforestry fields managed to cope up with climate change; creating retention lakes to keep water in place; enriching the region's economy and services so that inhabitants do not have to commute to long distances for work or education; developing more collective workspaces open to everyone; encouraging the revival of cultural habits like celebrations, festivals and traditional events; reducing unemployment rates to zero, and, above all, becoming a place filled with friendship and solidarity among people. It is evident they have already started with most points of that overall vision. Interactions like the free school, the CSA, the catering service, small businesses such as beekeeping and dairy products made in the castle, are already transforming the region on their scales.

Media / Social Media

The ecovillage is visible on the official websites of the networks where it holds membership. This is how some current inhabitants got their first contact with them. In addition to the ecovillage's website, some initiatives like the Free School and the Talvolk also have their respective websites where they show their projects and invite people to join their events (like film projections and seminars). They try to keep recent information by updating the websites every week. Regarding audiovisual production, they are currently working on a film about the Valley initiative, where they will show some interviews with the valley residents and documented events. Schloss Tonndorf also has a presence in the local media such as newspapers and radio, and even some TV journalists have visited to document their actions and achievements.

4.4.7. Measurement

The Valley's demographics are well known, allowing the community to keep track of local needs, challenges, and solutions. Approximately 2,500 people live in the eight villages that form the Valley. This means they need between 12 and 15 agriculture projects to provide organic food for these individuals. In addition, 40 children are born every year, yet only 7 new school places become available yearly, which means they would need to develop approximately six additional schools similar to the existing one to accommodate all children living in the Valley. Thus, they compare the number of people they reach with the target they have set beforehand. Nevertheless, there is no clear understanding of the ecological impact they are having, such as the carbon footprint of the Valley community.

Additionally, interactions like free school, seminars, and entrepreneurship projects also keep records of financial and management matters. However, they do not have measurement procedures for other aspects of these interactions, like awareness levels, satisfaction, and knowledge, among others. Furthermore, some of the small businesses held in the ecovillage have received certifications for organic or environmentally friendly production.

5. DISCUSSION

This section aims to further elaborate on the research objectives, allowing for a detailed and coherent interpretation of the results obtained throughout this study. First, the use of SIBs is discussed as tools for the analysis of knowledge flows, relationships, and networks that have structured the interactions between ecovillages and their regional environment. Subsequently, specific projects, programs, and initiatives that include the participation of external actors are analyzed, with a focus on their initiation, importance, and scope of the SET. Finally, a comparison of the two case studies is made, emphasizing dimensions not analyzed in the previous two sections.

5.1. Reconstruction of the Knowledge Dynamics and Relations Between Ecovillages and Outside Actors through SIBs.

Using a method such as SIBs proves to be fitting for analyzing the dynamics of knowledge, actors, and networks, especially at the beginning of the interactions, including their challenges and milestones. This approach was based on previous literature; nonetheless, it was directly adapted from the one applied in (Terstriep et al., 2015), starting from the premise that the analysis focused on the interactions between the villages and their surroundings. These were defined as social innovations; in other words, the interactions themselves were the core focus of the biographies. It was also possible to trace aspects of the foundation of the ecovillages, but this was not the main focus of the biographies; rather, it was viewed as a pre-interaction phase to help identify these facts and possible patterns of how such interactions were initiated.

5.1.1. Context and framework

There is no unique way to develop social innovation (Oeij et al., 2019; Wirth, Bandi Tanner, et al., 2023). However, the origins of both villages share a common context, as the founding members had previous experience living in similar communities. In both cases, an earlier attempt to establish an intentional community on the same unused lands had been unsuccessful. The subsequent approval of the projects reflected the importance of the initial actors possessing a basic set of knowledge and, appropriate lexicon. Moreover, an understanding of previous successful cases was instrumental to effectively presenting their proposals to relevant stakeholders, such as local government and landowners (La Rocca & Snehota, 2014; Leite, 2022).

Regarding the context of initiating interactions, both villages initially faced skepticism from authorities and neighbors. As a response, they actively sought to include the surrounding region from the outset by maintaining open doors. Not only did this action serve as a means to support collective transformation, but also to be perceived as examples of unified regions. They aimed at working toward a socio-ecological transition, which is grounded in innovative and ecological practices, and consciously departs from the extractive logics of modern society.

