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Community economies in eco-communities: Spaces of collaboration, opportunities and dilemmas

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Introduction

While there is evidence of concrete environmental outcomes from eco-communities and anthropological research has informed on the cultural or governance aspects of living together, relatively little research has focused on eco-communities from an economic perspective, including their economic and financial sustainability, impact on local economies and the conceptualization of different economic, organizational and co-production models and their replicable potential. In this chapter, I argue that in order to understand their potential in terms of transformation/resilience, there needs to be also a more robust elaboration of how their social and environmental goals and outcomes relate to their economies. This requires both a theoretical framework and more empirical evidence.

The research gap may be due to the diverse objectives of eco-communities, whether environmental, political, spiritual or housing (see Wagner 2012 for review). However, some stimulating studies have been conducted. Nelson (2018) or Litfin (2014) visited many global ecovillages/eco-collaborative housing projects and informed about various aspects including the economy. Cattaneo and Gavaldà (2010) investigated how two urban squats in Catalonia performed in terms of time and energy consumption, arguing that it is possible to live well in less energy-intensive economies. A study comparing intentional and unintentional communities by Mulder et al. (2006) provides an understanding of the contribution of built, human, social and natural capital to quality of life, with the results indicating that intentional communities, according to the authors, can better balance the different capitals (e.g. by substituting built capital with social capital) and therefore manage to achieve a good quality of life despite having significantly less financial means than households in unintentional communities. In their Catalan study, Escribano et al. (2020) looked at three material factors – the legal situation, the cohabitation form

and the economic orientation – to demonstrate the different economic perspectives of eco-communities. And in their mixed-methods study of an Australian ecovillage, Milani Price et al. (2020) explored the relationship with the market economy, arguing that a community's alternative economic practices rely to some extent on the market economy and that market economy strategies and diverse economy practices are increasingly converging.

There are several reasons why eco-communities are important to study economically. First of all, they are residential and usually formed in a well-defined and more permanent physical location where members live, manage common infrastructure and develop their livelihoods. Second, eco-communities are linked to the dwelling not only physically but also through the financial means. They (re) create the built environment of apartment blocks, former schools, restored farmhouses with hectares of land or abandoned factories – environments that are usually the domain of neoliberal investment (whether in the hands of the state or corporations), often ending up demolished and rebuilt with profit-maximizing motives. Third, the scope of economic activities is broad and covers, depending on the size of a project practices of, sharing, care, social and solidarity activities, non-monetary transactions and relations, income-generating activities and self-sufficiency (Blažek 2016). In fact, many now-popular practices of community-based and sharing economies as defined by Acquier et al. (2017) have been pioneered in eco-communities.

In this chapter, I aim to contribute to the debate on eco-community economies, building on the frameworks of *diverse economy* and the *community economy* of Gibson-Graham et al. (2013) to conceptually unfold how the economic activities are structured and to consider the community economy as a space of decision-making and economic democracy, where the different economic practices are strategically discussed, negotiated and governed. I offer my experience researching eco-community economies and present examples of inspiring community economies in Europe to show how the theoretical economic promises can be fulfilled and how eco-communities imagine and transform their community economies. In the discussion, I offer some of the lessons learned from the contradictions and dilemmas that arise in the implementation of multidimensional sustainability goals on the 'wide edge of capitalism'.

I have spent the last decade studying the community economies as part of my doctoral thesis of which this chapter originally prepared for this book is part of (Malý Blažek 2024). Primarily, I use evidence from the field research, which took place between 2015 and 2018. I visited more than forty projects in six European countries, including Portugal, Spain (Catalonia), Austria, Germany, Denmark and the UK. I interviewed community members and participated in daily activities. I spent hours, days, weeks and in a few of these locations some months (with total of 184 visit days). The research was designed to study eco-communities in their diversity – from all-sharing communes to cohousing projects, from small farm collectives to ecovillages, from low-impact developments to housing syndicates. It explored projects experimenting how we can, at the community level, create economic alternatives with our own set of rules, which try and tackle our un/sustainability. I am thankful to each of the visited eco-communities.

Economies of eco-communities: Spaces of collaboration

Community diverse economies

Gibson-Graham define the economy as ‘a diverse social space in which we have multiple roles’ (Gibson-Graham et al., 2013, xx); a *diverse economy* which encompasses economic activities in households, local economies, regional and global economies. It encompasses market and non-market activities and a plethora of alternative ways in between (see Table 1).