Both ecovillages remain open and receptive to new ideas and projects, which makes them available to the needed iterative processes to strengthen the value of community participation in tackling practical and environmental challenges (Yalciner Ercoskun et al., 2025a). Their processes for initiating interactions are not complex and can be done verbally or in writing. Once a proposal is submitted, its approval depends on internal procedures, after which it is assigned to the relevant working group for planning and implementation. This approach facilitates innovation, as it ensures that proposals are easily received and that the voices of all participants are respected throughout discussion spaces, depending on the stage of the interaction: proposal, execution, or operation (Karavioti, 2024). Also, the sociocracy framework practiced by the Sulzbrunn community which was explicitly mentioned by its members. That stimulates transparent participation, adaptability, and decision-making (Yalciner Ercoskun et al., 2025a). In this way, the constant exchange of internal and external knowledge is incentivized; this intellectual commons' scaling can be highly beneficial both for the innovation process and for the community, as stated by (Avelino & Kunze, 2009; Hess & Ostrom, 2006; Yalciner Ercoskun et al., 2025b).

Initiatives such as the Seminar house and the Talvolk were created to connect regional residents and like-minded communities with the values of the ecovillages. They serve as bridges between the villages and the surrounding region, expanding opportunities for knowledge exchange and fostering new initiatives that can benefit the region and potentially, other parts of the world.

5.1.2. Problem addressed

Both analyzed cases serve as examples that ecovillages can function as laboratories of innovation (Avelino & Kunze, 2009; Koduvayur Venkitaraman & Joshi, 2022; Kunze & Avelino, 2015). These intentional communities do not seek to solve specific problems; however, while one of the villages states that it does not prioritize problem-solving, the other explicitly identifies issues such as population decline in the region, the impacts of

large-scale industrialized agriculture, and modern social isolation. Ecovillages are indeed seen as incubators of innovation and testing grounds for potential solutions to contemporary societal challenges. Therefore, they are considered highly relevant in the broader social-ecological transition that humanity urgently requires.

By offering diverse spaces and activities to the surrounding societies, these ecovillages contribute to increasing collective consciousness and awareness of the current climate crisis (Cohen, 2017). Through resources such as the projection of films with ecological themes and environmental issues. In addition, these interactions promote free expression and reflection on these matters. Initiatives such as the TransRegio II project and the Talvolk are spaces where people can come together to recognize themselves as individuals, acknowledge their contributions, communicate their ideas and perceptions of the present regional and global issues. Furthermore, interactions such as the communal housing project have directly addressed the concern of regional population decline in one of the ecovillages. This was done by acquiring abandoned properties and transforming them into new living spaces for incoming families, bringing fresh ideas and contributions to community life.

5.1.3. Motivation and core solution

One of their main motivations is to serve as an example of a different, slower-paced, less consumerist, and more nature-connected model of life. They aim to become beacons of knowledge to the outside world and not remain isolated. In this process, both ecovillages have had valuable learnings for their development in these transformative processes. Key learnings include: new members attract new knowledge, good allies are essential, and no ecovillage is perfect. Sharing these learnings between communities in spaces like the GEN meetings is necessary as this contributes to building resilience (Avelino et al., 2020; Tuitjer & Küpper, 2020; Yalciner Ercoskun et al., 2025a). The solutions these ecovillages have found are varied and depend on the challenges they aim to address. For this reason, it has been observed that some of the initiatives found or joined adopt multidisciplinary approaches, such as Common Good Economy certifications. These contribute to raising awareness and encouraging more responsible and conscious consumption among individuals and stakeholders involved in production processes. Both ecovillages demonstrate that social innovations are not only technological or strategic, but also deeply experiential and emotional (Cohen, 2017; Dumitru et al., 2016; Pisters, 2022).

5.1.4. Resources and strategies

These two studied intentional communities demonstrate how ecovillages can combine resilience, creativity, and adaptability to manage uncertainty in resource scarcity and prioritize local and fair consumption (Roysen & Cruz, 2020; Siebert, 2023). The main income of both ecovillages is obtained by the monthly contributions of each of their members, which are paid from their salaries. The jobs of these members are located both outside and inside the community; some run enterprises or are involved in the activities or services that the ecovillages offer. These outside jobs could be hindering the members from investing time and other resources in the ecovillage (Ergas, 2010; Siebert, 2023).

Networks and relationships are essential to these communities, as they are not isolated but in constant contact with external actors (Avelino et al., 2020; Tuitjer & Küpper, 2020; Yalciner Ercoskun et al., 2025a). They therefore maintain open communication and a strong commitment to strengthening these connections. Another important source of income is the educational facilities and held events such as seminars, workshops, and other activities, which are common among ecovillages according to (Dawson, 2006; Erol, 2024).

Schloss Tonndorf demonstrates a diverse range of income sources managed by some of its members, which include dairy production, catering, beekeeping, and seminars. In addition, being a beneficiary of several public funds has served as an important catalyst not only for the improvement of the castle's facilities but also for supporting interactions such as the free school and catering service. Conversely, as many other ecovillages these two are affected by bureaucratic barriers (Cohen, 2017; Yalciner Ercoskun et al., 2025a), a lack of time and limited human resources when applying for—or even becoming aware of—these external funding opportunities (Boyer, 2015; Kunze, 2012; Siebert, 2023).

Some other common challenges shared between communities are the short duration of the projects they participate in, emotional fatigue (Cohen, 2017), and administrative delays from the government (Yalciner Ercoskun et al., 2025a). Tonndorf's cooperation in initiatives such as the regional solidarity fund reflects an incentive to work together with strategies to achieve regional economic autonomy. This is also reflected in Sulzbrunn's participation in the ECG certifications and Allgäu fairnetzt, which aim to improve, encourage, and strengthen local economies.

5.1.5. The network – Governance, support & obstacles

Both cases confirm that well-established and well-connected networks provide fundamental support for the emergence of innovations (Avelino et al., 2020; Strasser, de Kraker, et al., 2020; Tschumi & Mayer, 2024b). Thus, the two ecovillages have been extremely well connected to networks since the formulation of their projects. However, the outcomes of these connections manifest similarly in each case: both began their participation in networks spanning trans local spaces such as GEN Germany, and as they settled in, each founded or joined local networks. Sulzbrunn has the Seminar house, an important space that is a relational nucleus, attracting internal and external actors. Moreover, it is a member of the Allgäu Fairnetzt network, which promotes courses and activities in the region on sustainability and quality-of-life improvement. Meanwhile, Schloss Tonndorf formed and participated actively in the local initiative called Talvolk, which fosters collaboration among the populations of the valley and encourages trust and a sense of belonging towards the ecovillage within the region. Local support is important because innovations flourish not only from a need and an idea but also from the support provided at the local level through local networks. This in turn thrives due to the interest of new external participants (Tuitjer & Küpper, 2020).

The benefits of being part of a network such as GEN Germany are numerous and fruitful, allowing direct access to information and advice drawn from the experiences of other villages and network experts (Yalciner Ercoskun et al., 2025a). This support enables ecovillages to carry out their projects effectively, addressing potential challenges. Interviewed members reported that this collective support generates a feeling of tranquility stemming from peer cooperation. Additionally, both eco-communities participate in TransRegio II, which has encouraged activities to recognize individuals working for the region and enabled ecovillage guidance for new community housing projects. Schloss Tonndorf demonstrated that maintaining direct and constant contact with the government facilitated overcoming challenges during the founding of the free school. Although the Ministry of Education initially raised numerous observations prior to its inauguration, direct contact and cooperation with the Chancellor facilitated the resolution of these obstacles. These cooperations and network participations incentivize the interference of numerous external actors, which is relevant for the transference of newly acquired synthetic knowledge into the local context (Bock, 2016; Tschumi & Mayer, 2024b). Despite these benefits, some institutional challenges that affect governance persist, such as bureaucratic slowness and complexity (Jick & De Keyser, 2024; Olsen,

2021), generational differences (Kapoor & Solomon, 2011; Polrel & Coppola, 2021; Purdue University, n.d.), and staff turnover (Kapoor & Solomon, 2011) .