Eco-communities are great examples of this economic diversity. But they are also examples of what Gibson-Graham et al. (2013, xix) call the *community economy* – ‘a space of decision making where we recognize and negotiate our interdependence with other humans, other species, and our environment’. Healy, Heras and North (Healy et al., 2023, 13) explain the community in community economies – in the words of philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy – as the ability of being in common. The community economy then should allow us to *be in common in economic terms*.

The community economy is the part of the economy that is governed, negotiated and managed at the community level, including people, nature, infrastructures, networks, material and financial flows. Its importance and robustness are intentionally designed and vary considerably from case to case. So, for example in income-sharing communes, the community economy includes virtually all economic activities. In most projects, however, it exists alongside the individual economies of members, which are negotiated at the household level.

In keeping with the positive, experimental narrative typical of many eco-communities, I call community economies *economic playgrounds*. Similar to real playgrounds, they can be understood as infrastructures that enable the creation and play of concrete ‘games’, i.e. the creation of concrete economic practices and strategies. The *games* (economic activities), played in the playground, vary in size, purpose, rules, impact and in relating to each other. The playground serves each member, work group or community-based enterprise to play these games. It helps to (1) *negotiate* their everyday preferences and activities as well as the long-term vision and mission of the eco-community with other members; (2) *navigate* between eco-community goals – the playground holds, redirects and shifts the social, ecological and economic variables between activities, as some activities serve financial means; others have social or environmental benefits; (3) transform economic flows between the diverse economies

Table 1 The diverse economy

The diverse economy				
Labor	Enterprise	Transactions	Property	Finance
Paid	Capitalist	Market	Private	Mainstream Market
Alternative Paid	Alternative Capitalist	Alternative Market	Alternative Private	Alternative Market
Unpaid	Non-capitalist	Non-market	Open Access	Non-market

Source: Gibson-Graham et al., 2013, 13.

(market – alternative market – non-market) as means of relating in the commons but especially to the other actors.

In the next section, I shortly describe three areas of the playground: collaborative financing, collaborative provision and collaborative production. Then I present concrete examples of economic activities which are performed or even invented in eco-communities.

Financing of housing and the built environment

For the many socio-environmental, political or cultural objectives of eco-communities, this area of community economy has been maybe sometimes forgotten. And as with most individuals and families, the rising costs of land, materials and energy affect and determine the long-term socio-economic situation of residential eco-communities. In fact, the right financial and ownership plan at the outset has a fundamental impact on the economic situation, including the ‘capacity’ of the community economy to ‘hold’ and meet the social and environmental objectives.

Nevertheless, eco-communities are looking for solutions. They are together with other collaborative housing projects the early adopters of innovative financial/economic and property/legal frameworks and tools such as direct loans, assets pools, mutual home ownership, solidarity funds or tenant syndicates (CLH London 2020; Holm and Laimer 2021; Hurlin 2019). These schemes and tools allow to actively distribute capital, administer debt and allocate assets from members to the community and vice versa (see Table 2.). Other housing strategies include reduction of bank loans, advocacy with municipalities (e.g. for land rental or-co-production); active

Table 2 Diverse economies in eco-communities

Community economies					
Non-market economies					
Housing decommodification	Self-management and building	Money pooling	Solidarity funds	Income redistribution	Income sharing
Mobility sharing	Food coops	Self-sufficient farming	Homeschooling	Care sharing	Free flow
Alternative market economies					
Asset pools	Direct loans	Community supported agriculture	Alternative currencies	Micro-enterprises	Community enterprises
Public and market economies					
Subsidies	Partnerships	Shopping	Selling	Bills	Bank loans
Individual economies					
Individual household incomes, expenditures and enterprises					

and voluntary participation of members in project management and construction; and the architecture design that focuses on extensive use of common spaces or low-tech ecological solutions.

Collaborative provision of goods and services

While the financing and ownership of common property is usually a serious game with strict rules and legal regulations, it is the collaborative consumption or, rather, collaborative provision that the economic games get fun. Again, it involves the consumption of goods and services produced in all kinds of economies: in the market, in alternative markets and in the community itself. Members create, manage and join activities in many areas, including food, mobility, education or care for people and, in general for the commons. These are organized in systems based on pooling (that redistribute capital from individuals to the community and eventually vice versa), alternative value and exchange systems and local currencies (that value and record individual contributions and exchange between members), and free flow and solidarity schemes (where contributions are more open or less important to track) (see Table 2). The community playground is then the space that holds and directs all these practices, requiring one or more levels of democratic governance on the one hand and offering resource savings through *non-market economies of scale* (Pickerill 2016), e.g. by shopping in bulk.

Production for the public economy

The third area of community economies covers the production of goods and services that serve the public (non-member) economy, and generate (not necessarily financial) resources. These include food production, manufacturing, social services, education or culture, but also the rental of land or office space. They mostly operate for financial gains, but aim to be in line with the values and principles of the eco-community. Again, the democratic space of the eco-community economy offers the advantages of keeping the different practices together (economies of scale) and of switching between the diverse market and non-market economies (e.g. with volunteering and other *non-market capitals*, see Bruyn 1992); and of navigating and negotiating the objectives of production. These include individual enterprises that can be economically, legally and administratively independent to the eco-community; micro-enterprises, which can be economically and legally independent, but are dependent on the eco-community in terms of governance; and community enterprises, which are legally and economically dependent to the eco-community, in addition to their governance (cf. Johansiova et al., 2013 and their definition of primary and secondary social enterprise).

Community playgrounds in practice: Spaces of opportunities and solidarity

In the previous section I used the concept of the community playground to structure the economic practices identified in European eco-communities. I presented that eco-

communities differ in the combinations of economic practices outlined in Table 2. However, community playgrounds depend on many factors related to identities, capital, infrastructure, decision-making or broader socio-technical, cultural, economic and political contexts. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to explore all these particular factors. Instead, in this section I offer to ‘zoom’ into the field to look at how community economies can be imagined and constructed. I present examples of European eco-communities that were interviewed and visited as part of the research. I have chosen a community centre, an income-sharing commune, a large eco-settlement, an ecological cohousing, a low-impact development and an urban building group.

It is worth noting that the current situation in the projects may differ (the field research was undertaken between 2015 and 2018). Communities never stop forming, constituting, reforming, eroding and fragmenting. However, the aim is to present some of the specialities, rather than to give full picture of the richness of each of the community economies.

Diverse European eco-communities

Makværket is a cultural and environmental collective formed around a project to restore an old ceramics factory into a cultural community centre. It is located in the Danish countryside, well-connected by train, car and cycle-path to Copenhagen, the capital city with a vibrant history of self-organized projects such as The Floating City, Ungdomshuset or Christiania (Chapter 17), all of which combine autonomous culture, education and politics with (post-capitalist) structural and material experiments. *Makværket* has translated this vibe into a large 10,000 square metre factory in the countryside, with lots of embedded material and space for material storage. The economy has been created around non-market and non-monetary practices in work (with tens of thousands of hours of volunteer work) – freegan culture and dumpster diving, slow development, co-education and the use of second-hand materials, but also around donations, cultural activities and public funds for building repairs. The collective consists of permanent – though not necessarily resident – members, and a fluctuating residential community of visitors from around the world. To support themselves, some members of the collective have worked and studied in Copenhagen or other cities or have partly been employed by a construction company that owns the building (the factory was sold to the construction company by the local municipality for a symbolic price). I have been able to visit this project several times and observe the long-term process of stabilizing and localizing of the collective in small housing communities in the villages around the factory. Today, the factory serves as a cultural and community centre, but also as a workshop for individual and community micro-businesses and to some extent as a safe space and starting point for many global newcomers to the Copenhagen area. It serves as an example of a multi-layered governance, a sensitive renewal of the local factory and the work it generates, but also of new rural (and rural-urban) relationships.

Lokomuna is an urban commune in Kassel, a historic city with a student atmosphere in the centre of Germany, which is a very special place for eco-communities, with a high density of political communes in the region, including the well-known Kommune

Niederkaufungen, founded in 1986. In Locomuna, the economy is based on a radical redistribution of income, wealth and time from the individual to the community level. Members share not only all costs, but also their time ('Neither money, nor time can be privatized', as they say). Spending money is decided and regulated by the collective, as is free time ('Everyone should have the same amount of free time'). This may be difficult to accept, but the community supports individuals in all life situations and crossroads, so that, for example, they have enough time to find the right job or study at any age. They are well connected to other communes in the Kassel area in a regional network, within which they are experimenting with a free-flow economy based on need, not cost. They are also unique in their system of wealth redistribution. When people join, they must give all their capital (if they have any) to the commune. Over time, as the loans are repaid, the house becomes an asset and anyone who wishes to leave receives a fair share of the wealth created. This system ensures that people with lower incomes are not 'trapped' in the collective economy. If they want to leave, they get enough capital to maintain a good quality of life in the future.