5.1.6. Outcomes and impacts

The analyzed ecovillages work towards the same goal: regional transformation aimed at serving as examples and disseminators of sustainable values and cooperative practices. Both communities function as catalysts of change and inspiration, formulating and developing projects according to their respective capacities and contexts as stated by (Avelino & Kunze, 2009; K. Litfin, 2009; Mooney, 2015). Gemeinschaft Sulzbrunn has an educational and inspirational impact largely centered around the Seminar house. These seminars offer courses and lectures on various topics connected to village values. This additionally creates an unexpected outcome by attracting visitors who initially had no intention of engaging in communal life. Consequently, visitors acquire knowledge about these lifestyles, possibly spreading this new knowledge further. Furthermore, Sulzbrunn's collaborations with GEN and TransRegio II reinforce the cycle of feedback, shared learning, and idea replication.

In contrast, Schloss Tonndorf has generated a more long-term vision together with the Talvolk for regional regeneration. This aims to integrate different spheres of its context, such as reviving the development of the local economy, climate resilience, strengthening local culture, and enhancing the development of local agriculture with forgotten practices. This is done through strategies such as alternative education with the free school that seeks to stop the migration of inhabitants to the outskirts of the valley and at the same time reinforce the sense of belonging of its inhabitants.

Knowledge is a resource that can be disseminated within a group of people facing social dilemmas; this is why digital technologies redefine knowledge as a commons (Hess & Ostrom, 2006; Labaeye, 2020). Additionally, social media presence should not remain limited in both ecovillages due to its ability to serve as an environment that fosters social innovation by encouraging new ideas to emerge, grow, and subsequently be disseminated and developed (PELKA & MARKMANN, 2015). Nevertheless, both ecovillages maintain websites promoting their activities and spreading their values; they also appear on the websites of some initiatives and networks to which they belong. Furthermore, they occasionally feature in small documentaries and books showcasing alternative ways of living. This exposure helps maintain their public presence, greatly benefiting them by fostering more alliances, enhancing reliability when applying for resources, and serving as

references for other initiatives seeking to apply similar models or practices in different geographical contexts.

5.1.7. Measurement

A persistent pattern in grassroots innovations is the limited capacity to measure their impact, due to a lack of skills, time, or resources (Nicholls & Dees, 2015; Rizzo et al., 2020; Strasser, de Kraker, et al., 2020). Some ecovillage initiatives maintain records of finances, clients, and events. By doing this, they could avoid future problems or reprocesses for the planning and execution of future events or initiatives, that generate slowness and loss of resources. Similarly, there is a lack of methodologies to measure impacts on society and the environment such as carbon footprints, blue footprints, levels of environmental or climate awareness of society, levels of satisfaction of communities, among others. This obstacle encourages ecovillages to seek strengthening their relationships with academic institutions and thus be able to work together in favor of this transition. Furthermore, the true reach of digital awareness remains unknown, as metrics such as likes and views fail to measure deeper engagement or impact beyond superficial interaction.

5.2. Identified Projects, Programs, or Activities Involving External Participants.

Both cases demonstrate a diverse landscape of interactions with external actors. This reveals their faculty to relate to their surrounding areas' thematic networks. This is being achieved by involving themselves in the economy and municipality, and reaching the outside through education. This also reaffirms their capacity to transform communities and infrastructures (Dawson & Lucas, 2006; Kunze & Avelino, 2015; K. Moore & Wight, 2007). These interactions serve as both entry points and amplifiers for social innovation. While most of the identified interactions were internal initiatives originating from the ecovillages, both communities have managed to establish relationships with authorities, academic institutions, regional inhabitants, and local businesses. These enabled them to sustain and scale their efforts and intentions, which at the local level is highly relevant to the knowledge inputs in all the stages of the social innovation process (Kluvankova et al., 2021; Tschumi & Mayer, 2024b).

In Sulzbrunn, interactions with external actors typically emerge as internal initiatives that subsequently expand outward, attracting external collaboration or interest. A clear example is the Seminar house, which operates as a hybrid space that not only promotes the internal values of the community but also welcomes outsiders who bring diverse knowledge from all over Germany and even other countries. Similarly, Sulzbrunn’s

participation in initiatives such as TransRegio II, certifications with the ECG, and involvement in Allgäu Fairnetzt reflect how this ecovillage aims to extend its practices outward while adapting external ideas internally. It has been observed that these interactions usually flourish through mutual recognition of shared values. Although most initiatives originate within the ecovillage, they are consolidated through funding, cooperation, or knowledge exchange with public institutions, universities, and activist networks.

On the other hand, Schloss Tonndorf demonstrates a more territorially anchored model where regional integration is at the center of its initiatives. By participating in the Talvolk initiative, this ecovillage has cooperated closely with the surrounding villages in the valley, developing solutions in areas such as local food systems, education, and housing. The valley's free school is a significant example of how the Talvolk, in collaboration with ecovillage inhabitants, has mobilized political, financial, and social capital from external actors. Additionally, participation in initiatives such as GEN, CSA, and the Travel Café (associated with TransRegio II) highlights Tonndorf's proactive approach towards open cooperation aimed at achieving shared goals.

In both cases, the direction of interactions has evolved. Initially, most interactions started as unilateral efforts from the ecovillages (→), or mutual commitments (↔); later, external actors began approaching the ecovillages to initiate interactions (←). This evolution indicates that the intentional communities are recognized as reliable partners in their regions. These interactions are not only functional but also contribute to relations' development that foster legitimacy, the flow of resources, and the dissemination of practices, knowledge, and values. Nevertheless, their success depends on interpersonal trust and a continuous commitment of time and personal energy (both physical and emotional) as key contributions to these cooperations. This finding aligns with existing literature on social innovation, where the innovative process is jointly developed by multi-sectoral actors' collaboration within interactive innovations (Kluvankova et al., 2021; Noack & Federwisch, 2019; Rizzo et al., 2020; Terstriep et al., 2015).

5.3. Other Comparisons between the Ecovillages.

In addition to the comparisons made in the previous sections of this discussion, and considering that comparing IBs is often seen as a challenge due to the uniqueness of each innovation process (Butzin & Widmaier, 2012) and that there is no unique way of executing a social innovation (Neumeier, 2017; Wirth, Bandi Tanner, et al., 2023). This comparison was not particularly challenging, as both ecovillages share many similarities,

from the initial project formulation to some of the interactions they are part of. Nevertheless, these two eco-communities manage their external interactions in comparable ways: they are both embedded in their regions, members of networks, have internal structures that encourage participation, provide educational opportunities to external audiences, and their projects serve internal and external communities.

Given that both ecovillages are current members of GEN, one of the most notable differences is the operational time of both ecovillages, since one started in the mid-2000s, and the other began approximately ten years later. This difference in "age" is notable in aspects such as the degree of linkage and territorial roots, since one of them is much more integrated into the regional population. Both have formed regional networks, however, Tonndorf initiated an association and cooperative with people from the valley (Talvolk). Through this collaboration, they have long-term plans such as reviving traditions, cultural practices, and strengthening the regional economy (including the possibility of creating their own currency). Another aspect that can be compared is the certification in the ECG that Sulzbrunn obtained. This could be an effective strategy for Schloss Tonndorf, allowing it to self-evaluate and improve internal processes that might require refinement or advancement.

Additionally, there is the creation of the free school, an initiative of one of the villages in cooperation with the regional network. As a regional and national innovative initiative, it received institutional support from the government, including the support of the Ministry and the Chancellor. Furthermore, it promotes the settlement of the younger generations in the region by offering quality education close to their homes.

Conversely, as both are members of GEN Germany, these interactions and practices can be shared among ecovillages as part of their mutual learning process. Thus, promoting future applications and even joint consultancies was facilitated by the direct link provided by this large network of inter-sectoral support. (Leite, 2022; Meister Broekema et al., 2022; Selvakkumaran & Ahlgren, 2021).