Cambium Leben in Gemeinschaft is a relatively new community in Fehring, a small town in rural Styria, Austria. In Austria, non-urban eco-communities are often located in areas with cheaper land, typically on the periphery near the borders with Czechia or, in this case, Hungary and Slovenia. But the group's history links Austria's two largest cities. A founding group in Vienna (Cambium) merged with a group with similar aims in Graz (Leben in Gemeinschaft) to form a single large rural project, and soon bought an old military barracks and land from the State of Styria. They successfully implemented the asset pool model, 'an alternative, interest-free, value-sustaining, legal asset cycle independent of the banking system' (Distelberger, n.d.) to acquire property worth €2 million. The system is based on diversification and permanent replacement of shareholders 'in the pool'. If some of the shareholders need money back, they are swapped with a new person. In theory, this system makes it possible to buy back the investment after it has been made, or at least at a much slower rate. Therefore, the asset pool shareholder model may guarantee the same feeling of secured housing as homeownership, but the housing security is much more connected to good relationships, community capital, trust and control, rather than to the need to own. The community is also experimenting with the solidarity economy; at the time of my visit, for example, they had a sliding scale payment system for rent and food with different levels of individual contributions. This solidarity and the high level of sharing (spaces, tasks) make living in the community relatively economically inclusive. However, as many similar projects struggle to do, also for *Cambium Leben in Gemeinschaft* it remains a challenge to create spaces that are inclusive in terms of other socio-demographic and cultural characteristics such as education or ethnicity.

LILAC - Low Impact Living Affordable Community in Leeds, UK is a cohousing project often cited as a successful example of ecological and affordable housing in a new urban development. The project consists of twenty households living in straw bale multi-unit houses and sharing a common house for means and other activities. The LILAC community has pioneered a Mutual Home Ownership Society, an affordable housing finance model in which community members pay 35 per cent of their income as rent (or 10 per cent once they have paid off their personal shares, with an option to

pay-off between 90 and 110 per cent of target shares (CLH London 2020)). As a result, individuals pay off 'their' shares at different rates and timeframe. LILAC also has an equity fund in which those who leave get back what they have invested. This solidarity takes equity out of the property market. The model is affordable across generations, but as newly built ecological housing, it is not inclusive of people on really low incomes, as there is still a minimum rent required to ensure that the loans can be repaid.

Tinker's Bubble is a small, low-impact woodland community of self-built cottages in Somerset, UK. The project focuses on a local economy, zero use of fossil fuels and an economic connection to the land, working with the resources it provides. The economy is based on voluntary simplicity and low, land-sustaining levels of material and monetary flows. In their case there are two commercial commodities – wood in the forest and apples in the orchards. So Tinker's Bubble produces hand-pressed apple juice and wooden frames using only hand tools, horses and a sawmill powered by a wood-fired steam engine. The hours devoted to this production are derived from the very low financial needs of the members (at the time of my visit, around £30–40 per person per week plus a few pounds per week to repay the property). The rest of the time is devoted to self-sufficient activities. The model proves to be socio-economically inclusive, but the radically low consumption and low-impact living conditions in the forest houses have been challenging and unacceptable for many people.

LiSA – Leben in der Seestadt Aspern is one of the many new building groups (*Baugruppe; Wohnprojekt*) in Seestadt Aspern, a model district in Vienna, Austria. A building group is a group of households (association, cooperative) that finances and maintains a collective property, individuals use their apartments and benefit from sharing (cars, tools, skills, care, rooms, etc.) and pay stable monthly payments (rent to pay loans). In LiSA, with a population of about seventy adults and twenty children, the house was purchased in a standard way (bought from a developer at a regular price, with a bank loan with a 35-year repayment horizon). But unlike other similar projects built in the city at the time, LiSA deliberately focused on the social and income diversity of the households. As a result of this solidarity, a third of the members contributed more than the target share and the community was affordable for people with little or no capital. In addition, half of the flats are small to increase the diversity of rents. Moreover, LiSA deliberately sought applicants of different nationalities, made two flats available to an adult day care centre, and set up a solidarity fund for situations, such as when a member is temporarily unable to pay the rent.

Community expectations: Spaces of dilemmas, compromises, luxuries and sufferings

In the previous text, I have argued that eco-communities implement multiple alternative economic practices, which are negotiated, navigated and transformed in what I call economic playground – a space for democratic governance of economic practices in eco-communities. Table 2 summarizes the identified practices and applies the concept of diverse economies on eco-communities.