5.4. Limitations

Like other academic papers, this thesis is not free of limitations. First and foremost, one is the restricted number of cases analyzed due to constraints related to time and the availability or initiative of the other participants in the TransRegio II project. Although their participation was valuable, this research model could be replicated in ecovillages with different contexts, allowing for a more heterogeneous comparison. Another limitation of the study relates to SIBs, which primarily focus on the internal processes that drive social

innovations. Nevertheless, this approach tends to overlook external factors, limiting the ability to conduct a holistic analysis that fully considers the institutional or sectoral contexts of these initiatives (Butzin, 2014). Finally, the analysis performed through these SIBs is strictly specific to the two cases studied and is therefore not directly comparable with other ecovillages.

5.5. Further Research

Several previous studies were analyzed to carry out the present research. Moreover some useful methodologies and analyses were identified which could not be considered to further research deep aspects for a better understanding of the networks of actors and stakeholders (Bruns & Ohlhorst, 2011; La Rocca & Snehota, 2014; Leite, 2022; Tuitjer & Küpper, 2020), the dynamics of knowledge and knowledge types within initiatives (Butzin & Widmaier, 2012, 2012, 2016; Tschumi & Mayer, 2024b; Tuitjer & Küpper, 2020), as well as for estimating the scope of their transformative power (M.-L. Moore et al., 2015; Temesgen, 2024; von Wirth et al., 2018). These biographies were constructed with a global awareness of the interactions, their identification, and how they support the socio-ecological transition of their regions. Furthermore, an internal focus was applied to the inhabitants of the ecovillages and employees of these initiatives. Thus, it is also suggested that specific SIBs could be created for each of the interactions identified in this study, including more external perspectives of beneficiaries. Each interaction has distinct impacts and scopes, and it would be highly beneficial to identify their steps, challenges, and milestones in a more comprehensive and detailed manner for future applications in other villages, regions, or communities.

Similarly, it is suggested to perform a transformative impact analysis of the ecovillages through the 3D FRAMEWORK (three dimensions of transformative impact and capacity) to better understand the extent of their impact on different spheres of society. Additionally, an in-depth analysis of the actors involved and the internal dynamics of their relationships could be conducted as suggested by (Strasser, de Kraker, et al., 2020). Which states that by identifying three dimensions of transformative impacts and capacities in social innovation networks (depth, width, and length), valuable information would be acknowledged for future decision-making, the development or adjustment of new strategies, intervention designs, and internal evaluation, reflection, and monitoring (Strasser, de Kraker, et al., 2020).

6. CONCLUSIONS

This study confirms that ecovillages are drivers of social innovation scaling (Boyer, 2015). Starting from their foundations, they represent the scaling of existing villages in other regions. They foster regional innovation through the interactions they have founded and those they have joined. This supports previous studies, which state that ecovillages are local change agents across various sectors of the economy and community. It also enhances the statement that ecovillages are SET agents in their regions, thanks to the creation of spaces that allow for communication, innovation, and education. SIs (which refer to novel solutions that address or alleviate social needs and promote the common good) are embedded in ecovillages' existence, practices and interactions. The SIBs were a valuable tool for understanding how these villages initiate such interactions, identifying the actors involved, their most significant challenges, and milestones. This can serve as a reference for other communities that are willing to replicate similar initiatives in different geographical contexts. The internal knowledge flow of ecovillages remains constant, as all relevant community events are communicated during their periodic plenary meetings. Therefore, the egocentric network analysis suggested in the methodology by (Terstriep et al., 2015) could have been conducted with any member of the villages, given that both have flat internal organizations with members having equal access to information.

Prior and external knowledge is crucial when initiating social innovations, which is demonstrated by the successful outcomes of all interactions mentioned in this study. Both ecovillages have their doors open to the general public to receive ideas and proposals for interactions. These initiatives do not have a stipulated procedure for their proposal, which stimulates and facilitates the emergence of these innovations.

Ecovillages are aware that modern challenges are numerous and seek ways to mitigate them. They contribute to the creation or participation in initiatives that encompass various sectors of regional economies, acting in favor of sustainability and its values. As precursors of these spaces, they promote and encourage awareness, reflection, learning, and recreation on these issues. The main motivation of these communities is to be a source of knowledge to the outside world, extending their values and eco-friendly principles to the region and the world. Another of their greatest incentives is the result of being members of networks such as GEN, where they find peers who share their ideals, challenges, and milestones. Knowing that they are not alone in facing their problems and that there are communities in similar situations that propose successful solutions motivates them to move forward with their initiatives.

Both cases are involved to some extent with the local economy. Not only do they attract visitors to the events organized on their premises, but they also have enterprises that stimulate the region's economy. Some of their members also commute daily to cities near their jobs in order to contribute to the community's pool of assets.

Despite having been beneficiaries of some financing programs, these two ecovillages have lost opportunities to access further financing or aid from the state or organizations. This is due to insufficient human resources available to take on these tasks. Daily life in an ecovillage is hectic and busy, so time is limited for assigned tasks, and it is difficult to devote more energy to the search for financial support. It was observed that, for the most part, retired people are the ones who have the most time available to devote to external interactions in these communities. Human resources are highly important for both ecovillages; thus, they maintain strategies for ensuring adequate communication and positive relationships, both internally and externally. Another challenge present in both communities is the low inclusion of young people, since their members are mostly older individuals. Bureaucratic reprocessing and the short duration of the projects in which they participate are often slow and complex. Despite this, both ecovillages are active in regional cooperation networks such as Allgäu Fairnetzt and Talvolk, which aim to create projects to transition to a sustainable economy in the region.

These communities have been founders or precursors of some of the networks they currently belong to. Through these networks, they encourage collaboration, inspiration, creation, execution, and operation of diverse activities in favor of their common interests. These common interests are aimed at social-ecological transformations, which are highly beneficial not only for their regions but also for the whole world. These mutual collaborations are of great importance as the participants not only enrich each other but also generate a sense of support and belong to common causes.

Their main objectives are focused on spreading their values and knowledge to other people to cooperate towards the necessary socio-ecological transformation of the region. In addition to catalyzing cooperation, their initiatives seek to learn and spread knowledge about issues of social, ecological, and spiritual interest. Each of the ecovillages has been able to attract the necessary audience for their events successfully through various media; however, a stronger digital presence could be a great tool to expand their reach. Despite the interest in both cases in assessing their reach or social-ecological impact, it is currently not possible as they lack methods of doing so.

The interactions identified span several community and economic sectors. This reflects the interdisciplinary nature of the solutions that can be provided by initiatives that create or include ecovillages. Initially, in both cases, the initiatives presented were born from the intentional communities and partnerships with other sectors. However, over the years, some interactions have arisen from external actors that invite or include ecovillages. This demonstrates the trust and reputation that these eco-communities have generated in external agents as allies in the SETs of each context.

Although both ecovillages have many similarities, there are a couple of aspects that they can learn from each other. Schloss Tonndorf is deeply rooted in the region, not only because of its cooperative and networking efforts but also because its operation has a 10-year head start over the other ecovillage. Sulzbrunn is active in participating in the local network of common good economy certifications, which could help Tonndorf to self-evaluate and propose necessary improvement strategies in these issues.

The findings of this thesis may serve as a guide or support for institutions to create flexible financial incentives or provide administrative and technical support focused on this type of initiative. Given the lack of human resources in ecovillages to access information about such support, the approach could be reversed, originating from the authorities rather than the communities. Likewise, a dedicated committee or network could be established in cooperation with public authorities to support all types of social innovations with bureaucratic and financial guidance. This would not only foster the strengthening of existing ecovillages but also stimulate their creation, as well as the emergence of other social innovations. Additionally, such an initiative could include the academic sector and local inhabitants, as they would be key actors in knowledge development.

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8. APPENDIX

A. Guideline Questionnaire for the Interviews Conducted.

No.	Guideline Question: TransRegio leader	Guideline Question: Other ecovillage actors
The main objective of this project is to identify the activities, events, projects, or connections the ecovillage has with external people, communities, or institutions. We will refer to these activities, events, projects, or connections as **interactions**. Some examples of these interactions include connections with other ecovillages or institutions, whether governmental (the state) or educational (schools, universities...); recurring activities, courses, or education provided to external communities, among others. The purpose of this interview is to learn more about the history of these interactions and to understand the internal participation and organization of the ecovillage around them.		
Introductory	Could you please say your name and your role within the ecovillage?	Could you please say your name and your role within the ecovillage?
	Where are you originally from?	Where are you originally from?
	How did you discover the ecovillage?	How did you discover the ecovillage?
	How long have you been living here?	How long have you been living here?
	Can you describe the founding process of the ecovillage, from the initial idea to its current state, highlighting the key actors involved, milestones, and challenges?	Can you describe the founding process of the interactions with the outside communities, from the initial idea to its current state, highlighting the key actors involved, milestones, and challenges?
	How were the experiences for the neighboring communities like?	
	How did interactions/cooperations come? What milestones and challenges should be emphasized?	
I. Context & Framework Conditions		