Evidence from my research suggests that eco-communities often do not fully exploit the potential of diverse community economies. Across contexts, I have found

that some of the theoretical promises are being fulfilled (especially in terms of care, sharing and (re)producing of housing). However, they differ in their capacity to prefigure practices in a social-ecological direction and often fail to find alternatives to the market economy (for interpretation of findings, see Malý Blažek 2024).

There are dozens of dilemmas that projects have to face and resolve. Sometimes they have to lower their expectations. And sometimes their solutions are contradictory. For example, if we were to compare different eco-communities in terms of their ecological outcome, it would not be surprising that projects that avoid the use of fossil fuels and/or aim at energy or food self-sufficiency (e.g. most low-impact developments and some ecovillages) would probably have more ecologically sustainable outcomes than more mainstream projects (such as some urban community developments and cohousing groups), which often adopt 'light green' approaches materialized in prefabricated ecological building materials, organic shopping or car sharing. But what if we found that some ecologically radical projects are economically dependent on an influx of visitors from far away (accumulating air miles), or their food production is dependent on volunteer programmes where volunteers are actually asked to pay for their stay, while the social innovation impact of some more mainstream projects at city or country level generates pro-environmental changes in neighbourhoods and in the housing sector and related policies? Or what if we found that some projects with strong environmental sustainability values cannot afford sustainable building solutions but are socio-economically affordable, while other projects with generally weaker sustainability values are at the top end of building ecology but are not socially inclusive? Or that some of the deep ecology back-to-the-land eco-communities have far-right and/or libertarian values and their attitude to the outside world is extremely selfish, if not threatening? These are important lessons for evaluators of community economies in eco-communities, because they show us how they are connected to their social ecologies; that non-market, alternative or local practices are not necessarily always more sustainable and ethical; and that they can create more tensions and problems than they solve.

The findings from the field confirm that eco-communities are, with words of Jenny Pickerill (2016, 32), 'incomplete, partial and sometimes problematic'. They are not resistant to dilemmas. On the contrary, these could be important moments that can shape the nexus between social/ecological and economic/financial spheres. What needs to be explored is whether the dilemmas arise from purposeful actions, from contradictions in objectives or from conditions that projects have to face.

More hopeful ontology and epistemology of diverse community economies

Eco-communities include not only examples of the inspiring projects presented earlier in the chapter, which nourish the social, solidarity, non-market or low-impact economies as their fundamental objectives. There are also projects which are economically less-innovative; in which members pay personal mortgages, have nine-to-five jobs, and in which the threshold for participation derives primarily from personal wealth. On the very top end, we find ecological community neighbourhoods full of collective luxuries and smart infrastructure, where the price of living is exclusive. How can we compare their economies and sustainabilities with projects that operate with a fraction

of money, for example, political projects, such as squats and radical ecology projects, or with communities that operate as full income-sharing economies? What could we learn from such a comparative analysis and is it, in fact, desirable?

Heterodox economists, geographers and anthropologists are developing new concepts out of the need to seek answers to such and similar questions, and also to study the differences between practices that ask such questions and those that tend to ask less. As Johanisová and Fraňková (2013) discuss in their example of eco-social enterprises, there is a tendency to view economic alternatives on a mainstream–radical axis. From the mainstream perspective, alternatives are complementary to the mainstream, they act economically within the system to achieve their multifaceted goals and mitigate some of the mainstream problems; in the case of eco-communities, for example, the housing crisis, social cohesion or rural depopulation. From a radical perspective, alternatives oppose the dominant system and, to achieve their goals, develop new economic practices and legal structures that reject mainstream approaches.

Radical (as well as mainstream) strategies are implemented by most projects, although we can expect that radical ecology or strongly politically driven projects to be less willing to compromise their values. For sustainability assessments, Johanisová and Fraňková (2013) suggest that researchers should also position themselves along the mainstream–radical axis. In this text, for example, I propose that the market-based sharing economy practices are more mainstream than solidarity economy practices, even though both may have similar ecological outcomes in different contexts. For example, in *Gleis 21*, another Baugruppe project in Vienna, Austria, one of the members said that she perceives her project as very mainstream because the members are socio-economically relatively homogeneous in the (upper) middle class. However, the project is non-hierarchical, provides housing for refugees, runs a food co-operative or solidarity fund, and has built high-quality ecological housing. The project can be perceived as either radical or mainstream, depending on the context and (self-) positioning.