1	What is the context (social, political, environmental, historical, whatever you consider relevant) in which the Ecovillage emerged?	What is the context in which the interactions with outside communities emerged?
2	Were there any grants they could apply for? Did you receive support from the local administration?	Was there some sort of discrimination against these? if yes, did this change? How?
3	Was there some sort of discrimination against it? If yes, did this change? How?	
II. Problem addressed		
1	What particular problem, need, or demand is addressed by the ecovillage regarding it's sorroundings?	
2	Can you outline all the activities, projects, or interactions the ecovillage undertakes in collaboration with the external community? when did they begin?	Can you outline all the activities, projects, or interactions where you are involved in collaboration with the external community? when did they begin? and since when are you part ot it?
3	If the concept came from outside: What was needed to adapt it to the context? How was it received by the ecovillage community?	If the concept came from outside, What was needed to adapt it to the context? How was it received by the ecovillage community?
4		
III. Motivation & Core Solution		
1	Who initiated the ecovillage? How did the ecovillage community gain access to the land or property? What were the initial interactions with local authorities and neighbors?	Who initiated the interactions, and what were the first interactions with the neighboring communities?
2	What motivated the founders, and what was their background?	What motivated the initiators of the interactions?

3	In which dimension of sustainability does the ecovillage offer the most in terms of influence in their surrounding communities: social, cultural, ecology or economy?	
IV. Resources & Strategy		
1	What are the key features/interests of the ecovillage that are driving/promoting the interactions with the neighbors (informal or legal status, people occupied, day of foundation or duration of the project)?	What are common challenges that you face at the moment of initiating/executing one of these interactions with the outside communities?
2	What resources (economic capital, social capital, political support and so on) have been needed to bring the interactions into life?	How are these interactions internally organized? Is there a division of labor/tasks? is the outside community involved in this internal organization?
	which skills are important and do these resources and skills come from within the ecovillage or from the outside?	
3	What resources are needed but are difficult to achieve?	
4	What are common challenges that you face at the moment of initiating one of these interactions with the outside communities?	
5	How are these interactions internally organized? Is there a division of labor/tasks? Is the outside community involved in this internal organization?	
V. The network - Governance, Support & Obstacles		
1	Which actors (individuals and/or organizations) are/were involved and what are their roles in the interaction process?	Which actors (individuals and/or organizations) are/were involved and what are their roles in the interaction process? (You can draw a map)

2	Is there any cooperation with other projects/ecovillages? Are they similar or do they follow other, but complementary aims? If yes, how does it work (role of communication media, platforms of exchange)?	Is there any cooperation with other projects/ecovillages? Are they similar or do they follow other, but complementary aims? If yes, how does it work (role of communication media, platforms of exchange)?
3	What are the social networks that are important to secure the resources? (resources: human, natural, financial, time, knowledge...)	
4	What have been the most important supporters/opponents?	
VI. Results: Outcomes & Impact		
1	What kind of value (including economic, social and other forms of improvement of the situation) is generated by the interaction? Who is the beneficiary?	What are the realized and expected outcomes from the interactions (intended as well as unintended)?
2	What are the realised and expected outcomes from the interactions (intended as well as unintended)?	Did media or social media play any role in the birth or spread of the interactions?
3	Is there interest in limiters/followers? Do you work on it actively?	
4	Did media or social media play any role in the birth or spread of the interactions?	
VII. Measurement		
1	Do you have any ways or methods to scale/measure the approach of the interactions?	Do you have any ways or methods to scale/measure the approach of the interactions?
2	Is integration with the surrounding communities important for the economic viability of the Ecovillage?	
3	How do you see the success of the cooperation?	