By no means all eco-communities (quite the opposite) claim to be ‘alternatives to capitalism’. However, they create places on the wide edge of capitalism, which includes both more radical autonomous and anti-capitalist collectives or radically ecological communities that seek to maximize their self-sufficiency, and essentially more mainstream communities that actively contribute to and operate within (green) capitalism. However, I do not aim to decide which eco-communities are radical enough or too commercial. Following the radical epistemologies and ontology of community economies I argue for the study of diverse economic practices beyond capitalocentric perspectives.

As Monticelli (2022, 5) writes, whether by design or as a necessary consequence, diverse economies (including in eco-communities) exist ‘within and despite capitalism inextricably intertwined with it’. Milani Price et al. (2020) even argue that the diverse economy and what they call the ‘modern market economy’ are becoming increasingly confluent. According to the authors, they are converging in terms of creating alternatives to capitalist modes of production, alternative measures and attitudes to economic growth, ecological responsiveness/environmental intentions and social relationality in economic transactions. While it is debatable to what extent the spheres of confluence are actually converging, the position of eco-communities ‘always struggling with being

with, beyond and against capitalism' (Pickerill et al., 2024) is certainly non-static, since non-static are both capitalism and economic alternatives.

As Benedikt Schmid (2018, 285) argues, this radical epistemology avoids looking at diverse economic practices and strategies from a 'capitalocentric perspective'; from the logic of the paradigm built on aspects of economic growth, technocratic efficiency or profit maximization. North (2018, 79–80) refers to the Gibson-Grahams' perspective as a 'more hopeful ontology'. The main role of the Gibson-Graham's framework is according to him to help pose emancipatory and epistemological questions to different actors, including ourselves. Gibson-Graham describe and categorize economic reality, but not for the purpose of deciding what is necessarily right and what is necessarily wrong. An example of such research that community economy epistemology enables is North's research on alternative currencies. He does not ask whether alternative currencies work, who is to blame if they do not work or what their transformative limits are. Instead, he simply asks 'for whom do the currencies work, and who struggles to use them?' (North 2014). In my research on eco-community economies, I follow this epistemology and do not aim to provide definitive answers as to whether community economies make the eco-social promises possible.

Conclusions

My intention in this chapter was neither to celebrate eco-communities, nor to criticize them for failing to achieve a certain level of commoning or sustainability outcomes. There are eco-communities that are environmentally focused but economically mainstream, just as there are projects that have not yet achieved their environmental goals but are more economically and socially inclusive, seeking new imaginaries and radical solutions based on economic democracy, solidarity, sharing and non-monetary practices. There are many that do not focus as much on economic transformation as on other issues, but there are a few that make serious efforts.

I used Gibson-Graham's community economies framework to conceptually explore how eco-communities create spaces of economic democracy. To explore how the democratic space is constructed, I have called it a community economic playground. Through democratic decision-making, community economies have an agency that enables them to play 'concrete games' (diverse economic practices) in economic playgrounds, i.e. to negotiate the preferences, navigate between goals and transform the particular economic activities between market, alternative market and non-market.

On concrete examples of European eco-communities, I have shown how the 'promise of enabling' of diverse economic practices can be performed in community economies. My research suggests that the economic playgrounds are as joyful and innovative as they can be stressful and demanding, as luxurious as they can be impoverished. Many projects are not making the most of their diverse community economies and there are also potential barriers to the economic diversity, such as the degree of initial 'lock-in' to the market economy through the required investment in built and natural capital. Lock-in to the market determines how 'big and fun' the playground will be, and how diverse a project's dilemma-solving strategies can be over time.

In the discussion, I described that eco-communities are situated on the wide edge of capitalism, and argued in favour of hopeful ontologies and epistemologies that would enable to raise critical, empowering questions to be asked that explore the possibilities rather than the limits of the inextricably intertwined relationship between capitalism and its alternatives.

Economies of eco-communities are not only spaces of collaboration and opportunities but also spaces of dilemmas, compromises and contradictions. The concept of community economy playground provides a guide to navigate through multi-layered goals and multiple voices in community initiatives, often resulting in dilemmas which require balancing or trading-off between the strategic objectives. Developing a community economy alone does not automatically lead to environmental, social or economic sustainability, but if organized well it can provide the needed space/playground for supporting sensible social and environmental decisions, and space for solving dilemmas in reaching the objectives. What eco-communities teach us, fundamentally, is that the economies we develop and represent can be reconfigured in a more sustainable manner, if we take an active role in them.

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